

Catalyst Universe

Player Guide

(Draft - Version 0.5)

Project Catalyst Report, Dec 2004

A History of Superpowers

Project Catalyst was formed to investigate the sudden proliferation of superpowered beings. Though various government agencies had documented reports of superhuman powers extending all the way back to the late 1800's, such occurrences were rare, and the individuals were of much lower power than the ones existing today.

Before going into detail about the findings, various aspects of superpowered individuals must be defined for brevity. These definitions are listed below:

- **Prime** – An human displaying capabilities well outside of the human norm. Referred to by the public as superbeings (superhero/supervillain) – the term borrowed from comic books. Current research estimates the number of primes as one per 1,000,000 people. Referred to in scientific terms as *homo sapiens superior*.
- **Baseline** – A normal human, referred to in scientific terms as *homo sapiens*.
- **Latent** – A human that has minor superhuman abilities. Examples would include psychics, low-power telekinetics, and legendary figures such as John Henry. Sometimes referred to as “spoonbenders”, though this is certainly not an official designation. Current research estimates the number of latents as one per 250,000 people. Still considered part of baseline humanity, though they often become primes.
- **Catalyst** – An as-yet undefined occurrence that causes the creation of primes. Latents are particularly susceptible to this, though baselines can also become primes.

The government first became aware of the existence of primes in World War II, where they were used on both sides of the conflict. Fortunately, neither side wanted public exposure of their primes. Thus, the media was limited to a few unsubstantiated reports that the public treated as fiction. Nevertheless, Hitler's occult and scientific resources could not have been overcome without the extensive use of Allied primes in the conflict.

Subsequent research discovered that primes have existed since at least World War I, and evidence of latents has been found throughout human history. Clergy of many religions have documented miraculous occurrences since the dawn of time. Now that we know about primes, reexamination of these records indicates that latents, and possibly low-powered primes, have always been with us.

The first latent that we can identify with 100% accuracy was John Henry, a railroad worker in the late 1800's. Though the public believes him to be a mythical figure, he was a real person. A federal marshal documented his existence and his legendary contest versus a steam engine. Several eyewitnesses interviewed confirmed his extraordinary strength and stamina. While not at the level of what is currently considered superhuman, John Henry was definitely at the upper limit of human potential.

By World War II, the government had documented over 100 cases of suspected latents. Furthermore, the Allies had uncovered evidence showing Hitler's ties to the occult, proving once and for all the existence of magic. What followed was an intense

search for mystics, diviners, and any other possible wielder of magic that could be used to tip the scales of the war. Both the Axis and the Allies hid the truth from the general populace, creating a second layer of the war occurring behind the scenes.

Unfortunately for the Allies, the first full-fledged prime surfaced in Germany in 1942, and was quickly recruited by the Axis. Code-named *Übermensch* (superman), this Axis super-soldier was immune to small-arms fire, could outrun most vehicles, and was strong enough to tear the turret off of a tank. Things seemed bleak for the Allies, until battlefield reports revealed that the United States already had a superhuman of their own – a soldier named Sergeant Audie Murphy.

Sergeant Murphy did not have any discernable superpowers, but observers noted his incredible luck on numerous occasions. After reports surfaced of him charging several enemy positions without injury – despite numerous holes in his clothing indicating that he was narrowly missed by more than a dozen bullets – the Army began to keep a close watch on him. They were surprised to discover a second superpowered individual in his unit. Private Glen Cassell had amused his fellow soldiers with tricks such as spoon-bending, guessing cards pulled out of a deck, and so forth. However, after a harrowing encounter with Nazi zombies, Private Cassell's psychic powers increased exponentially, manifesting superhuman abilities of telekinesis and telepathy. This was the first indication of a possible “catalyst effect”, bringing forth latent superhuman abilities.

The army reassigned Murphy and Cassell into a unit filled with suspected latents. The unit encountered numerous Nazi menaces, including *Übermensch* (though none of their battles with the German superhuman were conclusive). While the major turning point in the war was D-Day, the Allies were also aided by *Übermensch*'s disappearance on October 15, 1944, one day after Rommel committed suicide. Most of the other superpowered Axis disappeared or died in the final months of the war.

By the end of the war in May of 1945, five more Allied soldiers in Murphy's unit had manifested supernatural abilities. It was at this time that the term Prime was coined to describe superhumans.

After the war, the government continued to accumulate data on primes and latents. This knowledge had spread to other governments as well, particularly the USSR. It was during the Cold War that the Catalyst Project was born. If Russia discovered what events triggered the creation of primes before the United States, they could dominate the world. While the public watched the nuclear arms race, a second arms race was hidden from public view.

