What if the world’s greatest supervillain were not actually an idiot?

By Ron Edwards
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MAGNETO: I AM NO HERO. MERELY A MAN WHO HAS SEEN AND DONE AND ENDURED WHAT CAN NEVER BE FORGOTTEN OR FORGIVEN.

VICTOR VON DOOM: MEASURE MY CRIMES AGAINST WHAT MANKIND DOES TO ITSELF, AND I AM A SAINT.

THANOS: DEATH, THUNDER GOD, IS LIKE LOVEMAKING. IT GETS BETTER EVERY TIME.

This is a playtest document
I’m presently most interested in the conduct and outcomes of play itself. Any thoughts on the following points will really help me.

- Does Doctor Chaos have a fighting chance? Do the heroes?
- Five people seem ideal – is the game robust with fewer or more? I’d like it to work for 4-6.
- Does it work to explain the win and loss conditions as part of preparation?
- Is rearranging the Conditions actually fun?

I welcome public discussion of these and any other observations about the game at the Adept Press forum, indie-rpgs.com/adept.

Since the game is not yet in physical design and construction, please reserve suggestions about these things for later. My current thoughts about the ultimate physical game include:

- Lesser villain and Doctor Chaos icons, which stand in front of the relevant players.
- Two “targeting” counters individually colored for each player, to be placed in front of whichever villain or villains he or she is opposing during an Episode.
- Two distinct decks of cards; the deck shared by the hero and lesser villain players will feature a vast profusion of fun images for inspiration.
- Tearaway sheets for developed superheroes
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Superhero role-playing games, superhero role-playing games, all over the place like cockroaches. Right upon the heels of D&D, a bevy of them scuttled forth, and then after the appearance of Villains & Vigilantes in 1979 and Champions in 1980, wham, you couldn’t swing a dead cat without hitting some new spandex-goober game. And now, right when we’re seeing new games, interesting games, even games that are built to challenge every assumption in the hobby, what do they have festooning their covers? Superheroes.

Scuttling like cockroaches, I say!

Late in 2004, Matt Snyder asked me if I’d contribute again to his wonderful e-zine, Daedalus. What’s the theme this time, I asked … sure enough, he said spandex-goobers, I mean, superheroes. I said no, but I kind of lied about why. I said, these RPGs are too hung up about the powers, and not enough about soap operas, so “superhero gaming” just wasn’t anything I was interested in any more. Not after a decade of playing Champions with great love and verve. Besides, Michael S. Miller was already fully embarked on the soap/angst approach in designing With Great Power…, and there was nothing I could add to his excellent points and plans for that game.

And that was all true, but here’s really why I couldn’t get my engines going for it. Matt had used the wrong word.

Because mock superheroes as I might, I’ll never mock the supervillain. I love supervillains. I loved Stan Lee’s book from the 1970s, Bring On the Bad Guys. I loved almost every one of my villains in all those Champions and other superhero role-playing games I was in.

One great type is the poor-bastard villain, caught between some flawed values and a raw deal, often with disfigurement thrown in for extra pain. I made up tons of these “blessed with suck, cursed with awesome” bad guys, and wrote lengthy essays about them as fictional entities and game-mechanics entities in the APA The Clobberin’ Times. Paul Dini is a master of this approach, producing the finest revisions ever for the villains in Batman: the Animated Series: raw, needy blends of menace and neurosis.

I also like those straightforward super-crooks. I mean, venal supervillainy makes sense. There you are, you now have electro-powers, whoopee! And what do you do with them? Well, first things first, you zap your appliances and phone line and so on so you never have to pay an electric bill again. Then you figure, correctly, that someone will be happy to pay you for, say, disposing of someone else with a mysterious and untraceable fibrillation. So do this every so often and quit your job; when the IRS wonders about you, destroy their records. And why think small? The city council will respond very nicely to
the possibility that you will engineer a city blackout such that the darkened blocks, from above, spell the name of the girl who wouldn’t go out with you in the tenth grade.

Good golly, I spent half my time in prepping for those games figuring out ways for supervillains to make money through thuggery, cleverness, terror, blackmail, and stunts. And most of the ways would behoove the authorities to make damn sure nothing was ever known about it. The gaudy names and costumes weren’t expressions of neurosis for these guys; they were promotional devices, like rock stars and pro wrestlers.

**Ultra-Villainy**

The most fun comes with the ultra-villains, who really aren’t “criminals” at all – they don’t even notice such piddly opposition as law enforcement. Most of the best ones came from Marvel Comics. You know them too.


These guys’ powers were impressive, yes, but that wasn’t the point at all … they had the presence, the purpose, and the guts to turn their hand to changing the world. Not just getting rich. Not just getting revenge or chewing up some real estate. No, they wanted things to be different, and their observation that things weren’t different was no setback – merely an affront. Then they didn’t just sit in the coffee shop, they pulled on the gauntlets, welded metal masks to their faces because “pain is for mere ordinary men,” and set to organizing armies, inventing time machines, opening gates from Hell to Earth, building androids of themselves, usurping command of the invading alien armada, organizing or enslaving various other super-powered folks (hardly “super” in comparison), ripping asunder the very fabric of time and space, ruling small countries, and that sort of thing.

It takes more than powers or even a cool concept to make an ultra-villain. Some examples from the comics weren’t bad on paper, but didn’t really fly in practice, like Kang the Conqueror. What made these guys less compelling? The answer is simple: they didn’t have any issues that mattered. They may have been nuts, or determined, or festooned with powers, but they didn’t have any right on their side, not even a little bit.

Remember Graviton? If you do, you probably groaned aloud, just now. Quite likely the lamest villain in the history of the Avengers, despite insanely powerful, kick-Avengers’-butt control over gravity. Why? Because he was some goob in spandex. He had no issue, no point, no reason to be cluttering up the pages except that they had to fill a couple of issues and this was all they came up with – “controls gravity.” If I recall correctly, he had a thing for his blonde secretary. Thud. Graviton wasn’t about anything. To this day I can’t remember how they stopped him or escaped his trap or anything like that, and you sure won’t see him in any retrospective collections or spin-off products like porcelain figures, much less inspiring other cultural icons.
It doesn’t matter that by the gamer-numbers, Graviton was “equal to” Magneto or Doctor Doom. Imagine either of these two, facing off with Graviton over something, and you know the show would be over instantly. It has nothing to do with “powers.” Victor von Doom would simply … I shudder to think, actually. ‘Bye Graviton.

The difference lies in pure theme. The ultra-villain not only has phenomenal power and personal presence, he also cares about important stuff, and has taken a stand about it that in some ways makes sense. We may disagree, but we recognize that it’s not a matter of the perfectly sensible superhero opposing the perfectly bonkers/evil villain.

And so a few months went by after my conversation with Matt, and finally, finally a couple of the right neurons rubbed together. Hey! A role-playing game about these guys and their ilk, that’s a different thing entirely. But no, that’s wrong too. A story with two of them in it is no good either. You need one – the best one, the most important one, the perfect one for the story you want to be creating.

Let me introduce you to …

**Doctor Chaos**

Who is hands-down the primo ultra-villain ever, the one you knew you could make up in seventh grade, except when you tried he was lame for some reason. Only this time, you’ll do it right, using the parameters I’ll give you.

