

ACTION

ADVENTURE ROLE-PLAYING

HEROES



CHRISTOPHER HELTON

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ACTION-HEROES: THE ROLEPLAYING GAME

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OUTLAND

ENTERTAINMENT

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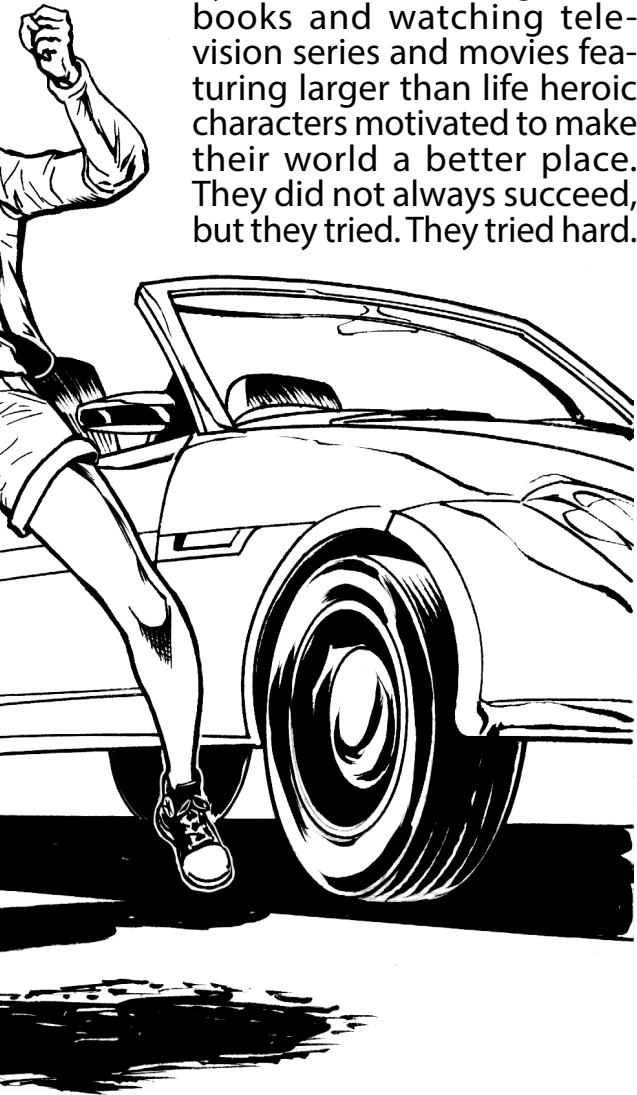
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INTRO

Our world needs more heroes, and sometimes the only way that you can get them is through unleashing the power of your imagination. There is great power in the imagination, and through pretending we learn the lessons that we can take into the larger, so-called real world, to make it a better place. Get ready to take action for the things that are important to you. **Action-Heroes** is inspired by decades of reading comic books and watching television series and movies featuring larger than life heroic characters motivated to make their world a better place. They did not always succeed, but they tried. They tried hard.



With **Action-Heroes** you can play a wide gamut of character types. You can play spies trying to bring the secrets of the world into the light. You can play highly trained military operatives working to stop the spread of terror and fascism. You can play super-powered beings dressed in Spandex or more practical uniforms. You can even play fantasy heroes trying to overcome the forces of darkness. Regardless of the type of game you play with **Action-Heroes**, the idea is that your character is the hero of the story, someone who fights evil and oppression in their world.

The first idea for **Action-Heroes** was to make a role-playing game that took the mechanical simplicity and the concept of rules developing through rulings at the table from early role-playing games, and marry it to more contemporary concepts of player empowerment and agency. This meant using mechanics that would help

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to support the cinematic, big screen mode of play, and putting it together in an easy-to-use manner. This is not an emulation of any specific game. It was built from a number of open content sources for streamlined ease of play, and it draws upon ideas from a number of sources, older and newer.

The second idea for this game was built around the idea that all game masters and groups already have a setting (or even more than one!) in their head, and they just need the right game system to explore that world. **Action-Heroes** was made to fill that need. There are default assumptions to the game: a more or less modern world that could be from anywhere in the 1930s up to fifteen or twenty years from now, fast paced action and competent, larger than life characters, but there is not a default setting for the game. Mix in your favorite movie or comic book universe, or adapt one of the worlds published by Outland Entertainment, and explore those worlds with your characters.

