

Gestalt: The Hero Within

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The Review:

Reviewed By Gordon Feiner

The Upside:

Gestalt: The Hero Within is a Superheroic Setting using the Hero System. The setting evolved from years of actual games, which means the concept of the setting works well in a game.

Two capture the idea of the setting the book opens with a monologue from a Gestalt. In short Gestalts are the embodiment of ideas from the collective human subconscious. The ideas is simple, elegant and an excellent basis for a campaign that wants to explore more than Good Guy vs Bad Guy.

Chapter One - Campaign Basics. Starting with the basic idea of what the campaign is and isn't, and introducing the idea of Gestalts, the superhuman template of the setting. This chapter serves as the introduction to the setting.

Chapter Two - Character Creation. First things first, the book goes into the type of character the setting embodies. Each character has to pick an archetype, or the kind of Idea they want to embody in play. Though sometimes Players like to go and do something else, the setting does have room for a few different kinds of Origins, several of them are directly related to the Gestalt Idea. Then the chapter does what is probably my biggest complaint regarding this book (not the Setting, but how it's presented) - it provides ways to get around Superhuman Origins Not Present In Gestalt. To even present the ideas seems counter productive to the intent of the setting completely. As long as you're going to play a setting play it as intended or find another setting, but built in rules to ruin the feel is just a bad move.

Along with picking an Archetype, Gestalt characters are goal focused, this can become a major part of playing an Idea Made Real. Power Level is another aspect of the Gestalt game that is different from your average game. The point levels will be familiar to Hero Gamers, but each Power Level has a defined set of parameters and restrictions they work within. From Novice to Beyond (PCs are advised they should play Experienced, Respected or World-Beater depending on the game focus). To get to a higher level (and thus more raw power) requires point expenditure. This has the advantage of having the GM keep the game at certain levels and within certain parameters, characters won't get too far apart in major combat abilities. The down side is natural growth can be stunted, or characters may all start to homogenize as they max out their abilities levels. To help solve some of this Niches are introduced - Niches allow a character to fulfill a specific specialized role (the classic archetypes such as Brick, Speedster, etc) and exceed the parameters in one area while restricting themselves in another.

A new Skill is introduced Gestalt Control, where a Player is allowed to alter plot elements based on concept and a skill roll - it's a very metagame construct. Gestalt Immortality is a new Power for the setting, for those Gestalts that can't be truly killed except in a very specific way. A Variant on Luck for Gestalt is introduced, creating another metagame mechanic (though this one less intrusive than Gestalt Control and a moderately common use of the Luck Power in Hero).

Technology in Gestalt-Earth gets some mention, how it interacts, works and to what levels it exists. Gestalt Family Powers is a very cool concept, for Gestalts of the same (or similar) types they have a chance to influence each others abilities (transferring power for example) to some extent through a contest of wills. Disadvantages is also talked about since a very important part of a Gestalt is the drive behind the character - the overriding need of the Idea being represented, Disadvantages model some of the aspects of a Gestalt that are rigid or can be used against them in their unwavering need to follow their concept.

Chapter Three - History Of Gestalt-Earth. This is a history of Gestalt-Earth from the very first Gestalt in nineteen-eighty nine to roughly the present day. It touches on major events in the Gestalt perspective and alters quite a bit of Real World History to suit the game setting. The side bars are full of extra tidbits, and text boxes cover some things in more detail.

While not really required reading for players, it would be advised that they at least be familiar with major events. The history is thorough, with plenty of holes for an enterprising GM to drop his own tidbits into it to customize a campaign.

Chapter Four - Background Characters Of Gestalt-Earth. This is the NPC chapter, with descriptions of many of the major villains and heroes of Gestalt-Earth. It starts with a note on PCs however, letting you know that the game should focus on the PCs, but not always make them the center of the game world. They live in a big place full of other superheroes after all.

Arch-Villains are up first. Starting with the worst of the worst we have a host of the truly evil to choose from. From those who want to control the Earth, to those that just want to destroy it outright. Major Villains provides some bad guys of lower caliber, and sometimes lower ambitions. Minor Villains moves further down the chain to people who are, for the most part, simply criminals.

A good range of Villains are presented, write-ups for many of them are later in the book which is good. This section provides just descriptions of villains, making it easy to simply create them for your system of choice if you don't play Hero.

Along with Villains are the Heroes. Starting with America's Finest we cover those Gestalts that cover the entire nation (or planet). After that major US cities are covered in more detail providing mostly names of Gestalts in each city for Players to interact with. From major to minor Gestalts.

Adversaries INC covers those who aren't all bad, and aren't all good either. Some are neutral or have agendas that cause them to cross back and forth - just like in the real world - between doing a lot of good and a lot of harm.

Also in this chapter are some notes on other Gestalt related aspects of the world. Gestalt Events are odd happenings not connected to a Gestalt, but are still connected to their point of origin (the Gestalt Dimension) in some way. A note on Lost Worlds is made - there are none in this game. There are Fantasyscapes, which are connected to the Gestalt Dimension which can fit the purpose should a GM need on.

Gestalts Around The World covers NPCs on the rest of the planet. Covering just about every major country and region on the planet you get even more NPCs to work with should you want to go globe trotting, or simply provide some information on what's happening outside the PCs immediate influence. It helps make Gestalt-Earth truly filled out with superhumans.

