MASKS: The New Generation

Basic Concepts, Setting, and Mechanics

# Overview

Halcyon City is considered the greatest city on the planet. With size and prestige come great enemies! Remember the time that Tyrannosaurus marched down Bleaker Street, munching on cars? Or what about the team of two dozen little people who broke into the museum of antiquities and absconded with a single candelabra? And then there’s Haxxion, the intergalactic tyrant who was brought down just last week by the silver age hero, The Interloper, right there in front of a crowd at town hall. Weird stuff happens. ALL THE TIME. And you want/need/are forced to be a part of it!

You are teenage heroes from ages 15 to 19, each with a different background. You may or may not have been aware of each other until recently when you came together as a team to put down a dangerous opponent that you couldn’t have handled solo, and now it feels like the start of something big!

The game is designed for 3 to 5 players though it could accommodate more or less.

# This game (And My Opinion of the “Apocalypse” system)

From reading the materials, watching some character making and play sessions online, etc., these are my takeaways:

* The mechanics don’t take long to master.
* Occasionally you have to try to think of what action you’re performing. A classic is when you’re trying to convince an adult to do something. Since they have influence over you, you typically don’t have a leg to stand on no matter how good your argument is if they just don’t want to do something. That’s where *Pierce the Mask* is useful. You essentially figure out what the best method is to get them to do something and use that influence against them.
* No miniatures! There’s no point. It’s all in your head and there are no measurements like Hit Points or inches of movement. Instead you are disabled from play when you more than max out your conditions, and you really only die if it’s dramatically appropriate, which is not common at all in comics.
* No order to events. I describe something, you decide as a group who is likely to act first, each person describes what they are doing. If you’re doing one thing I may say that you can’t do something else at the same time.
* Each Playbook (or archetype) has its own spin, something about it that makes it mechanically different from the others because it has its own unique origin or direction.
* The volume of heroes is greater than my other games, but it makes sense. For those who played *City of Heroes* MMORPG, it’s like that—with a ton of heroes out and about doing things but a lot of things needing to be done!
* The game is purely about character interaction and teamwork. Some of it may be a little touch-feely at times when it has you describe why your character feels a certain way about another character, but that actually feeds into the mechanics, adjusting bonuses up and down.
* It may not be “rules crunchy” enough for some of you, but virtually everything seems to be covered. A session seems to run about 1-3 hours if characters are already made, another hour or two if it’s your first session. We would likely chain a number of sessions together to make a complete day.

# Starting the game (First Session)

First thing you do is to sit down together and create your characters and flesh out some of the world you live in. Input from others is integral to this game.

* GM passes out the 10 core **Playbooks**. Players take turns reading the flavor text on each one.
* Review the ones you find interesting with an eye toward their abilities and powers.
* Decide between you who will get which playbook. Just ONE of each playbook in a game, no duplications.
* Once you’ve settled on a playbook we go around the room. Each player gives some information:
  + (EVERYONE) Most hero teams have a rallying point. Do you all attend the same school? Are you Members of the same scouting troupe? Hang out at the skate park? Attend the same community event center? Drama Club? Come to a consensus on the reason for your general vicinity to one another.
  + **Hero Name** and if they have a **Real Name.**
  + The general idea of the character. (“I’m a hipster hacker who got his powers from a designer drug.”)
  + **Looks**: Note that the ones on the sheet are just *suggestions* based on what we see in comics.
  + Answer the 5 **Backstory** questions on your sheet.
* Next we’ll go around the room and choose your **Abilities** and **Moves**. Each sheet gives you your options for that playbook and the number you get to choose from.
* Your *starting* **Labels** are mostly set, but you can assign 1 point to one of them bringing it up slightly. They will fluctuate widely in play. There’s no such thing as a permanent Label number. See Glossary for Labels (below).
* We go in a specific Order around the room answering the **When our team first came together** questions. This is about the first time the group fought together as a team. It’s the basis for why you’re a team now. You can accept input from others but what you decide is likely what stands, barring some strong objections (“I would not be caught dead at a baseball game!”). It’s your chance to put your own stamp on things.
* Fill in the blanks on your **Relationships** questions. Often these are about teammates, but they can be about anyone in the hero’s life.
* Assign Influence to your teammates as directed by your playbook and explain why them. (“Rainy is the one who got me out of that foster home, Sunglow is the hero when we first came together who took a bullet for me, and Dollar Bill is teaching me to play poker.”)

