# **CHAPTER 4: GAMEMASTERING THE GOLDEN AGE**

his chapter provides resources for busy Gamemasters, and describes how the classic and postmodern approaches incorporate the real-world events of Golden Age differently, as well as the common storytelling conventions of each. In an ongoing *Mutants & Masterminds* cam-

paign, classic Golden Age style adventures, more postmodern fare, or some combination of the two are all possible. After reading this chapter, the Gamemaster and players can best decide which approach most closely matches the type of situations they wish to roleplay.

# **CLASSIC GOLDEN AGE ADVENTURES**

The comic books published between 1938 and 1955 differ from the modern variety for a couple of important reasons. First is the simple fact that Golden Age books are the product of another time, catering to tastes and standards often markedly different than those of contemporary books.

Secondly, while some Golden Age and some modern books break established conventions, they do so for different reasons. Today, comic book creators do so in calculated attempts to be nontraditional or thwart the readers' expectations for dramatic effect. Golden Age comic books, on the other hand, take unconventional turns because in those days the rules hadn't been written yet, and creators were free to follow their muses wherever they might lead.

If the Gamemaster and players want to roleplay adventures straight out of the pages of 1940s comic books, this section outlines the trappings that go into creating authentic Golden Age stories. It uses modern comic books as a comparative baseline, so readers wholly unfamiliar with present-day super hero tales are advised to check out Chapter 10 of *Mutants & Masterminds* to learn about the state of the art before proceeding any further.

# "HEROES"

Despite the wacky assertions of Dr. Wertham, superhero comic books of the Golden Age were never about instructing kids in anti-social behaviors. Granted, they weren't always about teaching *good* behavior either, but concern from parental, education, and religious groups soon changed this. By 1940, comic books had to be more than entertaining—they had to impart some positive moral lessons to their young readers.

## POLISHING UP THE GOLDEN AGE

Since comic-book stories were already pretty much "Good always triumphs over Evil," getting them to a point where they'd please the pressure groups was largely a matter of making the distinction between Right and Wrong crystal clear. To that end, costumed characters stopped using lethal force, even against the vilest foes (though villains still could die because of their own heinous acts). Characters that had been vigilantes before, hunted and misunderstood by the police, suddenly became duly deputized agents of the law.

Dropping their former unsavory habits wasn't enough, however. Costumed characters also had to be good role models. Before long, even strange visitors from other planets and times were expounding on the virtues of democracy just like good patriotic Americans. Similarly, costumed heroes of all types were lecturing youngsters (both in the stories and the audience) on the dangers of juvenile delinquency, as well as respect for the disabled and tolerance for other religions and nationalities (and occasionally, races).

In this time period, there were no anti-heroes or sympathetic villains. Heroes were heroes, no matter what, and the villains were all either bad guys, or worse guys. Only supporting characters could switch sides, either because they were blackmailed or innocently duped by the villain into being bad, or they were a former ally of the villain who repented his evil ways at the last minute. Even in the latter case, the morality of Golden Age comics was so black and white that the character invariably died in the process, for only death could absolve him of his past misdeeds.

#### "HEROES" IN GOLDEN AGE CAMPAIGNS

This same absolutist world-view is essential in recreating true Golden Age stories. America, democracy, law enforcement, the military, and the government (both Federal and local) can do no wrong, and neither can the heroes. By deliberate contrast, foreign dictatorships, lawbreakers, the Nazis, the Fascists, the Japanese, and (later) communists represented every negative trait and characteristic imaginable. While it's important to keep in mind the actual history of the era, its many complexities should not be allowed to get in the way of true Good, pure Evil, and their chosen costumed representatives.

# **CHANGES**

It's said there are comic-book readers around today who judge a story by how closely it adheres to the characters' past continuity. Not that any of *you* resemble that remark, gentle reader. Fans of such persuasion are well-advised to steer clear of Golden Age comic books entirely, because of the many genre conventions developed during that time, tight continuity wasn't one of them. Depending on the comic-book fan, that's either charming or maddening. In either case, it's doubtlessly a distinctive part of the era.

# TURN AND FACE THE STRANGER

To be sure, comic-book characters have always been subject to changes, great and small. What made the Golden Age different was the total lack of explanation for such alterations, no matter how sweeping they might be. The character who used to wear a business suit and fight crime with the help of his sultry girlfriend can show up in the very next issue wearing purple and gold tights and aided by a kid sidekick without so much as a "by your leave." A character that used to leap tall buildings in a single bound can suddenly fly over them like a bird or a plane without a word to the readers as to how or why.