How does he compare to Doctor Doom, Magneto, Dormammu, and so on? It’s not a matter of comparison – what those villains were to their comics, so is he to yours. And he’s the best.

Everyone playing this game will make him up all together, before you do anything else. I’ll provide the rules for doing this soon, but there’s no point unless you prepare yourselves mentally for this awesome task. You aren’t just making up “a” supervillain.

Doctor Chaos is mighty. No single hero can defeat him up-front, and he is more than equal to any institution or organization. He is expert at physical confrontation, cosmic energies, psychological and political strategy, technological innovation, and magical dimensions.

Doctor Chaos is also significant. He really could rule the world, and for all purposes can be considered a nation’s worth of resources and relevance to others. Cosmically, he has “place.” Demon-lords are polite to him.

Doctor Chaos is not an idiot. He understands all the things which could stop him and has figured everyone out already. His plans will work and his drive is more than sufficient to see them through. He considers “Hamlet” to be a stupid story.

Doctor Chaos has a point. His outlook may be warped or inhuman in some way, but it has its roots in human ideals which can be identified with and perhaps, in some other
context, admired. Some of the stuff he does or decisions he makes in the crunch may approach nobility.

Finally, Doctor Chaos is *masterful*. He commands more presence than anyone else, can overawe any gathering, can convince anyone he’s right through logic or fear as he sees fit. Unlike heroes, timing has nothing to do with his impact – his entrances make the timing right.

This is his game.

**Overview**

Doctor Chaos is played by one person at a time, and ownership regularly shifts around the table. The person playing Doctor Chaos at the moment is called “the Game Master.” This has very little to do with other uses of this term in traditional role-playing. It does, however, seem quite appropriate in this case.

He does two things: co-opts lesser villains to serve him, and fulfills the conditions for his plan to succeed, which occasionally requires doing something awful to an interfering superhero. So realize: Doctor Chaos can *win*. He can get his way. He can take over the world or whatever.

One person plays a lesser villain and never plays Doctor Chaos. This villain has his or her own plans, but may be subjugated by Doctor Chaos and used for the big plan instead.

All these villainous plans! How fun – if you fulfill the conditions, then you get your way, and even your ordinary supervillain, far more so Doctor Chaos, is fully competent to do this.

Except for the damned superheroes. Now, the superheroes are not exactly characters in the usual role-playing sense of the word. You don’t make them up beforehand, and no single person “owns” or “runs” any single hero. Their only presence in the game is introduced and expressed through interference with the villains’ plans. This happens through the actions and input of the people who are currently not playing Doctor Chaos or the lesser villain.

Too much superheroic interference is a real pain. If a villain can’t overcome it, the plans get delayed, and if a villain loses really badly, the good guys win and he or she might have to concede the whole plan. *Very* humiliating.

Doctor Chaos has a plan to fulfill, and the heroes keep getting in the way, threatening it from coming to fruition. The lesser villain has his or her own plans and must cope both with the heroes and with Doctor Chaos’ obnoxious ability to make the lesser villain work toward his plan instead.

Also, as superheroes are played, they may get more interesting and more powerful, and they can even start making alliances. Of course, they may also get imprisoned, distracted
by some diversion, evicted from the planet, wrapped up in some personal crisis, (temporarily) disintegrated, framed for murder, and simply beaten into pulp, but as I say, they tend to keep coming back. Furthermore, heroes become more vivid in play. So the developing story becomes not only full of powers and psychic battles and radioactive explosions, but also more personal, more dramatic for all involved.

**Organizing the group**
Get four to six people sitting around a table together, just as you would in playing a card game. Set out two decks of cards, normal 52-card decks, including Jokers.

Explain how the game is won and lost. All right, there’s this character Doctor Chaos, the big villain guy. And playing him gets traded around among everyone, although they can only have him one at a time.

Got that?

Doctor Chaos has a Plan, which itself has three Conditions, set in an initial order, 1-2-3. Play proceeds in Episodes, including card play based loosely on Gin Rummy.

- If Doctor Chaos succeeds in all the Plan's Conditions, then he wins, game over.
- If Doctor Chaos has a Condition delayed, their order changes; if that happens three times in a row, then he loses, game over.
- If Doctor Chaos fails a Condition, that Condition is failed and crossed off, so now there are two (unchecked) Conditions left.
  - If he fails one more, he loses, game over.
  - If he gets delayed twice in a row, he loses, game over.
  - If he succeeds in both, he wins, game over.

And now the other thing: you don’t make up any superheroes before playing. You have Doctor Chaos, sure, and a lesser villain all ready to go. But superheroes don’t get made up until someone opposes a villain’s plan. Then they pop into play, boing!!

God damn superheroes. They’re not even killable, although villains might be able to put them down or get them distracted by kidnapping loved ones and so forth (although that backfires). The best a villain can hope for, even the mighty Doctor Chaos, is that he or she can complete his master plan despite superheroic interference.

The lesser villain has his or her own Plan, which can be thwarted by heroes, or get nabbed by Doctor Chaos to do his bidding through loyalty or fear. But conceivably he or she can also work against Doctor Chaos when and if the chance arises.

In sum, there are two types of players in the game.

1. All but one of the participants play Doctor Chaos every so often and when they don’t, they play superheroes on an improvisational, oppositional basis.
2. One person plays a lesser villain forever and ever, amen.
Designate who’s playing the lesser villain person. Don’t make up that villain yet; just know that one person won’t be playing Doctor Chaos or any superheroes, and find out who that is. This is usually easily settled by someone saying “Me!” If that doesn’t happen, or if more than one person wants to, then cut a deck for high card.

That said, don’t stick a comics-deficient person with the lesser villain.

That brings up an important point: if there’s anyone in the group who isn’t all hip and savvy to superhero comics, then you must tread carefully. They cannot see the genre’s interplay among productive melodrama, striking iconography, cliche, and experimentation. That means they are simultaneously (1) disruptive and agonizing, introducing material that would instantly tank a comic's content, or derailing one of those features I just listed by failing to integrate it with the others; and (2) golden for introducing a necessary nigh-random colorful craziness to the game’s content.

Comics nuts such as myself are way too romantically serious about the material and we forget about its absurdity which is actually part of its charm and effectiveness. So naive contributions can function as a random mutation creative factor at the table, unfettered by the genre-emulating, occasionally feverish comics-faithful mind-set prevailing at the table. A certain percent of the suggestions make the rest of us scream and clutch our heads, but the other percent fill a gap that the rest of us don’t provide.

The next step is to make up your group’s own Doctor Chaos, and after that, the lesser villain. Again, superheroes are not made up prior to play. They’ll come in later.

**Making up Doctor Chaos**

It’s a group process. You will all come to agreement about (1) his Primary Style, (2) the Plan, its Conditions, and its Scope; and (3) his Look in terms of various details; and you’ll at least glance at (4) his Issues.

Partly it’s a matter of going step by step, but just doing that isn’t enough. You’ll have to listen to one another, and arrive, not at mere consensus, but at enthusiastic agreement. It isn’t good enough for one guy to make up Doctor Chaos while everyone else goes “yeah sure,” because that guy always runs the role-playing games.