# Basic Mechanics

Like many games, most actions require no rolls. In fact, if you see your character as an expert in coding, a listener of disco, or a fan of the Halcyon City Miracles soccer team, then you just know related things, no roll needed.

All you’ll ever need dice-wise is 2D6. When you DO need to make a roll they are generally noted one of three ways:

* Roll. On one or two occasions (Like **Take a Powerful Blow**) you just roll 2D6.
* + [Label]. The label in question will be specified as one of the 5 basic labels of a hero: Freak, Danger, Savior, Superior, Mundane. So if it says, “Roll +Danger”, roll 2D6 and add your Danger Label.
* + Conditions. Count the number of conditions you currently have checked, and add that to the 2D6.

Note that the conditions themselves have modifiers associated with them. So if you are asked to roll + Danger because you have elected to **Directly Engage a Threat** and you have the “Afraid” condition checked, then you are needing to include the “-2 to directly engage” which is associated with Afraid. So, in that case, 2D6 + Danger -2.

On a 6 or less you Miss. On a 7-9 you score a Hit. On a 10+ you score a Strong Hit.

So if you roll a 6 you miss and that’s it right? Not exactly. You see, there are ways to raise that number which often involve teamwork or other factors. Spending Team points or performing Team Moves can help you raise that number and you can do it retroactively! Here is a quick example of all of these elements in play:

GM: Bull and Nova, as you search the library you find that the burglars are still here! One man stands up behind you, silhouetted against the open shattered window and another two rise at the end of the table, each armed with a baseball bat. The man at the window has a knife. I’ll give you a chance to act. Who is first?

BULL: I’m your man to rush in full-steam! I take no time to assess the situation and just rush the two men. I **Directly Engage a Threat**.

GM: No, you don’t. You’re tough enough that they are no threat to you. If you want to toss those two about, just describe what happens.

BULL: I drop into a three-point stance like in football practice, lower my head, and rush full-speed at them. When I get there I raise both arms and left them up off the ground like tackling dummies and drive them back into the wall.

GM: Behind them is a wall with a bookshelf on it. You slam them into it and books cascade down over the three of you, drawing further grunts and moans. Nova, would you like to do something?

NOVA: My powers have a tendency to ruin things like libraries, so I’m going to turn to face the guy with the knife and karate-kick the knife out of his hands.

GM: Be honest, have you been training in Karate or something similar?

NOVA: No! I’ve just seen lots of Chuck Norris films. I lash out with a foot and hope to kick it free!

GM: That’s **Directly Engaging a Threat** since he can hurt you. Roll *+ Danger*. If you have the “Afraid” condition checked be sure to subtract 2.

NOVA: My danger is +1. I roll a 5 on the dice, for a total of 6. MISS!

BULL: We’ve got two team points. I acted, can I still use one?

GM: One, but you’ll have to explain how. You probably couldn’t do something physical since you’re across the room and you are acting virtually simultaneously with Nova.

BULL: Uh… I shout, “Kick his arm and break it off, like you did that guy last week!” Maybe that makes the guy hesitate.

GM: Mmm… okay, I like it. Your team pool is down to 1. Nova, you now have a 7. You got a hit. You and your opponent “Trade Blows”, so you’re both going to take a damaging effect, depending on what you choose. Your options are: Resist or Avoid Blows, Take Something from them, Create an opportunity for your allies, or impress, surprise or frighten your opponent.

NOVA: It would be nice to not get stabbed, but kicking the knife away would be cooler. I *remove something* from him. The knife flies up into the air and sticks in those awful drop-ceilings they have in school libraries.

GM: Perfect! You’re not unscathed though: please mark either Angry or Afraid, your choice. You’re either pissed off that he tried to stab you or you’re coming to the frightening realization that guy just tried to kill you!

NOVA: I’m not confident a hero enough to get to the “angry” stage yet. I think my nerves get to me. I mark “Afraid”.