In addition, there were plenty of the sort of continuity errors that keep hardcore comic-book fans awake at night and on the 'net. In one character's adventures, the inhabitants of Venus might be peaceful, benevolent, and elfin in one issue, then show up as nasty, hostile insect-



like invaders a few months later. Another story might revolve around a scientist who's perfected a time machine, only to be followed a few issues later by *another* scientist with *another* time machine, with no explanation as to what happened to the first such machine, or why the lead character is surprised such a thing could exist.

All that said, some references to past continuity did appear in later Golden Age comic books, concurrent with the development of the superpowered villain. After a particular comic-book bad guy proved popular, his subsequent appearances usually made reference to his past misdeeds (and, more often than not, his miraculous return from seeming death).

#### THE STREAM OF WARM IMPERMANENCE

The reasons for this discontinuity were many and quite understandable. During the Golden Age, there were no back-issue dealers or comic-book conventions, so there weren't any obvious caches of past superhero lore for readers to pore over. In fact, wartime paper drives were the order of the day, and during them comic books (already considered the most disposable form of literature) were sacrificed in great heaps in order to defeat world fascism. This gave rise to the now universal tradition of moms throwing out everyone's comic-book collections, and with them went the physical evidence (if you will) that might remind readers of any past discontinuity.

Moreover, discontinuity wasn't a problem back then, because people just didn't care. Comic-book readers—overwhelmingly children—savored each issue on its own merits, as radical a notion as that might be. If they took notice of any disconnects with older stories, Golden Age readers never let them get in the way of the simple fact that comics are supposed to be fun to read.

Golden Age creators fully understood this, as well as the nature of their audience. Given they were already burdened trying to meet tight

deadlines, please pressure groups, and make ends meet on unspectacular pay, comic-book pioneers focused on making entertaining books rather than building a canon.

#### CHANGES IN GOLDEN AGE CAMPAIGNS

Gamemasters striving for the authentic Golden Age experience can let this same commitment to fun above all animate their *Mutants & Masterminds* games. Rather than focus on long, drawn-out scenarios and complicated, angst-ridden back stories, each session can stand alone on its own terms. There may be thrilling villain bashes, outlandish mysteries, or some combination thereof, but in any case, Gamemasters can just let their imaginations run free, unfettered by modern comicbook storytelling conventions.

This style of play isn't for everyone, but for today's busy Gamemaster whose playing and planning time is limited, it can be just the ticket. Likewise, it can be just as much fun for players. Anyone who gets bored with their character can just go ahead and change them between adventures; no explanations needed. There's also no need to worry when real life intrudes and a player has to miss a session, since each week the adventure begins anew.

# **POWER OUTAGES**

It seems to go without saying, but a big part of being a superhero is being all super and doing super stuff with superpowers. However, during the nascent days of comic books, most costumed characters wouldn't think of using their powers far above those of mortal men when a simple sock to the jaw would suffice.

The reason for this was twofold. First, remember that comic books drew heavily on the pulp magazines of the period, where two-fisted manly men were the name of the game. While the early comic-book creators grew accustomed to dreaming up fantastic characters with out-

landish powers, they often went with what they knew when it came to plotting out stories, and that meant fistfights—a lot of them.

#### PUT 'EM UP!

Partly, the plethora of fisticuffs was a dramatic conceit. Most Golden Age stories involved gangsters, thugs, goons, and assorted other criminals of the sort a superhumanly powered individual should be able to put down in a page or so. Not only does that not make for good reading, though, but one-page stories also don't pay their creators terribly well

A good old-fashioned piersixer, on the other hand, evens the odds between the mooks and the demigods. It creates the rudimentary tension necessary for any story to work, and can put the costumed hero in the jeopardy required to generate some suspense and interest for the reader. Let's face it: dramatically speaking, fistfights just *work*. They don't require pages of set up and explanation for the readers to understand what's going on. Likewise, bare-knuckle brawls allow writers and artists facing tight deadlines to wrap up stories without undue expenditures of time and imagination.

The other reason for the prevalence of Golden Age slugfests is more fundamental. In that era, colorful costumes alone made the characters; superhuman abilities were an option, not a necessity. Many costumed characters had no fantastic powers to use, and a good left hook was all they really had going for them other than their rainbow-colored long johns.