Since all I provide are parameters, every group’s Doctor Chaos is different. Maybe yours is suave and elegant, or maybe he’s more magic than man. Maybe he’s half a machine. I know I’ve been saying “he” all through the book, but “Doctor” is a gender-neutral title, so that variable is totally up for grabs too. And so on.

The Cheese Rule might help. It applies specifically to this part of this game. The Cheese Rule says, “Doctor Chaos has no features which anyone in the group considers to be undesirable or lame.”
I leave applying the Cheese Rule up to you, with one exception. My only advice is, don’t get all PoMo and have a little-old-bag-lady Doctor Chaos or some shit like that.

On with the parameters! Choose one of the following as Doctor Chaos’ primary Style:

- Technology – robotics, computers, time machines, tractor beams, cloning dinosaurs, cold fusion, rocket ships, interesting bombs
- Cosmic forces – the galactic core, alternate dimensions, nega-rays, aliens (maybe lots of them!), omicro-beams, distant planets, positive zones, and so on
- Magic and mystic stuff – raising one’s lover from the dead, opening gates to hell, still more dimensions (the acid-trip ones), zombie armies, transmogrification, making stuff happen by saying it in rhymes
- Psychology and deception – a broad category, including ESP, mastery of media, tremendous anticipation of others’ actions, uncanny influence over others, conspiratorial connections and manipulations, and spies everywhere
- Elemental comics-physics – mental control over various physical processes like magnetism or nature or weather, and so on

Don’t get me wrong. Doctor Chaos can do all of these things and can combine them as he sees fit. He can use any or all of them to amass armies, run organizations, kick butt personally, sway whole populations, and so on. This step just clarifies which one informs how he looks and what sort of stuff he puts on the front burner.

He may or may not have an “alternate identity” in the comic book sense. Doctor Chaos is above such minor hassles as normal life, so if his real name is known, it’s because he wants it that way. If it’s not, then it is completely hidden as he sees fit and in no danger of exposure. Or perhaps he simply doesn’t have any such personal identity in the first place, being more of a Force than a man. Decide stuff like this now.

Also settle upon Doctor Chaos’ preferred scope of operations. I’m writing this more-or-less on the Magneto or Doctor Doom model, in which “the world” is just about right for him to consider his proper sphere of influence. However, it is perfectly all right to reduce or to increase this scope, such that “controlling London’s crime-world” might be his speed – or “conquering the very fabric of time and space.” All you need to remember is that no other character may approach, let alone exceed Doctor Chaos’ assigned scope.

Now it’s time for his Plan! Choose any or all of the following Aspects:

- To Rule – to be in charge of things, the recognized top boss
- To Conquer – to extend influence ever further and to exploit resources from conquered places
- To Control – to influence how others behave and run their lives

These are not the same things. For instance, if you Conquer and Rule, then you don’t care what people think about it or if they rebel or disobey for however long, because as you go along, you just punish them. But if you Conquer and Control, then you are all about
insidiously destroying power structures and turning everyone toward your point of view, ever outward and onward, without being the overt boss. If it’s just Ruling, then hell, be in charge, and who cares what everyone thinks about it.

Once you know which one, two, or all three Aspects are just right for the Plan, then create three Conditions for the Plan to work. Conditions are concrete things, for instance, conquering North America might require over the control of the satellites circling the planet, or perhaps destroying the influence of the city’s prime superhero team. Controlling a city or nation might include infiltrating its government with stooges or android replacements, or introducing behavioral-control devices or substances to the population.

By the way, “Destroy” isn’t a Plan Aspect. It’s a side effect of various Conditions. You will find out later how much destruction each of the Conditions has in it.

Write the Conditions on slips of paper and place them in the order that Doctor Chaos would like to see them implemented. It’s better for the Conditions to be independent of one another’s success, because they may well get out of order due to heroic interference in play.

Briefly state what basic position or resources Doctor Chaos is starting with, i.e., does he already have an army or an enormous satellite, or what.

Doctor Chaos needs a Look, too. Clearly, it expresses his primary Style (technological, etc). Consider:

- Face – an inky void? A metal mask? Whole head on fire? You’ve seen’em all, so come up with the best you’ve got.
- Outfit – how he’s dressed.
- Minions – a few? Hordes? Frightening and astounding, or secretly distributed among us?
- Visual Effects – now, anyone can just zap lightning bolts around. When Doctor Chaos does it, we are talking about that comic book artist earning his pay. What does it look like?

I gotta stress here: apply the Cheese Rule in full. Doctor Chaos’ Look cannot be lame.

I recommend staying within the fashion and cultural coding of the present-day, at the moment of play. Although the great ultravillains of past decades are given a pass for their historical moments of origin, your Doctor Chaos should not be too referential to them or retro in any way.
Finally, Doctor Chaos is human in every casual, thematic sense of the word. Even if he’s an alien or transdimensional invader or android, he’s human. Unfortunately, we humans have our issues, and Doctor Chaos, being superhuman, has Issues.

In fact, he has all of the following:

- Fixation – a substance, action, or phenomenon that often captures his attention
- Ideology – a philosophy which guides and sustains all the stuff he does
- Caring – strong emotional, personal connections, whether positive or negative

Don’t decide anything about these yet. Plenty of time for that to happen later. When you get to it, though, introduce something of its own. Don’t, for instance, identify a Fixation as “determined to conquer Earth” when that’s already part of the Plan to Conquer Earth.

Also, things like “arrogance,” “belief in his own greatness,” and “self-absorption” aren’t Issues. Doctor Chaos is great, so stuff like that merely acknowledges reality.

In fact, now is a good time to admire him for a few minutes. He’s your group’s grandest creation to date, so make sure he’s just the way you want.

**Quick review**

Here’s what you have now:

Doctor Chaos, all made up and ready to go. This is currently a single sheet which will be held by individual people at different times. As the current person narrates stuff about his powers, his Issues, and anything else that matches to or clarifies the sketchy information currently there, that person will write on this sheet. It gets pretty interesting after a bit.

A lesser villain, all made up and ready to go. This sheet is a lot like the Doctor Chaos sheet, only simpler, and is associated with one person for the whole game.

A few sheets of paper or 3x5 cards lying around for superheroes to be made up on.

Sheets for Developed heroes, should any appear.

Two counters of a single color per person at the table.

Two standard decks of 52 cards, including Jokers for a total of 54 cards each.

The Game Master (the person currently playing Doctor Chaos) uses a single deck of cards by himself or herself. This deck will follow Doctor Chaos around the table. Everyone else, including the player of the lesser villain, shares a separate, single deck of cards.

**Episodes and the Plan**
Play is divided into Episodes, each of which focuses on a given part of Doctor Chaos’ plan, that is, a Condition. An Episode determines whether a Condition is fulfilled, delayed or failed. **Fulfilled** Conditions are provisionally satisfied (checked off), although they’re not invulnerable to being reversed later. **Delayed** Conditions may be attempted again, later. **Failed** Conditions are crossed off the list, and Doctor Chaos must pursue a sadly diminished Plan instead.

Refer to the three playbooks to see how to play and conduct an Episode.

Ultimately, Doctor Chaos’ Plan succeeds if he can check off all of the Conditions currently on his list. But his Plan fails, entirely and for good, if either of these two outcomes occur:

- all of his existing Conditions are sequentially beaten
- the number of failed Conditions outnumber the existing Conditions

Now let’s hop up a level and think about Episode-to-Episode stuff in the game.