At its heart, **Action-Heroes** is a toolkit that gives you a way to explore worlds through games and stories.

Action-Heroes allows you to create and play heroic characters while pretending to be those characters in a story that the Game Master (GM) and the players help create. One player is the GM, playing the part of all the other people the characters meet. The game uses normal six-sided dice, such as those you will find in most family board games, or for inexpensive prices at discount or dollar stores. Along with paper and pencils, these are the only materials that you need to role-play. With **Action-Heroes** you and the GM can play quick and easy role-playing games with a minimum of fuss and muss. A number of potential games are possible with **Action-Heroes**.

This game was designed to be significantly light on the rules. There is minimal involvement with character creation, with only a small number of attributes and skills to get your character going. There may be powers and abilities that you think are important

**AT ITS HEART, ACTION-HEROES
IS A TOOLKIT THAT GIVES YOU A WAY TO
EXPLORE WORLDS
THROUGH GAMES AND STORIES.**

to a genre, that aren't in this game. **Action-Heroes** uses a mechanic called Abilities as the building block for any special powers that your characters might have in games, and when combined with descriptive special effects, you can create a wide variety of different powers. A part of balancing the idea of being a rules-light game is realizing that there will be a trade off with not being able to build every option in the game. This isn't going to be for everyone, but with **Action-Heroes** you don't need a lot of rules to make characters that are

robust and compelling, for long- or short-term play. You will find that a few key ideas are repeated through the game, but that is intentional and highlights important concepts of the rules.

Action-Heroes was not designed to be a "realistic" game because it was intended to simulate action-oriented genre tropes. This game does not worry about tracking a lot of details like money or ammunition, and instead gets to the action of drama of the story that your group wants to explore.

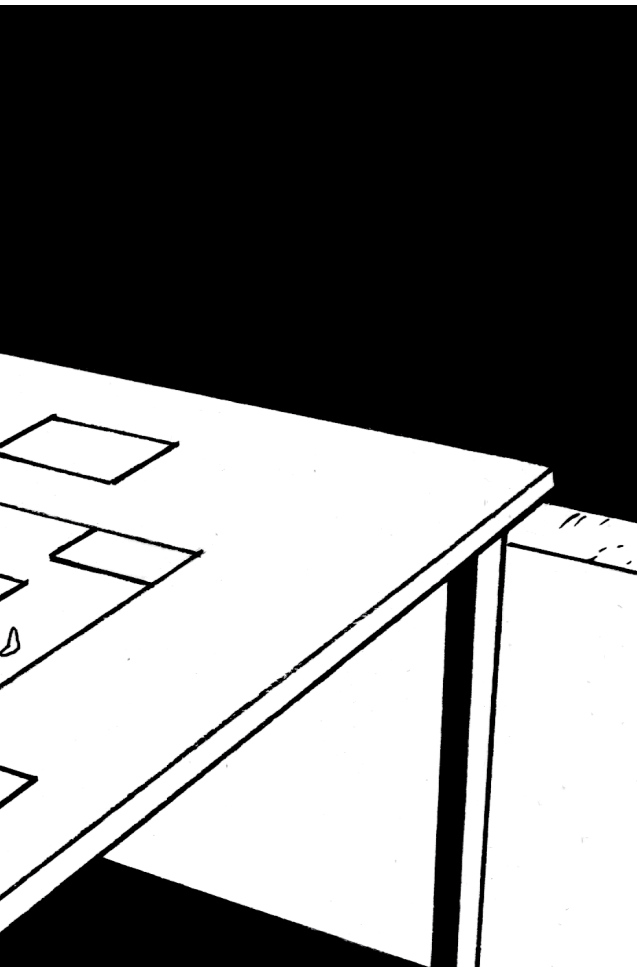


SESSION ZERO

The session zero for any **Action-Heroes** campaign is when the group gets together to create characters, figure out what sort of campaign everyone is interested in playing, and to determine things like the open-endedness of the campaign. As the GM, you have the added responsibility of making sure everyone in the group understands the mechanics of the game, including any house rules that alter or add to the mechanics of the game. Even just a quick

run through of how task resolution works, an explanation of how dice rolling works, and doing a quick combat example helps ensure everyone is on the same page of the game, regardless of the familiarity with the game of everyone in the group. Plus, it can save from frustrations over rules understanding interfering with play or dividing a gaming group. By making rules explanations a part of the campaign's session zero you aren't drawing attention to any specific player's lack of experience or understanding.