# **MYSTERIOUS POWERS AT WORK**

As a final note on Golden Age superpowers, keep in mind the era long predates the modern trend of trying to explain in detail how a character's outlandish powers are supposed to work. Comic-book readers of the day simply didn't demand that much attention to detail, and probably wouldn't have liked it had they gotten it. By the same token, comic-book creators didn't rely on the more arcane points of a character's powers to resolve stories.

Costumed characters simply had whatever unlikely abilities they needed to make them interesting and stand out in the crowded market-place. As to how the character might've come by his amazing powers, the explanations were often tenuous at best, when they were provided at all.

#### SECRET ORIGINS

Most commonly, costumed characters were masters of a particular skill, and got to the superhero equivalent of Carnegie Hall through "practice, practice, practice." Such characters were of ultra-keen mind, super-sharp wit, the master of an archaic weapon, or the like. At any rate, costumed-but-not-superpowered heroes were close enough to the real world that any needed explanations were easy and fairly self-evident.

Beyond that, there was any number of vague justifications for people being superpowered, and nothing seemed out of bounds. The cutting-edge technology of the day often figured in (however tenuously): wonder drugs, atomic power, radio waves, exotic chemicals like heavy water, and the like. At the outbreak of World War II, heartfelt patriotism was cause enough alone, and a little pep talk from a nearby national monument was all it took to make a woman super.

# **SCIENCE & MAGIC**

The burgeoning science-fiction genre also figured prominently in many character's origins, which was hardly surprising given how many comicbook creators were also literary sci-fi authors and editors. Thanks to their

influence, Golden Age comic books featured their share of strange visitors from other planets, time travelers from utopian futures (or pasts), and even hyper-evolved mutants.

Truly extraordinarily superpowered characters were said to be supernatural or magical in nature. Any costumed hero who was tossing planets around like medicine balls was almost certainly explained away as a ghost or a sorcerer, and in such stories almost anything was possible in terms of what they could do or what opposition they might encounter.

As a last resort, a superpowered character might debut *in media res* with his amazing abilities already established without explanation. It was rather a gamble, as the character had to be so gee-whiz cool the awed readers would never stop to think how it all came to be. Those who weren't landed in quick obscurity, but many of the ones able to pull it off are still being published today.

## **OLD CHUM**

Most every Golden Age costumed hero of note had a constant companion of some sort. They were not just part of the background supporting casts like in modern comic books, but a full-fledged sidekick sharing all the danger and excitement right alongside the feature's title character.

Depending on the sidekick in question, they may or may not have been aware of the main character's secret identity. Along similar lines, they may have been a willing, active participant in the hero's exploits, or a constant bystander who time and again gets inadvertently involved in each issue's particular dangers.

#### THE ROLE OF SIDEKICKS

Comic-book creators of the day used sidekicks as sounding boards for the main character. The internal monologue had yet to come into vogue in comics, and that meant the costumed hero needed someone to explain his actions to for the sake of the audience. So sidekicks were around in large part because of the audience identification factor (which accounts for why so many of them were kids, just like most of the readers).

Sidekicks were also a handy plot shortcut. When all else failed, a writer could just have the bad guys capture the hero's pal, and *voila*—instant dramatic twist! As plot points went, coming up with new ways of menacing the mundane companion required a lot less brain-sweat than figuring out how to put the superpowered lead character in jeopardy, especially back when run-of-the-mill mobsters were largely it in terms of villains.

## THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

Of the many types of constant companions seen during the Golden Age, a young boy as a crime-fighting sidekick was the most popular option. The aforementioned young-reader interest factor was too great for comic-book publishers to ignore, and it was a choice validated by sales. It wasn't until Dr. Wertham forever implanted his unsavory conclusions about bachelor men hanging out with adolescent boys in tights into the public consciousness that the enthusiasm for kid sidekicks began to wane. Thus, they remain an enduring symbol of Golden Age comics.

# SIDEKICKS IN SKIRTS

For heroes who wanted to steer well clear of Dr. Wertham's imaginative accusations, teaming up with a gorgeous gal was a good choice. More than a few comic-book duos emulated Nick and Nora Charles from the popular series of *The Thin Man* movies, sharing a little romance and a lot of adventure. It was important, of course, that it only be *a little* romance—no point in ruining a perfectly good comic with a lot of mushy stuff.