Delaying Conditions only bumps them to the bottom of the list, without affecting existing checks.

Doctor Chaos loses if failed (crossed-out) Conditions outnumber his existing ones, i.e. 2:1. So defeating Conditions this thoroughly is good for the heroes, especially because the Conditions that are left lose their checks, if they have any.

However, Doctor Chaos wins if he checks off all of his *existing* Conditions. Crossing off Conditions means that he now has less Conditions to check off.

Therefore, if and when he gets battered down to two Conditions, the game has hit its mechanical tipping-point. Checking off both means he wins the whole Plan, getting one crossed off means he loses the whole Plan, and delay means the heroes have a chance to defeat him by beating the second Condition. It’s time to start thinking about the role-playing, because that’s what opens up the better options for the cards.

**A quick, key point: talkin’**

The key point: “narration” when playing this game does not mean that one person is talking and the others are all struck mute and worshipful toward his or her pronouncements. The narrator in this game is not like the holder of the conch in *Lord of the Flies*. Instead, narration is expected to be semi-communal. You have to pay attention to what someone else is narrating, and you have to pay attention to others’ reactions when you’re narrating.

The current acting player is empowered to rubber-stamp whatever interpretation seems to be working best, to decide “all right, that’s enough suggestions for now,” and to act as the senior editor of all the talking.
I’ve already mentioned the Cheese Rule, as applied to the process of making up Doctor Chaos. It also applies to narrating stuff that includes Doctor Chaos during play, as a line-item veto privilege shared by everyone.

**Winning**
What’s winning, in this game?

Look – the hero players can’t actually win the card game. Straight-ahead Rummy vs. Doctor Chaos won’t work; his deck is better than the other deck, on purpose. The usual strategies for Rummy have been stripped out, with only one bit (“don’t chase melds”) remaining.

So don’t get wrapped up in competitive card-play per se, either within an Episode or among them. There isn’t any card game here, and such a focus won’t work.

Instead, the whole game is about Doctor Chaos’ Plan and where you stand relative to it. In other words, you don’t play to win at cards, you play cards for whatever fictional outcome you’re most invested in at the moment.

- Maybe you want Doctor Chaos to succeed while you control him
- Maybe you want Doctor Chaos to succeed and don’t care who controls him
- Maybe you want him to fail, regardless of who controls him
- Maybe you shift among these outlooks or among others as play goes along

You can play the cards intelligently and creatively for your immediate goals, yes. Let your own interest in what’s going on, and who you want to play at that moment, drive what you do with your cards.

Everyone else is doing the same, so competition or cooperation among you is a shifting thing.

**Acknowledgments (in draft)**

**Development**
The very first playtests in 2005 included myself, Tod Olson, Julie Stauffer, Ben Lehman, Maura Byrne, and Tim Kleinert; and at GenCon, Mike Holmes, Michael S. Miller, Rob Bohl, Chris Chinn, Gordon C. Landis, Keith Senkowski, and Judd Karlman. Sadly, all character details have vanished into the sands of time.

The 2010 playtest at the Dice Dojo in Chicago included myself (Fireballs, Homeland Hank), Peter Charnley (the Red Architect), Phil Kalata (Kinetic, Air Commander Fireballs), Sam Rivier (the Hippiemancer, the Astronut, Kinetic), and Mike Samuels (Poseidon’s Fist, the Star of David).
Jesse Burneko’s playtesting at Orccon 2011 included Jesse (the Raven), Sean (the Iron Boot), Anna (Lady Liberty), Dawn (Phantasma, Lady Justice), and Troy (Caustic).


Jesse Burneko’s playtesting in 2013 included Gretchen Losh, Hamish Cameron, and Wes Otis (the Wizard). (Heroes included Major Guns, Og the Word Speaker, Peek-a-Boo, the Hammersmith, the Raven, and the something-or-other Knight).

Summer 2014: Ezio Melega (the Purple Sorceress), Lavinia Fantini (Steve, Gh05t), Matteo Suppo (Lady Red, #42), and Laura Brandini (Aurora, Steve); Mario Bolzoni (Earthchild), Stefano Cuoghi (Twilight Owl, Zion, Silvana, Shape, and Patrol), Francesco Berni (Zion, The Freedom Spirit, Silvana and City Man), Francesco Sechi (The Freedom Spirit, Patrol, Zion, and Shape), and Ezio Melega (The Freedom Spirit, Silvana, Patrol, Zion, and Shape).

**Comics and about comics**

*The best and the most*

Doctor Doom, Magneto, Thanos

The Galactus saga – Galactus almost the purest possible example, interestingly almost sanitized; archetypal for the minion rebellion

Apokolips

special mention for the Kingpin at a lower scale

*A great villain who never was*

I thought I’d bend your ear for a moment regarding Kobra, a supervillain in DC Comics whom I encountered with his initial appearance, the first three issues of his title comic in 1976. You might not remember or know about these three-comics packs that were sold at the time, either a random set of latest issues or three in a sequence like this one, but it was one of those.

Jack Kirby proposed the name and initial imagery but left the project behind, and Martin Pasko completely rewrote it with Pablo Marcos as the primary artist. The story began with a startling image that illustrates the sudden relaxation in the Comics Code at that time: the birth of twins conjoined at the head. They were separated surgically and grew up separately into Jason, a hip, slightly macho, alienated American guy, typical of the heroes of the day; and Jeffrey, or rather Kobra, a secret cult leader. The three-part story is about an American security agency trying to use Jason to hunt his brother by exploiting
the extra-sensory link between them.

It was really cool. Kobra was strange and weirdly ethical, and the security agency was completely ruthless, clearly revealed to be the story's actual villain. The three issues ended with Jason defying the agency and even quoting Jesus Christ to characterize Kobra, with the implication that the two brothers might work out a better life if they could find a way without their respective organizations playing games with them.

It's a totally anti-establishment story, defying conventions every which way. It was also enclosed, without reference to other DC characters. The title lasted merely seven issues, also typical of the time, and the character was only picked up much later when the DC editorial policy shifted to a more universe-style Marvel approach.

They totally borked the concept, of course. In short order, Jason was dead and Kobra became a mere raving cult leader whose sole claim to characterization was pronouncing every S as “Sssss!” Except for a brief stint in the excellent Suicide Squad by John Ostrander and Kim Yale, Kobra was effectively doomed into uselessness. There's also a latter-day reboot and re-imagining in Faces of Evil by Ivan Branko, which I leave to you to judge.

Me, I want the original Kobra back.

Lesser villains

Batman: The Animated Series

Suicide Squad

Some books to check out

The 1970s: Bring on the Bad Guys, by Stan Lee
The 1980s: The Comic Book Heroes, by Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones
The 2000s: Marvel Comics: The Untold Story, by Sean Howe

The mystery isn't why and how the old Marvel Bullpen produced such brilliant work; it's how it functioned at all – these weird aging men, including a tough conservative (Kirby), a cross-eyed libertarian (Ditko), and a hip liberal (Lee).

Games

Villains & Vigilantes (1979, Fantasy Games Unlimited) and Champions (1980, Hero Games) are the classic superhero role-playing games.