Character creation is covered in the early part of this book. Making characters with **Action-Heroes** is an easy process, and the group should be able to get through making 3-5 characters within a couple of hours. As the GM, you might want to provide a list of the Abilities befitting the campaign's concepts, and which ones you might want to restrict or disallow during character creation. Creating these lists, along with presenting a basic concept for the campaign beforehand gives players the chance to come up with a character concept or two before the session zero. It is suggested creating characters for your **Action-Heroes** games be a group activity happening during the session zero. This way you get a group of



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characters more likely to be complementary, and less likely to step on each other's niches during play.

There is a spectrum of approaches to how open-ended a role-playing game campaign should be. Some want games going on for years, much like long-running television pro-grams, while others want to tell stories with discrete beginnings, middle and ends. Neither is a wrong way to do this, but since people have differing expectations on campaign length, it is something important to discuss, and agree upon, during the session zero. The group should be flexible on a campaign's open-endedness during play, because things can change once the game starts. The group may decide to extend out a limited series concept as they discover more to the campaign's setting everyone wants to explore. Regardless,

discussion of this and other campaign elements are vital to the sustained health of any role-playing game campaign, or gaming group.

This brings up another key point of why a session zero is important for a group. You need an open, and non-judgmental, dialog within a gaming group to sustain it. The group needs to be able to discuss not only the good things about a campaign, but the things not working for them during play. If something isn't working for a player, this isn't a criticism about the GM, it just highlights different people bring different experiences to the table, and we should acknowledge and respect them, so a group can be healthy and thrive. This also leads to how to help keep games within the parameters of what is acceptable and comfortable for everyone in the gaming group.

CONTENT DISCUSSIONS

One important part of session zero discussion is what things the players and GM are comfortable with happening during a game. There are several safety tools available for use with role-playing games, and it is suggested that the **Action-Heroes** GM research and find ones that work best for them and their group. It is hard to make a “one size fits all” recommendation when it comes to the use of safety tools in a gaming group, because groups are so different from one another.

There are several reasons why you want to work these things out in advance of play starting in your **Action-Heroes** games. It keeps people from becoming uncomfortable during play (which is an

important concern), and it keeps the flow of a game from getting interrupted (which is a less important concern). If you are playing with a game master who is more prep heavy, knowing what can and cannot happen during a game helps them better plan their prep as well. Some gamers say that content discussion is unnecessary because everyone in the group are friends and already know each other. You would be surprised about the types of content that might make someone uncomfortable that doesn't come up in every day conversations, but that can cause someone to disengage while playing a role-playing game. Spending time on discussing content during the session zero can save time later if something is introduced that a person in the group might not want to deal with during a game.

**ROLE-PLAYING GAMES ARE
A SOCIAL ACTIVITY THAT ARE ABOUT
HAVING FUN WITH A GROUP
OF PEOPLE. SPENDING TIME TO MAXIMIZE THE
POTENTIAL FUN IS NEVER WASTED TIME.**

LINES AND VEILS

The default approach **Action-Heroes** uses is called lines and veils. These are among the things the group should discuss during the session zero for a campaign, because these can vary from game to game and with different people in the mix. Even if you aren't using other procedures for setting creation in your **Action-Heroes** games, you should still utilize lines and veils. The group's games will be the better for it. The concept of Lines and Veils was originally created in Ron Edward's *Sorcery and Sex* supplement for his *Sorcerer* role-playing game, and the version being used here in **Action-Heroes** was developed through play.

