

# Sentinels of the Multiverse: How to Be a Hero

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | November 10, 2014



*Sentinels of the Multiverse*

designed by Christopher Badell, Paul Bender & Adam Rebotarro

published by [Greater Than Games](#), 2011

digital implementation by [Handelabra Games](#), 2014

get it from the [App Store](#) or [Google Play](#), or [buy the card game](#)



Not this Starman.

Back in the '70s I met a starman who was waiting in the sky and he told me not to blow it because he said that we could beat them forever and ever. He said that we could be heroes, even if it was just for one day.

So that was crap.

We can never be heroes. We can watch superheroes do their thing, we can read about them, but we can't *be* them. It's one of the most notorious hurdles of gaming. Doesn't anybody remember *Superman 64*? Doesn't anybody learn? Superheroes are the modern gods. You can't roleplay this shit.

On the one hand is a hardware limitation. Game environments are illusory spaces composed entirely of laws. Superheroes are supposed to uphold the law, but they end up breaking every one of them. By definition, superheroes can't be contained within games; the first thing they'd do would be to break the game, to break out of the game, just like Neo in *The Matrix*.

On the other hand is a narrative limitation. The only thing that makes superheroes interesting, narratively, is their flaws. But these are not physical flaws—the kryptonite is just a MacGuffin. Superheroes' flaws are mental; they are emotional. The souls of these übermenschen are riddled with revenge, with sin, or they are just too perfect to understand humanity. But you can't depict that in a game. You can limit the player avatar physically, but you can't force an emotional failing on a player.

It sucks. It's a bad situation all around. It sucks in video games, but it sucks even worse in board games, where the laws that make up the illusion of the world aren't hidden behind shiny graphics. Superhero board games suck, universally. There's nothing super about throwing a bum punch because you

rolled a 1.

*Sentinels of the Multiverse* can't overturn these universal directives, but it's still a damn fine superhero game, both as a video game and as a tabletop game. It's about as close as we're going to get to proving that starman right.

Before I tell you how amazing, how fantastic, how incredible this game is, though, allow me to lower your expectations. The *Sentinels of the Multiverse* app is based on a cooperative card game published in 2011. By design, the players take control of a team of 3-5 heroes, work together to foil a villain controlled by the game itself. The cooperative aspect makes this a no-brainer to turn into an app; it means that if you're by yourself, you never have to worry about finding an opponent online or get bored with the dumb AI.



There is nothing even about this match.

However, *Sentinels of the Multiverse* doesn't want to tell the story of a one-on-one superhero sparring match. It's about a league of superheroes fighting against an immensely powerful villain, and the game will not allow you to select fewer than 3 heroes.

This is also fine, if you want to pass the tablet around and play with your friends, but unless you are a hardcore gaming masochist (like me), you will not want to learn the game this way. *Sentinels* is a simple enough game, but there's a lot to take in on your first play: each villain, each hero, and each environment they face off in is powered by its own unique deck of cards. Even as a gamer, I found my first few solo attempts a steep climb. I now have no problem playing any combination of four or even five heroes, but getting to that point by myself was not an experience I'd wish on anyone.

Moral of the story: you had better bring some friends for your first game—or a deep mine of patience. Of course, if you *do* get together with buddies and pick one hero apiece, as *Sentinels* was intended to be played, it's bliss. *That* is the experience I'll be reviewing.

Let's make like The Flash and speed through the necessary but oh-so-tedious explanation of the actual game mechanics, because (spoiler alert) they don't actually matter. Each game of *Sentinels of the Multiverse* is a climactic showdown between 3-5 heroes and a villain (or coalition of villains, in one

expansion) in an environment. Each of these elements has its own specific deck of cards—25 for each villain, 15 for each environment and 40 for each hero. At the start of a round, the players automatically draw and play the top card from the villain's deck, then perform any actions listed on villain cards in play—minions or the villain himself might attack heroes, force them to discard cards, etc. Next, each hero gets a turn, during which they may play one card, use one power (either from an ongoing card in play or the innate power attached to their hero's character card), and draw a card, in that order. After each hero has had a chance to act, the environment gets its own turn. The environment's turn plays out exactly like the villain's, except that environment cards don't favor one side or the other; they may help or hinder the cause of good or evil, depending on the circumstances at play.