Give Me the Brain (Cheapass Games) introduced me to freewheeling primary resource, jumping around
My Life with Master (2002, Half Meme Press), central group-made villain, here with a different thematic purpose

With Great Power … (2004, Incarnadine Press), Darkpages (Memento Mori), innovative supers role-playing games

The People’s Hero, modification of first Doctor Chaos draft, shared/jumping character is the hero, individuals play villains, similar tradeoff between two ways to win

Better Angels (2014, Arc Dream Publishing)
Doctor Chaos’
Playbook

For this Episode, you are the Game Master, the person who’s playing the Doctor himself. Place the Doctor Chaos stand-up icon in front of you, with pride.

**Assess the situation**
Check out the Doctor’s Plan. At its top is a Condition, and this Episode will determine whether that Condition is fulfilled, delayed, or failed. Fulfilled Conditions are provisionally satisfied (checked off), although they’re not invulnerable to being reversed later. Delayed Conditions may be attempted again, later. Failed Conditions are crossed off the list, and Doctor Chaos must now pursue a new and sadly diminished Plan.

Number of Conditions
Checked, current sequential losses
Where you stand relative to winning or losing the game – closer than you think – e.g., destroyed Conditions may have moved you closer to victory

**Launching the Episode**
State the Condition Doctor Chaos is striving to fulfill, and get specific with it. Where is Doctor Chaos? What is happening that he seeks to influence? How does that look, as his efforts begin?

The lesser villain may currently be under your control as well, and if so, relax and enjoy it. State where he or she is, and how the lesser villain is aiding Doctor Chaos in fulfilling this Condition.

If the lesser villain is currently free from control, then state that Doctor Chaos is trying to dominate that character, and place a targeting token in front of that player. Don’t worry about how he knows about the lesser villain’s whereabouts or activities; Doctor Chaos knows all that stuff and possesses any means necessary to establish control.

Permit the player of the lesser villain to speak next, regarding the character's options (ha!), as well as something or other about his or her own pale excuse for a Plan.

**Cards! Play begins**
Draw a hand of seven cards from Doctor Chaos’ deck, which is all yours and no one else's, during this Episode. Turn over the top card of the deck as well and sets it beside
the deck in Rummy style. Everyone else also draws seven-card hands, all from the other deck, and that deck is set up similarly. By “hands,” I’m talking about traditional card games in which you hold your cards in a fan with their backs toward everyone else, so your cards are kept private.

Card play starts with the person seated to your left and keeps proceeding to the left.

On your turn, you get to state how Doctor Chaos is successfully proceeding with his or her Plan, which should be brief and visually striking. In so doing, you then alter your hand of cards in Rummy style. That means you may look at the top card of the face-up discard pile next to the deck and decide whether you want it, and if you don’t, take the face-down card on top of the deck instead. Either way, you must discard one card face-up to maintain your hand size at seven cards. You have to do this every turn; there’s no passing.

Cards are traded out in order to build melds, a Rummy term. A meld is defined as three or more cards which are either in sequence in suit or the same rank. Cards in your hand which are not in melds are called deadwood.

As the Game Master, you have special privileges. If you choose to take the top card of the deck, you’re not stuck with it; if you don’t like it, discard it face up and take the next one. Each turn, you may do this a number of times equal to however many people are seated together in play. That way you can pass over cards which are manifestly unhelpful at the moment. However, when you do choose a card, or when you reach the maximum, then this process ends for that turn.

Also, your Jokers are wild, permitting you to build melds more easily and even to build them up to six cards.

If your deck runs out in the middle of deal or a card trade-out, then gather up the discards, shuffle, and simply continue.

**Cards! And climax**

When does the round end? When someone knocks, which is another Rummy term – you knock on the table. You may knock during your turn, after discarding, but only when you have three deadwood cards or less in your hand. Knocking is voluntary; you can hold out and keep playing to keep improving your hand if you want. The reason you might want to do that is that a hand with all melds, no deadwood, is called Gin and is very powerful.

Knocking stops all card drawing instantly and everyone must show their hands. The more cards in melds you show, the better off Doctor Chaos is during the climactic events of the round. (Incidentally, this is not how actual Rummy is scored.)

Now it’s time for major narration, which depends greatly on whose hands are superior to whose.
Everyone counts up the number of cards they have in melds. That’s the basic number. The superhero players will almost always be comparing their totals to yours in opposition to the Condition of your Plan.

If Doctor Chaos controls the lesser villain, he may both count the lesser villain’s melds into his score and add the lesser villain’s Deadwood to improve his own melds, when it fits.

Ties are resolved easily for you: Doctor Chaos always wins.

Winners describe what happens, from most melds to least. Really describe how your opponent gets beaten. Don’t be a wimp and let them escape, or leave them an “out.” That’s up to the person who plays them later and is not your problem.

If and when Doctor Chaos defeats a superhero, it will either be:
- Shattering victory (non-Gin) – the hero is crushed in a distinctly personal and appropriate way, for daring to presume to matter.
- Dismissive victory (Gin) – the hero is simply and decisively defeated, and Doctor Chaos probably won’t remember or care about it.

Events concerning the lesser villain include:
- If a lesser villain under Doctor Chaos’ control strives to break free and defeats Doctor Chaos, then he or she breaks free and counts as opposing Doctor Chaos’ Condition.
- If Doctor Chaos defeats a lesser villain
  - The lesser villain is brought under his control if that was a stated goal for this turn and the lesser villain’s Condition, if it was under way, is delayed.

The key issue is what happens to Doctor Chaos’ Condition. The Episode is concluded when the narrations of the hands are over. Doctor Chaos has either achieved this Condition for his Plan (“Cower before my might, misguided misfits!”), or it’s been delayed to the end of his list (“Fools! You have merely delayed me!”), or it’s been demolished by the timely and determined intervention of the superheroes (“Aarrrgh!”).

- If Doctor Chaos beats everyone who opposes him, or is not opposed at all, then his Condition is fulfilled – put a check by it and move it to the bottom of the list.
- If Doctor Chaos is beaten by some but not all opposition, and no one gets Gin, then this Condition is delayed; it goes to the bottom of the list without being checked.
- If Doctor Chaos is beaten by everyone who opposes him, then the Condition fails, and gets a line drawn through it. Also, all remaining Conditions with checks become un-checked.
- If Doctor Chaos is beaten by even just one opponent by a Gin, then the Condition fails, and gets a line drawn through it. Also, all remaining Conditions with checks become un-checked.
The Portrait Moment
The Episode comes to a close with you, the Game Master, describing what Doctor Chaos does as a result of seeing his Condition fulfilled, delayed, or fully prevented from happening. The narration may include how he manages to escape from the heroes.

Now is also the time to role-play, illuminate, and develop Doctor Chaos’ Issues. Remember them? Ideology, Fixation, and Caring. Pick however many seem to be most relevant or interesting, and give us a look into the mind of this great villain, making up whatever you need to.

Consider introducing a minor character for the Doctor Chaos to interact with: a relative, a favored minion, a romantic interest, or anyone else deemed suitable for dialogue. Draw upon whatever events or characters you'd like from the Episode you just concluded.

This is the climax of your current ownership of the character, so give it your best shot. Remember the Cheese Rule, please.