Everyone has hard limits to what they don't want to deal with in life, or during an RPG session. This is called a line, because they are the lines people do not want crossed in their gaming. Once established as a line, these things will not happen in the game under any circumstances. To establish lines, the game master will need to ask "What don't you want to see in this game?" during the game's planning session and the

players will need to answer honestly and clearly. Once you have a list of lines from the people in the group? That's it, they are never referred to during play.

Veils are the things that can happen during a game, but they are likely to happen off camera. The game master will say something is occurring, and then things fade to black and the action picks up later in the story. For example, sex can be a heady part of romantic stories, but for a number of reasons, not everyone will be comfortable with role-playing scenes like that in front of a group of other people. If someone in the group wants sex scenes as a veil, that is perfectly fine. Talk about the characters heading off for their romp and then fade to black.

Like with lines, during the initial game session the game master will need to ask "What are the things that you would rather have happen 'off screen' during play?" and the players will need to answer honestly and clearly. You will want to record these things, so you will remember them during play.

The use of lines and veils in your games isn't about "neutering" mature content, but about presenting it in a way

that is respectful to the comfort levels of everyone in the group. When everyone in the group knows that they are on the same page, they are able to more fully explore the themes of a game. This allows the group to delve into mature content in a respectful manner.

BLUEBOOKING & CHARACTER JOURNALS

If the group wants to be able to address themes that come up during play, but they want to do it in a way respectful of the boundaries of others in the group, you can use the technique known as “bluebooking.” Back in the 80s, game designer Aaron Allston wrote *Strike Force*, a supplement for the *Champions* role-playing game widely considered a masterclass in how to gamemaster highly dramatic, heroic, and action-oriented games. One of the things Allston wrote about was called blue-booking. As this book was written in the pre-internet and pre-ubiquitous computer days, the options for expanding your character and their story outside of play were more

limited than they are these days. Blue books were used, primarily in colleges, for writing essays on tests. They were cheap and had about twenty or so pages in them. You would treat the blue book like a journal, or fan fiction, of your character and write out the stories that happened with them around the actual sessions of play. Cooperative blue-booking could occur by players handing blue books back and forth, with each player writing the section on their character’s actions. Periodically the blue books would be given to the game master, so that they were aware of any new subplots they might like to weave into the main game. As the GM, if you want, you can award experience for particularly engaging blue-booking.

If the group is playing online, players can now simulate blue-booking techniques by sending the GM word processing documents, or text files, in the form of a character journal. If they want to do these things more publicly, a blog or a shared forum or server works, too. Just remember to tag posts with content warnings, so that people who don’t want to see the content can easily avoid it.

STORY AND LORE

The background information about a game's setting is typically called the game's lore, or just lore. Since **Action-Heroes** is a setting-less game, this means that the session zero needs to also have a basic discussion of the setting's lore, so players can have an idea of what the world is like, and things like what Abilities might be allowable for their characters. You don't have to come up with a specific document about the basics of the world's lore for the players (although it can help them out), however you should take part of the session zero to give a basic briefing about what kind of world everyone will be playing in. Some things to consider for the game's lore:

- Existence of magic and/or super-powers in the world, and whether they are secret or openly known quantities
- The kinds of menaces that characters will face

- A world like the real world, or a fantasy or science fiction world
- Power structures that characters may have to deal with on a regular basis
- What the general public thinks about characters

The list can go on, but these are some of the highlights that you can hit as the GM. It is always important to remember that you are the conduit for the players into the game world, and if there is some piece of knowledge that should be commonplace about the world you need to inform that players about it. Any sort of information that can deepen everyone's enjoyment of the game should be shared with the group.

There are likely secrets in the world, and the players may not want to know *everything* about the world's background, but as the GM you should share enough so that players are able to make informed decisions about their characters' action during play.

SESSION ZEROES

**ARE A WAY TO GET THE GAMING GROUP
ALL ON THE SAME PAGE.**

The idea behind them is that by having a session where the group and make sure that everyone understands not only the mechanics of the game and the story of the world that everyone will be exploring, but when you explain what might be different from baseline expectations there are few things to trip over during play that might cause problems down the road.

**ONCE YOU HAVE THIS PART
OF YOUR GROUP'S SESSION ZERO DONE,
IT IS TIME TO MOVE TO
CHARACTER CREATION.**