The goal of each match is to bring the villain down to 0 HP before all of the heroes are KO'd, with some additional twists depending on the villain in play. If a hero gets KO'd, he or she isn't out of the game completely—although that player may no longer draw or play cards, the Incapacitated side of the hero card lists a few powers the hero may employ to help out the other members of the team.



Even Incapacitated, Legacy is still the leader of the Freedom Five.

What makes this such a super game are the drastically different ways the game can play out depending on your choice of hero, villain and environment. If you're fighting the mad scientist Baron Blade, you'll be struggling to pierce his energy shields and mobile fortress before he gets 15 cards in his discard pile, signaling the completion of his evil scheme to send the moon crashing into the Earth. If you're fighting the Magneto-esque Citizen Dawn, you'll worry more about her minions, "Citizens" born with incredible powers and team-up abilities who can easily overwhelm you through sheer numbers. If you're fighting at Insula Primalis, the newly discovered Arctic island where prehistoric creatures roam free, you'll also need to worry about packs of velociraptors, a hungry T-rex and an erupting volcano. That is, unless you have Ra on your team, who can shield the heroes from the volcano's heat while it slowly melts the villain's defenses and the dinosaurs go for each other's throats. This tactic works well against Citizen Dawn's horde of minions but less well against Baron Blade, who can reflect that heat damage back at the heroes with his Elemental Redistributor. Each piece of the puzzle can completely change the game.

Like the above example featuring Ra, some hero/villain, hero/environment or villain/environment combinations work out incredibly well, and others present a steeper-than-usual challenge. Fans of the game have [compiled data from countless play reports](#) to create a probable win percentage for each of the game's 9000 possible match-ups (which exceeds 1 trillion permutations when all expansions are taken into account, since the order in which the heroes act can also make a difference). Other fans have created [a free randomizer](#)

[app](#) to generate match-ups based on your available cards and desired difficulty, which I can't recommend highly enough—it makes the game that much more fun to know how much of a challenge you're up against before you play.



Baron Blade attempts to demoralize the heroes with his “Consider the Price of Victory” speech.

What both these sources demonstrate, however, is that the difficulty level in *Sentinels* can swing drastically based on a multitude of factors—and that's okay. In fact, that's awesome. Sometimes, your heroes are just taking out the trash on their way to the local shawarma stand. Sometimes, it's the ultimate challenge, the true test of a particular hero's mettle. Some days, you just can't get rid of a bomb. The game after I used Ra's heat-shielding technique to such great effect at Insula Primalis, the constant oxygen leaks and pervasive red dust at Wagner Mars Base stripped the sun god of all his heroic advantages. Both games were equally memorable, not least for their contrast. This swinginess in terms of difficulty just makes for *good storytelling*, adding peaks and valleys of tension to the cumulative experience of the game. The game's creators have even embraced this concept with the “nemesis” system, with which nemeses—heroes and villains with a matching icon on their character cards—deal an extra point of damage against one another with every attack. It's a meaningless detail on any one turn, but over the course of a game, it works to subtly push that hero into the limelight. When Legacy faces off against Baron Blade, or when The Tempest fights Grand Warlord Voss, *Sentinels of the Multiverse* wants you to remember that it's *personal*.

Not much need be said about Handelabra's translation of *Sentinels of the Multiverse* from a card game into a “video game.” There is music, a unique theme for each environment in addition to the rockin' Sentinels guitar theme. There are multiple poses for the heroes and villains depending on the current game phase (hero, villain or environment turn) and how much damage they've absorbed. There are suitable sound effects for each damage type. Most importantly, the app handles all of the bookkeeping the game can throw at you in the form of positive or negative damage modifiers or other ongoing effects—not insignificant in this game. You won't forget that you're playing a card game, but you won't miss the physical version, either.