Finishing the Episode
Bookkeeping: Delays, Fails, Checks

Gather up the cards for each of the two decks and reshuffle them. If Doctor Chaos was victorious against all comers, then the role of Game Master moves one person to the left for the next Episode, skipping the player of the lesser villain when necessary. However, if someone playing a superhero in the last episode defeated Doctor Chaos, then that person now takes on the role of Game Master. If more than one person did so, then the role passes to the one closest to the current Game Master’s left.

Give the Doctor Chaos stand-up icon and this rules packet to the appropriate person and join the hero players.

Doctor Chaos matters
Just how villainous is Doctor Chaos? Is he evil? How much is there to admire? It’s quite necessary that he offers something along these lines, as mentioned earlier. But … where’s the line? That’s up to you.

One of the issues concerns how much actual, physical destruction is involved in his Plan. Superhero comics and action movies offer a lot of latitude, as part of the point involves glorying in catastrophic imagery. So as people narrate various outcomes and details throughout play, keep in mind that, despite that latitude, a line for “how much is okay” does exist among you. If Doctor Chaos crosses that line, collectively speaking for the whole group, then he or she turns into a bad guy, in the “really-bad” sense of the term.

And that might be all right, or it might not. Stay in touch with your own creative honesty and enjoyment of the material.
In the comics, lesser villains and ultra-villains are extremely different in terms of atrocity. A lesser villain is usually well-established and fixed in these terms and really does deserve the sobriquet "villain." He or she will or will not kill, will or will not torture, will or will not sell drugs, will or will not not et cetera, but in at least one way, he or she is genuinely quite a bad person indeed. However, in comparison, ultra-villains are remarkably restrained. Even the ones who do indulge in large-scale destruction, e.g. war or eating whole planets, draw the line at individual suffering, with the possible exception of occasional henchmen who come within arm’s reach at the wrong moment.

Now, why is this? As far as I can tell, the continued potential for admiring the ultra-villain a little bit is a sacred thing. As soon as he crosses the line of, say, establishing concentration camps or indulging in cannibalism, then he descends to the level of a simple menace to be eliminated from the landscape.

But part of the ultra-villain’s appeal is that he does not do such things. His specific plans for world domination are rightly stopped by superheroes, yes, but somehow, we want him to stick around for another story one day. Perhaps because his genius and drive might someday be turned to more constructive ends. Perhaps because his shred of moral high ground is worth preserving. Perhaps because if one day a truly atrocious and powerful being came along, it might be good to have him on our side.

So I recommend that Doctor Chaos not be a cannibal, a rapist, a serial killer, or a practitioner of genocide, to name a few. Crimes against persons are generally beneath him. Now, don’t go too far: many an ultra-villain has been rendered lame when revealed to be a big softy. But this issue is even trickier than the destruction one, so that same attention to one’s own best authorial self is needed.

The final topic concerns that nebulous word, honor. Ultra-villain stories are full of examples of the character’s “strange, twisted sense of honor” that somehow leads to an outcome we approve of. The villain might stomp the heroes into the ground, but then when the hero helps the villain against a secondary and deadly threat, the villain renounces his current plan.

As far as I can tell, this honor isn’t a single thing or issue. It’s distributed among all the Issues as defined in this game, as an interactive property. In playing Doctor Chaos, you might look back over the story and find such a “strange, twisted honor” emerging out of how the Issues were played, and maybe even incorporate it as you see it into narrating various outcomes. This sort of thing is very much up to you as a group, for your own Doctor Chaos. It’s probably best not to force it … but on the other hand, it’s potentially the most engaging and rewarding aspect of the game.
The heroes’ playbook

For this Episode, you begin with no character in hand, but will invent a superhero after play has begun, or choose from those previously invented.

An Episode determines whether one of Doctor Chaos’ Conditions for his Plan is fulfilled, delayed, or failed. As a superhero, you must stop this Condition!

Launching an Episode
Play begins with Doctor Chaos embarking on the Condition at the top of his list, and then with the player of the lesser villain describing his or her character’s intentions as well. However, as the player of a superhero this Episode, until your individual term comes around, you don’t get to talk at all.

Cards! Play begins
You share a deck of cards with everyone except the current Game Master. You will be dealt seven cards from it along with the rest of them. Hold them in a traditional card game hand, in a fan with their backs toward everyone else, so your cards are kept private.

Play proceeds in turns from the Game Master’s left. On your first turn, you get to describe how you oppose one or both villains, and place your targeting token(s) in front of the relevant player(s).

There is no mechanical trade-off for targeting more than one villain, but do come up with reasonable fictional content to describe how you're doing it. Also, if the lesser villain is under Doctor Chaos’ control, don't bother opposing him or her, just focus on Doctor Chaos.

Then look at the top card in the face-up discard pile. Choose either to pick it up or to take the face-down card on the top of the deck. Either way, discard a card from your hand afterward, face-up on the discard pile, to maintain your hand size at seven cards. You have to do this every turn; there’s no passing.

Cards are traded out in order to build melds, a Rummy term. A meld is defined as three or more cards which are either in sequence in suit or the same rank. Cards in your hand which are not in melds are called deadwood.
Unfortunately for you and the other people using this deck, the Jokers are blanks – they cannot be melded. (This rule changes if your hero is Developed – see below.)

You and everyone except for the Game Master may communicate about how you play cards from the collective deck, but are limited to saying “I want that” or “I don’t want that” regarding the face-up card on top of the discard pile. To ensure that someone who comes after you gets that card, simply pick it up and then put it down again, leaving your own hand unchanged. Disclosing further information about the contents of one’s hand is not allowed.

**Narrating superheroes**

On your turn, you must narrate how your superhero *interferes* with the existing scenes, which permits them to trade out cards too. Since heroes aren't made up prior to play, you must invent and introduce a hero into the situation. Inventing a hero requires giving him or her a Name, choosing a single Style and making up a Look.

Stay sketchy. Sketchy, sketchy, sketchy! Heroes start very simply in this game, and you must forget all your years of inventing deep, nuanced, psychologically-rich, and carefully-detailed-powers superheroes from all those other games. Stick only to the Name, Style, and Look, and restrict the Look to a single detail.

*Example:* “Jet Star, cosmic space-skimmer, with a glowing star on his chest!”

It’s easiest to assume that the hero already knows who Doctor Chaos is, although you may change that if you want for a given hero. Do not justify the hero’s presence in logistic terms; his or her appearance only needs to be played as a surprise to the villain being opposed. Basically, the hero breaks through a wall, a henchman opens a crate and the hero jumps out, or something like that.

*Example:* “The energy module is suddenly pierced by a streaming bolt of light from above, and it explodes! It is reduced to bits of incandescent slag spattered all over. Where it stood now stands a man – Jet Star! ‘Just in time,’ he boasts.”

As this example also shows, really do thwart something about the Condition under way; don’t merely have the hero show up and shout defiantly.

During later Episodes, you can choose either to make up a whole new superhero, as described above, or bring back one we’ve seen before. For the latter option, though, you can only do it if you were not the last person to have played that character. It doesn't matter a bit if in the previous appearance, the superhero was apparently killed.