GM: Bad news: It’s his turn to act. Good news: Empty-handed he’s no longer a threat. He tumbles out the window!

It’s also worth mentioning that for some rolls, even on a *miss* you gain something.

# Cinematics

Essentially you’re describing a comic book. The GM is encouraged to describe the panels that lead into the action. (“On the splash page, the sun is sinking in the harbor while young people skate and bike up and down the boardwalk. A young couple, silhouetted against the orange sky move closer. *I’ve never had a more perfect day*, she says on one panel. Me too, he replies. They move to kiss when in the next frame behind them, rising from below the pier and rearing up higher than them is an enormous octopi tentacle. It takes a downward swing and narrowly misses both, impacting the pier right between them and shattering the railing. They both scream and fall backwards away from each other and the tentacle. It’s the same beast the fishermen have been seeing closer and closer to shore over the past week. You all are scattered over the harbor area watching for its probable arrival. Now that it’s here, which one of you is likely to arrive on the scene first?”)

Unlike some games where your description of what you do impacts your rolls, the descriptions here are encouraged simply as the core of the game. You don’t’ get bonuses for them, they simply *are*. For example, “I’ll use my darkness powers to cover the scene” isn’t as good as “We see a thick blanket of night roll across the pier, enveloping the two endangered lovers, removing them as targets for the octopi.”

# Glossary

## Adult Moves

You are kids. Adults all have influence over you. But adults also have their own moves that you cannot yet access.

## Advancement

The reward you receive (options listed on your Playbook) when you’ve accumulated 5 potential.

## Basic Moves

These are 7 things everyone can do.

* **Directly Engage a Threat.** A “threat” refers to interacting with real physical danger.
* **Unleash your Powers.** Doing something complicated, difficult or dangerous with your powers.
* **Defend Someone.** Helping prevent harm to someone in imminent danger.
* **Assess the Situation.** Ask specific questions of the GM about situation from a list.
* **Provoke Someone.** Manipulate someone into taking a specific action.
* **Comfort or Support someone.** Help someone clear a condition, shift labels, mark potential, or increase Team.
* **Pierce Someone’s Mask.** Gain insight into the intentions or actions of another.

## Conditions

Things happen in gameplay that cause you to mark a condition. Each condition gives you a penalty to perform actions. Conditions can be cleared, most commonly by Team Moves. If all your conditions are marked and you take another condition, you are out of the combat for an appropriately decided reason.

## Hold

Some powers give instructions like “Hold 3” or “Hold 1”, like The Nova. This means you have that many points available and you can use them toward the applicable function (In the Nova’s case, his BURN power). You can use your “Hold” points as needed during the scene. When the scene ends unused Hold goes away.

## Hits and Misses

All roll actions are resolved with 2D6, often with something added to them (Labels, Penalties for Conditions, etc.). On a 6 or less it’s a **Miss.** If it’s close, the players can try to come up with a way to get that extra one or two points to get it up to a Hit. One a 7 or higher it’s a **Hit**. Specifically on a 7-9 it’s a lesser or weak hit, whereas on a 10+ is a strong hit. Many abilities and powers list an additional benefit for getting a strong hit. While on a “hit” you get what you want, on a miss you get to mark Potential because you learn from your mistake.

## Influence

This is a measure of what you mean to other people and what they mean to you. To start, All Adults have Influence over you because you’re just kids. Just having influence over someone allows you to instruct them. The person with influence can adjust their labels (One up, One Down). What they say must correspond to which labels they shift. If you want to reject their influence, you can roll, and on a hit you have options to neutralize what they are saying. On a miss not only do your labels shift as they choose, but you also mark a condition, because their words hit hard. If you have influence over someone you are at an ongoing +1 to affect them with any move.

## Labels

These are how you view yourself and the image you project. *The Transformed* would have a high Freak (to start) because of his appearance and his feelings about himself, whereas *The Janus* is basically a normal person trying to be something more so they are average in everything and have a high Mundane. Often when one label goes up another goes down (but not always). Changes in labels happen because of gameplay, powers used, results of actions taken, etc.