The implementation and the mechanics—they don't really matter, you know. What makes *Sentinels* work so well is the deep, coherent narrative universe in which it takes place, an imagined line of comic books that is half familiar and half surprising. Sentinel Comics never actually existed, yet each hero's

character card features the cover art from their most memorable issue. Each card in each deck sports a frame from the annals of imagined comics history and an appropriate quote from one of the heroes, complete with the issue in which it appeared. What makes this game work so well is that it has an *expanded universe*, a tapestry of characters and defining events that is only getting richer and more tightly woven with each new release. Heroes switch sides or undergo transformations; villains have a change of heart. The *Shattered Timeline* expansions turns a previous villain, Omnitron, into the hero Omnitron-X—in the future, one of the unstoppable machine’s iterations added the concept of empathy to its algorithms. An upcoming mini-expansion allows heroes to fight within the massive machine assembly that is Omnitron-IV. Three heroes and one villain from the Legacy bloodline have already appeared in the games. One expansion sees Baron Blade assembling a villainous Vengeful Five to take revenge against the Freedom Five who defeated him.



Each hero has a detailed, original backstory.

In exchange for a licensing fee and some loss of creative control, *Sentinels of the Multiverse* could have been a game about established comic book superheroes, but this way is so much better. There’s no “this would never happen in the books” to stand in the way of your immersion; the climactic moments defining each hero’s saga are the ones *you* have lived through, and every victory or defeat adds to the ongoing narrative.

To close out this review and to whet your appetite for the game, here’s a brief introduction to the ten heroes, four villains and four environments found in the *Sentinels of the Multiverse* base game:

## **The Heroes**

**Legacy:** The Mr. Fantastic of the Freedom Five, Legacy is your basic super-strong do-gooder and champion of justice, somewhat of a Superman/Green Lantern hybrid. Paul Parsons the 8th comes from a line of heroes stretching back to the 19th century; each Paul Parsons born inherits his father’s abilities (along with his sense of justice and the heirloom Legacy Ring) and mutates one of his own. The current Legacy has a keen sense of danger, super strength, the ability to fly, and an 18-year-old daughter who can shoot laserbeams out of her eyes. In the game, he plays a strong support role, boosting other heroes’ attacks and taking their punches with his Lead from the Front ability.

**Bunker:** Tyler Vance, second member of the Freedom Five, plays the Iron Man role in the world of Sentinel Comics. Ex-U.S. Army Lieutenant Vance is a

strategic mastermind with unique access to a piece of highly experimental military hardware, the “personal armament exo-chassis YS-1200T suit.” Bunker’s play style focuses on shifting between his suit’s three modes as the situation demands and drawing plenty of cards as fodder for his devastating Omni-Cannon.



Not all quotes need be Shakespeare.

**Tachyon:** The third member of the Freedom Five, Tachyon was once known as Dr. Meredith Stinson, an expert researcher involved in nearly all the modern age’s technological marvels. One day, during an experiment gone awry, Dr. Stinson’s body became flooded with tachyons, and she emerged as the world’s fastest woman. Tachyon’s play style involves drawing and playing cards at a heightened pace, doing piddling amounts of damage to many targets at once and using discarded attacks to power her lethal Lightspeed Barrage.

**The Wraith:** Most Sentinel Comics heroes are an amalgam of two or more Marvel or DC classics, but the Freedom Five’s fourth member, The Wraith, is straight-up lady Batman. She has the same origin story—a wealthy socialite whose life was forever changed by a violent mugging—and the same blend of high-tech gadgets, mixed martial arts and fear tactics. In gameplay, The Wraith likes to build up a small arsenal of equipment cards over time so that she always has the right tool for the job, and she can even use more than one per turn when her Utility Belt is in play.



The Wraith’s Inventory Barrage is a great way to end a fight.

**Absolute Zero:** Fifth member of the Freedom Five and one of the trickiest characters in *Sentinels of the Multiverse’s* base set, Absolute Zero (Ryan Frost) was a janitor at Pike Cryogenics Laboratory when a malfunctioning machine dropped his core body temperature to absolute zero (-460 degrees Fahrenheit). He now wears a mobility-enhancing body suit designed by Dr. Meredith Stinson, fighting for the Freedom Five in order to pay off the high research and development costs. His innate power of dealing *himself* either fire or cold damage, makes more sense when you see his two suit modules, the Isothermic Transducer, which absorbs fire and spits it out as freezing cold; and the Null-Point Calibration Unit, which turns cold “damage” done to Frost into healing.

