



## Chapter 13

# Changing the Course of Mighty Rivers

## Building Superheroic Histories

Every superhero story is already an alternate history. Even if everything else is the same, down to the rivets on the newest model Lexus and the faces on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*, there's one big difference: Talents walk the world. If that's all the alternate history you want, and you don't care (and you're sure that nobody will ask) why Gwyneth Paltrow is on magazine covers in a world that has Wonder Woman, and why Lexuses even have rivets if Reed Richards patented the flying car in 1961—well, you're done. Your alternate history is already designed for you, and you can skip the rest of this chapter.

On the other hand, part of the fun of building a superheroic world is, well, building a superheroic world. How do Talents change fashion? Or politics? Or warfare? Or continental drift? Where can history be shouldered aside by Hyperbody, or charmed out of its tracks by Hypercommand? What would a world of Wild Talents look like? What *could* it look like? What do you want it to look like?

### Hyperfoundations

Let's answer that last question first.

There's one very important rule to keep hold of during this process:

First decide what you want, then build it.

Work backward. Begin with response and then dream up the stimulus; start with effect, and use that to deduce cause. That way, you'll be more likely to wind up with something in which you can actually set the game you want to play.

It's possible to just start building and let the setting decide where it wants to go—it's a lot of fun, too, in a kind of wool-gathering way—but you're a lot less likely to end up really invested in the game. Worse yet, you might feel obliged to set your game in this "logical" setting anyway. After all,

you designed it using faultless principles of cause and effect, as set out in this oh-so-shiny, full-color rulebook. Except you didn't design it—you let it design itself. (Letting the setting design itself can come in handy—especially when your players start stress-testing the campaign—but that's another topic.) You've already abrogated control over your game, and you haven't even started playing yet.

Work the other way around wherever possible. Decide the kind of superworld you want, and fill it in behind you; sink your foundation deepest where you already know you're going to put up the tallest, most scenic towers in your game world. Write down the answers, then ask what the questions were.

### Axes of Design

Before you even start changing history, then, it helps to have some kind of outline of the world you want to wind up with. There's a fair number of questions to think about in this "outline" stage, but let's begin with four basic axes, or continua, of design. These will help set parameters for your world; they can clarify the issues before you decide on something that you won't wind up actually enjoying or using. You can raise or lower any of these parameters independently of each other; raising all four of them together, by happy chance, replicates the traditional "Silver Age" feel of, well, four-color superhero comic books.

### Red: Historical Inertia

For the last two centuries at least, historians have argued back and forth between the Great Man version of history and the Great Momentum version. In the Great Man version, individual "heroes on horseback"—Napoleon, Luther, Hitler—forge nations, overturn religions, and start wars. In the Great Momentum theory, events happen because of



large-scale social and economic factors beyond the control of any individual. If Napoleon had drowned as a baby, some other general would have created the mass army of columns, exported French revolutions to Germany, and modernized European law codes; these were natural outgrowths of military technology, ideological psychology, and middle-class mass literacy. The sense of an inevitable sweep of history (usually toward some version of progress, often culminating in *Our Glorious Selves*) is most closely linked with Marxist theories; naturally, a Great Momentum world is high-Red.

So what, I can hear you ask, does this have to do with Talents? Well, Talents are obviously potentially the Greatest Men around. If Great Men actually can change history, you have a potential explanation for any change points you toss into the mix; if they always change history, you potentially have a very fluid game.

On the other hand, if Talents never wind up changing history, you may need to explain how that happens (see *Why You Can't Change History*, on page 122). In general, your game world will become more fluid and more grounded in politics at low Redness levels. At higher Redness, your game world may still change, but you (as the GM, and hence as the personification of Vast Unknowable Social Movements and Economic Imperatives) will control its speed and direction. Talents will primarily involve themselves with each other and leave politics and economics to lesser beings.

You can often shift levels; a game may assume “history as normal” up to the game’s present

day, at which point the Redness level drops when the player characters start shoving things around. (Shifting from Red 4 to Red 2 or 3 is very easy early on.) Unless you explicitly design your world with an “age of titans” in its past, it’s harder to shift to higher levels of Redness: If the players know that Mega-Man killed Hitler in 1942, they might feel cheated if you don’t let them use their powers to kill Robert Mugabe. You can always explain specific instances away, of course, but remember that the players are using your description of your world’s history and politics partially as a guideline to what you expect from them. Don’t keep the player characters at Red 5 while NPC Talents swan around altering the world at will, unless you plan to irritate them and disrupt your world’s internal consistency.

Here are some benchmarks for various Redness levels in your game world:

### Red 1

Talents change the course of history all the time, and may the better (or bigger) Talent win. The ancient gods and heroes were all Talents, perhaps. A Talent helped Cornwallis defeat the rebels in 1778, and a squadron of Talents helped colonize Mars in 1950. Everything ever invented, marketed, or perfected was a Hyperbrain innovation. Talents constantly take the forefront of history; only very rare and (dare I say it) talented normal people can make any kind of difference. If you’re trying to create an extremely alternate—even unrecognizable—history, this is a good level of Redness to begin with. Alan Moore’s *Miracleman* posits that even one Talent—if