Chapter Five - Sample Gestalt Archetypes. This chapter belongs with Character Write-Ups really, but it ranks as one of the most useful chapters for setting up a Gestalt-Character. This is a number of Gestalt types with a description and a Package Deal for the Hero System. A wide range of Archetypes are covered from Acting to the combat oriented Mythical Warrior. A wide range is given, not just focusing on types that you might find PCs playing in a game (after all, a Food Gestalt may not make a great PC). This is very good because you get to see that Gestalts cover all of human interest, and it can help the GM put together a variety of NPCs for different kinds of scenarios. Each Archetype also has a plot hook or three associated with it to kick start the imagination.

The only complain here is that it is smack in the middle of basically Campaign Background chapters. The chapter seems oddly out of place for what it is providing.

Chapter Six - Extraterrestrials. There's more than just Earth out there. Not a lot more, but enough to make things interesting. The history of Gestalt-Earth's extraterrestrials is short, but useful for lots of stories. The Ar are divided into three sub-cultures and are directly related to Humans, in fact they're transplanted humans from eight thousand years ago. They are joined in outer space by the wholly alien Fndnti and Eiko. The first technologically superior to just about everyone and keep to themselves. The Eiko are a classic evil alien race, though not quite bent on conquest but they do see humans as offensive and are planning to wage war on them.

Chapter Seven - The Gestalt Dimension. At the heart of the Gestalt idea is the Gestalt Dimension. This is the physical representation of the Human Subconscious, populated by it's own host of strange things. This is the origin story of every Gestalt. It has it's own rules that it operates under, this is a good example of using the Hero System in a different manner to get a specific effect. A Fantasyscape is a pocket in the Gestalt Dimension that acts out or embodies human dreams of some kind, such as a Fantasyscape of Faery tales.

The whole idea behind the Gestalt game is really embodied in this chapter, taking the human psyche and giving it a physical outlet. The idea is so simple and elegant in execution it's hard not to like it.

Chapter Eight - Everyday Life In Gestalt-Earth. This chapter covers most aspects of the rest of the setting. Attitudes towards Superbeings, both in general and from the point of view of specific entities. Technology and where it has advanced and where it is roughly the same as the Real World. Including Gestalt Prisons and technology advanced by Gestalt scientists and such. And a host of mundane things and how Gestalts have affected them (like media, space exploration and religion). One really cool part of this chapter is the section on Gestalt Slang, a big list of words and terms you can use to add a lot of color to a game.

Chapter Nine - Character Write-Ups. This chapter starts with some information on how to handle NPCs in a game world full of them, as well guidelines for integrating the PCs into this world. Then it goes into write-ups of many of the major NPCs from Chapter Four. These are the ones PCs are most likely to interact with. A wide range of Archetypes are provided, so we get to see how various Gestalts are fully fleshed out and not just those that are more adventure or combat oriented would look. Both Villains and Heros are provided. Also detailed here, and talked about in earlier chapters, are the Leviathans, which can be thought of as Anti-Gestalts as they exist to do one thing, find and kill Gestalts. They make good continuous opponents.

Chapter Ten - Campaign Secrets. This is the behind the scenes look at Gestalt-Earth. Detailing all the plots brought up earlier in the book. Who is doing what, why, when and how. Along with a nice "Why haven't they conquered the world yet" text box covering all the major villains and why they haven't actually succeeded.

Chapter Eleven - Campaigning. This is general advice on setting up and running a Gestalt Campaign. From variant campaign ideas, focusing on the play between Gestalt Need and Human Need. And of course it touches on how to use Gestalts without a Gestalt Campaign, because as the book pointed out Gamers can be contrary. This chapter contains some good overall advice for any GM, not just ones running Gestalt and is a good chunk of information.

Chapter Twelve - Adventures. This is two adventures for a Gestalt Campaign. The first is a good introductory adventure to get the PCs involved in the game world. The second is intended as a more ongoing scenario, a little less linear and good for incorporating into a full campaign.

Chapter Thirteen - Scenario Seeds. This is a big collection of plot hooks and adventure ideas you can use in a Gestalt Campaign. From one off adventures, to campaign seeds, interludes, ongoing scenarios. It's all here. These are taken from various points in the middle of the book which is peppered with scenario ideas in the side bars. Having them all organized in one spot is a helpful feature for the over worked GM.

The Downside:

As I said before, the one sticking point to this as a sourcebook is that it provides too many ways to sidestep and get out of the concept behind the Setting. This is, in my opinion, a massive mistake. If you don't want to buy into a setting don't play it. And any enterprising gamer can adapt just about anything to their needs - officially provided ideas do too much to subvert the presented material.

As an aside Blackwyrn Games provides a PDF Download for Players which has a really good section on actual creating a Character for a Gestalt Game, this should be in the main book. As is it kind of feels like they said "oh, and you can play too" by doing that. If space was a concern then I would suggest cutting out How The GM Did It explanation of setting up a Campaign that is the last half of the Chapter Eleven.

The Otherside:

The setting is both unique and interesting. In fact it's probably the best superheroic setting I've encountered, it really grabs the idea of what it means to be More and focuses on the concepts behind our heroes and villains.

The book is thick and full of information. This is a completely fleshed out setting and presented almost completely without System Information. It's good for anyone wanting something a little different from a superhero campaign.

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