**Tempest:** Before he was one of Earth’s defenders, Tempest—M’kk Dall’ton in his native tongue—was a Maerynian ambassador from Vognild Prime before his home planet fell victim to the ravenous Grand Warlord Voss and his gene-bound legions. One of the few of his kind to escape Voss’ forces, Dall’ton crash-landed on Earth and was rounded up by F.I.L.T.E.R., the Federal Initiative to

Limit Terrorism by Extraterrestrial Races. He now employs his weather-manipulating powers to defend his new home from Voss or anything else that threatens her. Tempest's prowess at influencing atmospheric charge potentials makes him an expert in crowd control, although the Gene-Bound Shackles he carries as a memento of his planet's fate help him focus his wrath on the villain in charge.



Summoning the mighty Staff of Ra.

**Ra:** After archaeologist Blake Washington unearthed the Staff of Ra inside a Saharan pyramid, he discovered the truth behind the ancient Egyptian pantheon—that they were mere mortals imbued by ancient relics with incredible power, heroes walking among the people. Grasping the staff, Dr. Washington became the first Sun God to walk the planet in over two millennia. Analogous to Marvel's Thor, Ra deals and manipulates fire damage, amplified by the energy of his Staff of Ra, which he can retrieve in any situation using his Summon Staff ability.

**Haka:** Haka is the curveball in the world of Sentinel Comics. His background—a Maori warrior who was exiled from his tribe after his *Tā moko*, or face tattoo, mysteriously faded one day, who was killed and rose again the next day, whose nicknames include “The Damned” and “The Salted Earth”—can't be easily matched with any of the big names in superhero comics. Mechanically, he plays the Hulk Smash role in the group, dealing, defending and regenerating large amounts of damage. neutralizing negative environmental effects, and doing some collateral damage with his Rampage move.



The Visionary's telekinetic cocoon protected her body while her mind healed.

**Fanatic:** The X-Men's Angel meets Joan of Arc on a Holy War kick. This is another character with a surprisingly dark backstory: Fanatic began life as a poor, unexceptional, anonymous Peruvian child...until she was struck dead by a bus at the age of 6. Miraculously revived from her medical death, the girl spoke of visions of the afterlife and a special purpose on this Earth. These memories grew into an obsession, reaching its climax when she terrified the convent that had adopted her by revealing her massive white wings and claiming to be an angel of the Lord. Soon thereafter, she claimed the holy sword “Absolution” and began the business of smiting evil. Fanatic's play style focuses on martyrdom and mortification of the flesh, leading up to her apocalyptic Wrathful Retribution ability.

**The Visionary:** Injected in utero with an experimental compound known as PSY-200, Vanessa Long was destined from birth to become a supersoldier, America's secret weapon in the Cold War—a war that the U.S. lost in 2018.

Enormously psychically developed by that point, Vanessa opened a rift in spacetime and traveled back to our present, suffering a brain aneurysm as a result. Seriously weakened, The Visionary uses her powers of Precognition and Suggestion to manipulate the Villain and Environment decks and allow other players to draw cards, but her most powerful mental abilities further weaken her body, dealing psychic damage to herself.

## The Villains

**Baron Blade:** Archnemesis to Legacy and the Freedom Five, Baron Blade is the son of a Lithuanian scientist named Fyodor Ramonat. Promoted to the highest rank by a U.S.S.R. terrified of falling behind in the arms race against an America filled with superhuman individuals, Ramonat pioneered some of his time's deadliest and most ingenious technology, prompting reprisal from the U.S.A. Paul Parsons the 7th, the current Legacy's father, was personally responsible for Ramonat's demise, a fact that his son Ivan has never forgotten. Now calling himself Baron Blade and commanding an army of technologically enhanced supersoldiers, Ivan Ramonat took his revenge on the elder Legacy before setting his sights on the younger, but Paul Parsons the 8th's invulnerability foiled his plans again and again. Finally, Blade settled on his current course of action: destroy the entire planet with his Terralunar Impulsion Beam, leaving nothing alive except the mad scientist and his unkillable nemesis. Fighting Baron Blade is a race against time—the heroes must punch through his Mobile Defense Platform and navigate his Living Force Field to take him down before 15 cards enter his discard pile, signalling the Earth's destruction.