**Development**

If you’re bringing back a hero we’ve seen before, then you may be able to Develop him or her. A Developed superhero gains several mechanical advantages in card play, explained below.
A superhero may be Developed upon reappearance only if, during an earlier Episode,

- He or she received a shattering defeat at Doctor Chaos’ hands, or
- He or she stopped or helped to stop Doctor Chaos’ Condition from being fulfilled.

This is a big deal. Consider yourself to have two solid pages of great superhero comics to work with, drawn at the height of the writer’s and artist’s powers.

You begin by describing what the hero has done to build upon his or her success or to overcome the shattering experience. Stay simple! If a villain turned his spouse against him, then the hero could well patch up the relationship. It doesn’t have to be complex—but it does have to be sufficient. Add to his or her description with one of the following: Disability, Responsibility, and Doubts—anything that humanizes this character and perhaps prompts empathy.

Then you can introduce the hero into play as with any other hero, appearing in some way that surprises the villain and opposes his or her current Condition under way.

Once a hero has been Developed, he or she stays that way and can be brought back into play in later Episodes with no need for special narrations, although always subject to the rule that no one can play a given hero twice in a row.

A Developed hero has the special ability to help the lesser villain if and when the villain seeks to rebel against Doctor Chaos’ control, using the hero’s humanizing element as a dramatic hook.

**Cards! And climax**

When does the round end? When someone knocks, which is another Rummy term—you knock on the table. You may knock during your turn, after discarding, when you have only three deadwood cards or less in your hand. Knocking is voluntary; you can hold out and keep playing to keep improving your hand if you want. The reason you might want to do that is that a hand with all melds, no deadwood, is called Gin and is very powerful.

Knocking stops all card drawing instantly and everyone must show their hands. The more cards in melds you show, the better off your villain or superhero is during the climactic events of the round. (Incidentally, this is not how actual Rummy is scored.)

Now it’s time for major narration, which depends greatly on whose hands are superior to whose.

Everyone counts up the number of cards they have in melds. That’s the basic number. Compare your total to the totals of the villain or villains you’re opposing; whoever has more cards in melds has been victorious.

Developed superheroes may:
- Combine their melded cards with those of other Developed heroes for a single shared value.
- Add Deadwood from any superhero’s hands into their own melds, when it fits.
- Assign one or both Jokers from their hand any value or suit; i.e., Jokers are wild; furthermore, use the Joker in their own hand or donate it to any other hero's hand.
- If all the current heroes are Developed, then success means the villain’s Condition fails even without Gin!

Ties are resolved easily; you always lose.

Winners describe what happens, from most melds to least. Really describe how your opponent gets beaten. Don’t be a wimp and let them escape, or leave them an “out.” That’s up to the person who plays them later and is not your problem.

**Finishing the Episode**
The Game Master does all of this part, so you don’t have to do anything, but here's what will happen.

If Doctor Chaos was victorious against all comers, then the role of Game Master moves to the current hero player at the current Game Master's left for the next Episode, skipping the player of the lesser villain when necessary. However, if someone playing a hero in the last Episode defeated Doctor Chaos, then that person now takes on the role of Game Master. If more than one person did so, then the role passes to the one closest to the current Game Master’s left.

The new Game Master receives the Doctor Chaos stand-up icon and playbook and the previous one becomes a hero player.

**The “hero” in superhero**
Folks, it’s simple: unless enough people in the group care about the superheroes as people, and want to see them win, Doctor Chaos will probably succeed in his Plan.

Oh, he might still lose if this doesn’t happen. The various people playing him might not coordinate their tactics well from Episode to Episode, which (if you like thinking in these terms) means he really is a looney-tune after all and can’t get his shit together. Or perhaps the lesser villain thwarts him in favor of his or her own Plan, which might illustrate how evil is innately divisive and self-destructive.

But hands-down, Doctor Chaos’s Plan is most likely to succeed if people dismiss the importance of the heroes’ special properties. What are these special properties? It’s simple: if they appeal to most people in the group more than Doctor Chaos does, then they have a better chance.

- You can invent heroes who are admirable in ways that Doctor Chaos is not.
• You can play heroes as interesting, in that their abilities and rhetoric are simply great creative work, relative to the superheroes everyone knows about.
• When you contribute to narrating their defeats, you can provide suffering which is not jokey or overly referential, but instead honestly moving.
• You can describe how they deal with the shattering defeats inflicted upon them in ways which illuminate character traits you, personally, value.

When this kind of role-playing begins, heroes are much more likely to be mechanically Developed, resulting in significantly more effectiveness. Since a hero can't be played twice in a row by the same person, this won't happen unless more than one person at the table gets invested in it.

So what this means is that the superheroes only have a good shot at defeating Doctor Chaos if you, plural, come to like them. If you instead collectively accept Doctor Chaos’ estimation that superheroes are fundamentally deluded and only occasionally succeed through luck, then you will almost certainly be proven right.
The lesser villain’s playbook

This is the character you’ll be playing cards for throughout the entire game. You’ll never play a superhero or Doctor Chaos or any other character.

Place the lesser villain stand-up icon in front of you. It will stay there for the whole game.

Making up the lesser villain

First, work with everyone else to make up Doctor Chaos. Then take a few minutes for your own character.

Here are the parameters again. Choose one of them to be your lesser villain's Style:

- Technology – robotics, computers, time machines, tractor beams, cloning dinosaurs, cold fusion, rocket ships, interesting bombs
- Cosmic forces – the galactic core, alternate dimensions, nega-rays, aliens (maybe lots of them!), omicro-beams, distant planets, positive zones, and so on
- Magic and mystic stuff – raising one’s lover from the dead, opening gates to hell, still more dimensions (the acid-trip ones), zombie armies, transmogrification, making stuff happen by saying it in rhymes
- Psychology and deception – a broad category, including ESP, mastery of media, tremendous anticipation of others’ actions, uncanny influence over others, conspiratorial connections and manipulations, and spies everywhere
- Elemental comics-physics – mental control over various physical processes like magnetism or nature or weather, and so on

Unlike Doctor Chaos, this is all your lesser villain can do. No criss-crossing Styles for him or her.

Also unlike Doctor Chaos, your lesser villain has or had a real name and ordinary human identity. Think about that for a moment.

Decide as well your lesser villain's preferred scope of operations. It has to be smaller than Doctor Chaos' scope. About right now, come up with a name if you haven't already.

He or she also has a Plan, and it must be incompatible with or irrelevant to Doctor Chaos’ Plan. Your lesser villain's Plan concerns one of the following Aspects:
• Profit – this is, I believe, self-explanatory
• Respect – to be acknowledged by others, perhaps specific others, for certain qualities or accomplishments, unequivocally, sincerely, and fully
• Power – to hold authority over and assign direction to others in some manner that is currently denied

Now create two Conditions for the Plan to work. Similar to Doctor Chaos’ Plan, its Conditions are concrete things. Write the Conditions on slips of paper and place them in the order that your lesser villain would like to see them implemented. The Conditions need to be independent of one another’s success, because they may well get out of order due to heroic interference in play.

You need a Look, too, which expresses your Style, to say the least.

The lesser villain is not subject to the Cheese Rule.