## Potential

Each time you miss a roll your potential goes up one. It’s your experience! 5 potential gets you an Advancement.

## Take a Powerful Blow

This is not one of the basic moves it’s a triggered move (worth its own entry). When you perform the *Engage A Threat* move, one of your options is to *resist or avoid blows*. If someone attacks you and hits, you can *Take a Powerful Blow* (Unless someone can take a *Defend Someone* move and step in). This is only roll you want to fail. ‘Hits’ will result in various options, from needing to flee or losing control of your powers to insulting teammates or giving the opponent an opportunity. On a ‘Miss’ you mark potential and describe why you so easily weathered the blow.

## Team Moves

These are actions you can take that help you affirm your self-image. As teenagers, you’re very interested in what other people think of you. If you perform a team move the results can shift your labels up and down, give influence to other people, or clear a condition. They’re different for each playbook.

## Team Points and Team Pool

You start a game with at least one Team point in the pool. Anyone in the team can use it to bolster a roll. Once it’s used it’s gone. More Team points can be gained through *Team Moves* and the *Comfort or Support Someone* basic move.

* Someone can elect to take 1pt of Team and apply it to someone else’s roll giving them a +1 on a move. This can be done retroactively. Explain how you helped them. Multiple people can each apply a point to that team member’s move if needed. But each can only apply one point, and they can only apply it if there’s some in the team pool. It is first come, first served. If it won’t raise a roll high enough to be a hit, then don’t use it.
* You can act selfishly and use a team point. This spends a point from the pool, applies it to one of your actions, raise one label and lower one label, hopefully giving you enough points to get a hit. The action must be acting to your benefit and against the team’s general best interest.

# End of Session

At the end of the game everyone chooses one of the following:

* Grow closer to the team. Explain why and give influence over you to anyone appropriate. Then clear a condition or mark potential.
* Grow into your own image of yourself. Explain how you see yourself as a result of that fight and shift one label up and another down.
* Grow away from the team. Explain why you feel detached. Take Influence over you away from another character.

# Environment

Halcyon City is an enormous west coast city with a long tradition of superheroes acting within it. First let’s discuss the ages of heroes. Crime-fighting within the law is not illegal.

* Golden Age: This is pretty much the 1920’s through the 1940’s era. Both Heroes and Villains here had colorful, often goofy names that incorporated colors and titles, a la Champion, The Haunt, Cast-Iron Man, and Bryce Brilliance. Flying Freedom is widely considered the first Superhero.
* Silver Age: 1950’s and 60’s. Loaded with powerful heroes and world-spanning villains, this is considered the most powerful age. Silver Spark and Starbolt are examples, taking on major villains like Doctor Infinity and the Jabberwock. Some are still around today but they are very near the end of their time.
* Bronze Age: 1970’s and 80’s. A slightly darker, more gritty group of heroes, they employed Silver Age methods until a hero named Quintessence accidentally killed his best friend, a normal person, during combat with a major threat. This caused heroes to take a second look at the methods employed and the rules they’d been following. The Silver Age heroes had never fully solved their problems and the younger heroes began to adapt their methods to solve the problems their predecessors didn’t solve, some turning to outright vigilantism.
* The New Generation: There’s no metallic name for the current age. Most seem to be waiting to see how it shapes up or for someone to coin something appropriate. There are other small groups of heroes around the city, doing their best to stave off the tide of crime. Names tend to be hip, concise, and often meme-worthy.

The city is very metropolitan despite its age. At its core are financial and business districts that resemble big cities all over America. The climate is nice, warm but subject to ocean breezes since you are on the coast.

# A.E.G.I.S. (Advanced Expert Group for Intervention and Security)

This governmental body deals with the metahuman world. Under current law, superheroes are allowed. They maintain metahuman holding facilities, an intelligence network, and strike teams.

They are who responds to the scene of supervillain incursions if no hero has arrived or in the aftermath, to either haul in the bad guy or see to bystanders safety. It’s possible to work directly for them, if that is what the heroes elected during their origin story. But most of the time AEGIS is both help and hindrance.

# What each Playbook Brings to the group

There are more specific advantages to each of the playbooks, but this is more of a broad look at a single element each one offers.