Ra's flames penetrate Baron Blade's force field.

**Citizen Dawn:** Imagine Professor Xavier without a moral compass and you have a pretty good sense of Citizen Dawn. Like many heroes in the world of Sentinel Comics, Dawn Cohen began showing signs of superhuman ability during adolescence. Specifically, she could draw on and manipulate the Sun's rays, channeling it into healing or destructive powers. Tired of being studied by "normals," Dawn escaped to the Arctic jungle island of Insula Primalis with the goal of leading a solitary life. Soon, however, other superpowered individuals began approaching her, and she became the de facto leader of the Citizens of the Sun, a faction of superhumans intent on eradicating all those weaker than them. Fighting Citizen Dawn means enduring the combinatorial attacks of her loyal Citizens and tactically thinning their ranks—kill too many, and their enraged leader will draw on the Sun's power to gain temporary invulnerability.

**Grand Warlord Voss:** Grand Warlord Voss, the archnemesis of Tempest and

devourer of worlds, is a collector of rarities—not cultural or technological, but genetic. Once a high-ranking figure in the Thorathian military, Voss was exiled to the icy Gadrion Delta after his genetic experiments on Thorathian soldiers went public. During his exile, Voss continued and perfected his experiments—the Feethsmar or “frost hounds” of Gadrion Delta were the first species to join his gene-bound army. Other races from other planets soon followed, and the more Voss conquered, the more powerful his armada grew. Taking over the Thorathian military, Voss travels the galaxies, subjugating the strongest races he meets and destroying the weaker ones. Voss is invulnerable behind his mindlessly loyal horde of gene-bound extraterrestrials; the heroes must eliminate the front ranks of this army before they can even begin to damage Grand Warlord Voss.



When the Technological Singularity hits, you don't want to be standing in a Radio Shack.

**Omnitron:** Created by Aldred Industries in St. Louis, Missouri, the XK 9000-Alpha was just another robotic munitions factory until a corrupted software update granted it sentience. Now a self-aware, self-modifying robotics factory, Omnitron is the trickiest villain in the *Sentinels* base set. Shifting every round between its production facility and marauding robot forms, it spits out a constant stream of drones and modifications to hassle the heroes, even recycling machines that have previously been destroyed. Its most dangerous add-ons, like the Disintegration Ray and Electro-Magnetic Railgun, can be easily deactivated by hitting Omnitron hard enough in a single round, but it has other tricks up its sleeve bearing: the Technological Singularity destroys all of the heroes' equipment *and* damages them in the process, while Omnitron's Adaptive Plating Subroutine forces the heroes to alternate between damage types to break through its immunities.

## The Battlefields

**Megalopolis:** Not much mystery here—Megalopolis is Sentinel Comics' nod to Metropolis, fictional home of Superman. The largest city in the world, Megalopolis provides one of the base game's most dynamic arenas for the villain showdown as Plummeting Monorails, Hostage Situations, Traffic Pileups and Cramped Quarters Combat change the rules of the game with each passing round.

**Insula Primalis:** A previously undiscovered, volcano-warmed island in the Arctic, Insula Primalis is home to several species of flora and fauna that have been extinct in the rest of the world for millennia. Of the base game environments, Insula Primalis is the deadliest, as its prehistoric predators and Volcanic Eruptions threaten hero and villain alike.



Clever girls.

**Wagner Mars Base:** The first human research facility beyond Earth's gravity well, the Wagner Mars Base was funded by billionaire Jane Wagner and home to the solar system's most crucial research. Heroes fighting here should be prepared for the equipment-destroying Pervasive Red Dust, the distracting Meteor Storms (preventing either villains or heroes from dealing damage while they are in play), and the base's last line of defense, a Self-Destruct Sequence that provides an alternate way for the heroes to lose.

**Ruins of Atlantis:** The ruins of the once-great city of Atlantis house secrets that could transform the course of humanity's evolution. As an environment, Atlantis lends itself to fast, supercharged battles thanks to its Atlantean Font of Power, which automatically plays the top card of each deck, hero and villain alike, and the Pillars of Hercules, which introduce a similar effect. Meanwhile, the deadly Kraken might appear to finish off the weakest targets.