Your lesser villain is quite the extremist compared to ordinary people, but isn't as hag-ridden with Issues as Doctor Chaos. Choose only one:

• Fixation – a substance, action, or phenomenon that often captures his attention
• Ideology – a philosophy which guides and sustains all the stuff he does
• Caring – strong emotional, personal connections, whether positive or negative

Don't worry about whether he or she is obviously useful to Doctor Chaos’ Plan in some way. Doctor Chaos is brilliant enough to make him or her useful no matter what.

Remember, if Doctor Chaos’ Plan succeeds, your Plan comes to grief anyway, initially successful or not. Lesser is lesser.

If you wish, you may begin play with your villain already under Doctor Chaos’ control, in the time-honored position of Troubled Minion.

**Launching an Episode**

Play is divided into Episodes, each of which focuses on a given Condition of Doctor Chaos’ Plan. But you have a Plan too, with Conditions of its own, and you have a chance to make the one at the top of your list happen.

An Episode determines whether a Condition is fulfilled, delayed, or failed. Fulfilled Conditions are provisionally satisfied (checked off), although they’re not invulnerable to being reversed later. Delayed Conditions may be attempted again, later. Failed Conditions are crossed off the list, and you must pursue a new and sadly diminished Plan instead.

When the Episode begins, your villain will be either free from Doctor Chaos’ control or currently dominated by him. You must choose among the following:
If you are currently free, choose one of the following:
  o Strive to fulfill your own Condition.
  o Oppose Doctor Chaos’ Plan’s Condition, much as if you were a superhero, and place a targeting token in front of the current Game Master.
  o Both of the above – this carries no penalty or compromise.

If you are currently dominated, choose one of the following:
  o Knuckle under entirely and obey Doctor Chaos, based on the situation as already described by the Game Master.
  o Strive to break free; this is synonymous with opposing Doctor Chaos’ Plan’s Condition as well, so place a targeting token in front of the current Game Master.

If you are free, you will automatically be opposing Doctor Chaos’ attempt to control you.

**Cards! Play begins**

You use the same deck as the current players of the superheroes and are dealt seven cards from it along with the rest of them. Hold them in a traditional card game hand, in a fan with their backs toward everyone else, so your cards are kept private.

Play proceeds in turns from the current Game Master’s left. On your turn, you get to state what your villain is doing, which should be brief and visually striking, based on your choices as outlined above. Then look at the top card in the face-up discard pile, and choose either to pick it up or to take the face-down card on the top of the deck. Either way, discard a card from your hand afterward, face-up on the discard pile, to maintain your hand size at seven cards. You have to do this every turn; there’s no passing.

Cards are traded out in order to build melds, a Rummy term. A meld is defined as three or more cards which are either *in sequence in suit* or *the same rank*. Cards in your hand which are not in melds are called deadwood.

Unfortunately for you, the Jokers are blanks – they cannot be melded.

You and the people playing the superheroes may communicate about how you play their cards from the collective deck, but are limited to saying “I want that” or “I don’t want that” regarding the face-up card on top of the discard pile. To ensure that someone who comes after you gets that card, simply pick it up and then put it down again, leaving your own hand unchanged. Disclosing further information about the contents of one’s hand is not allowed.

**Cards! And climax**

When does the Episode end? When someone knocks, which is another Rummy term – you knock on the table. You may knock during your turn, after discarding, when you have only three deadwood cards or less in your hand. Knocking is voluntary; you can hold out and keep playing to keep improving your hand if you want. The reason you
might want to do that is that a hand with all melds, no deadwood, is called Gin and is very powerful.

Knocking stops all card drawing instantly and everyone must show their hands. The more cards in melds you show, the better off your villain or superhero is during the climactic events of the round. (Incidentally, this is not how actual Rummy is scored.)

Everyone counts up the number of cards they have in melds. That’s the basic number. Compare your total to Doctor Chaos, if you were opposing him; whoever has more cards in melds has been victorious. Any number of the other players may be doing this to you as well.

If you’re tied against a superhero, you win, but against Doctor Chaos, he wins.

If you’re controlled by Doctor Chaos and you’ve either opted not to rebel or failed to rebel, then your cards simply become part of his hand, and that’s the end of that.

So what happens to your Plan? If you were striving to fulfill a Condition, and no one defeats you, or if no one was opposing you, then it succeeds; check off that Condition and move it to the bottom of your list. If you can do this with both your existing Conditions, your whole Plan succeeds!

- Do please note that if Doctor Chaos wins in the end, your successful Plan is overwhelmed and negated in the course of his triumph.

If you were striving to fulfill a Condition and someone opposes and defeats you, or if Doctor Chaos gets you under his or her control, then your Condition is delayed and moved to the bottom of your list.

When and if a Condition is delayed, you may alter it slightly or completely into a different action. Doctor Chaos cannot do this, as his Plan was already perfect, but you need to be more adaptable to circumstances.

Your Conditions cannot be destroyed or un-checked. A Gin effect against you has no special effect.

Various secondary outcomes include:

If you were under control, striving to break free
- Success means you break free and oppose Doctor Chaos’ Plan
- Failure means your melds are added to Doctor Chaos’ score

If you were under control, resigned to your minion-hood
- Your melds are added to Doctor Chaos’ score

If you were not under control and striving to fulfill your Plan’s Condition
• Success means you check your Condition and move it to the bottom of your list

If you were not under control and opposing Doctor Chaos
• Success means your melds are counted as if you were a superhero

Winners describe what happens, from most melds to least. Really describe how your opponent gets beaten. Don’t be a wimp and let them escape, or leave them an “out.” That’s up to the person who plays them later and is not your problem.

**Playing your character**
After the card results are narrated, do a little bookkeeping to update the status of your Plan, whether you’re under Doctor Chaos’ control, or anything else.

At the end of the Episode, the Game Master gets to play Doctor Chaos for a little while longer, expounding upon his situation and Issues. You don’t get to do this. Therefore the only way everyone at the table will learn about your character is to bring as much of his or her Issue or Issues into your narrations as possible during your turns. That means emoting and explaining to illustrate just how your villain feels and why he or she is striving in that particular way for this Episode. Exactly how you choose to do this is up to you, from dramatic dignity up to and including chewing the scenery like a neurotic Weimaraner.

**The lesser villain’s dilemma**
Oh, hell, I’ve given it away already. You’re playing the only character in the game who corresponds to the traditional concept of “player-character.” As such, he or she is also the one with the most potential for dramatic and thematic actions.

• It’s fun to play a villain who’s really out for his own Plan
• It’s fun to play a villain who knuckles under to Doctor Chaos
• It’s fun to play a villain who defies Doctor Chaos for his or her own reasons
• It’s fun to play a villain who adopts superheroic ideals during the story

You’ve figured it out, right? Because if you play the lesser villain, any and all of the above options are available to you throughout the entire game. Talk about a good time!

Keep in mind that if the lesser villain stays true to his or her initial concept and struggles only and successfully for his or her Plan … that this does not itself oppose Doctor Chaos. If Doctor Chaos’ Plan succeeds, then the lesser villain’s efforts come to grief.

What all this means is up to you. Consider a villain who remains very warped, Issues firmly in place, committed to his or her Plan … but whose actions consistently thwart Doctor Chaos. Or one who, in trying to thwart Doctor Chaos, abandons his or her own Plan.