The search for the necessary catalyst to create a superpowered individual became an obsession. Experiments on humans occurred in several countries (including the United States, though all test subjects were volunteers). A few Primes were created, but none of the methods used could reliably reproduce the results. Most governments gave up on the laboratory method within a decade, but the United States and Russia continued with their experiments. US experimentation continued until the wave of government reform that followed the Vietnam War finally put an end to such projects. It is believed that experimentation never ceased in Russia, though funding was low-priority compared to their nuclear program.

Project Catalyst was deemed a failure by the government. Though President Reagan was still interested in the project, no justification could be presented for its continued existence. The Catalyst Project delivered a final report to President Reagan in 1982. No

specific catalyst had been proven to cause the creation of primes, though four possible sources were outlined:

- **Magic** – Private Cassell manifested his powers after an encounter with zombies. For many years, it was believed that exposure to magic was the catalyst for superhuman abilities. However, if this is the case, it is completely random and unable to be duplicated in the laboratory.
- **Stress** – Likewise, situations of high stress and danger (as occurred in the war) were thought to turn latents into primes. Unfortunately, this is also unable to be reproduced under laboratory conditions.
- **Other Primes** – The government noticed that several latents became primes after being transferred to Murphy's unit, which had two primes (Murphy and Cassell). Again, laboratory experiments, even combined with the other methods listed above, could not reproduce this phenomenon. Interestingly, most of the primes disappeared under mysterious circumstances shortly after the end of the war.
- **Radiation** – Though not present during the initial wave of primes, nuclear radiation seems to be a possible catalyst. Multiple governments (particularly the Japanese) have had primes emerge at or near sites where large amounts of radiation exist.

In 1986, the world was presented with concrete evidence of the existence of superpowered individuals when the supervillain known as Hiroshima made his dramatic first appearance in New York, during the 100th anniversary celebrations of the Statue of Liberty. Hiroshima announced his intent to destroy the Statue at midnight, and easily fought off both local police and the military forces that were stationed nearby. However, on the stroke of midnight, nearly two dozen primes emerged separately from the crowd of onlookers to fight Hiroshima. The fight that took place was witnessed by every major news agency, and broadcast worldwide. Hiroshima was rendered unconscious, and taken into custody by the government. The superheroes left immediately after the combat, some carrying away their unconscious allies as the media closed in to question them.

Two days after being taken into custody, Hiroshima escaped captivity. He was placed on the FBI's most wanted list less than 24 hours after his escape, and Congress quickly approved funding for an organization designed specifically to combat superpowered threats. Over the next few years, Hiroshima engaged in a campaign to attack various locations of military or economic importance to the US. Each time, he would strike, inflict moderate damage, and either retreat or be driven off by Primes (now known to the public as superheroes).

Meanwhile, other superpowered criminals began to make their mark on society, no longer hiding from public view. While several gravitated towards the major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles or New York, a disproportionate amount appeared in smaller cities such as Bayport, California and Middleton, Texas. Furthermore, wherever these criminal primes appeared, other primes would eventually emerge to stop them.

As the prime population soared, a portion of the funds allocated by Congress were used to restart Project Catalyst. Most, however, were used to create a new government organization, dedicated to protecting the common man from superpowered threats. Known as the Paranormal Interdiction Taskforce (later renamed the Prime Incarceration

Taskforce), or P.I.T., this new agency was given a mandate to create the tools needed to capture or kill a superpowered being.

PIT's greatest success – and greatest failure – was the incarceration and execution of the supervillain Hiroshima. Taken to a secret government lab in the Nevada desert, Hiroshima was executed using an experimental device. The exact details of what happened during the execution will never be known, but it appears that the nuclear energy contained within the prime's body was released upon his death to catastrophic effect. The blast could be seen from orbit, and the knowledge of what had occurred leaked to the media, creating a panic among the populace. A law was passed less than a month later banning the use of the death penalty against superpowered individuals unless it could be proven conclusively that their death would not be a hazard to others.

After Hiroshima's death, the government adopted a policy of containment, calling upon members of the superhero community to help build a prison capable of incarcerating primes for years or decades. Because of the danger in transporting supervillains, the location chosen was on U.S. soil instead of in international waters or outer space. The official name of the prison was the Metahuman Prisoner Lockdown Facility (MPLF), but the prison is now known by the agency's acronym – the PIT.

The panic after Hiroshima's execution was addressed in Congress by the introduction of the Metahuman Registration Act. As written, the act would have required all individuals with superpowers to register with federal and state law enforcement agencies. In addition, the government reserved the right to call upon primes for military service “as needed for national security”. As the bill was debated in Congress, the superhero Teke made a prime-time address to the nation, stating that if the bill was made law, he would hang up his cape and go into hiding. Many superheroes supported Teke by protesting the bill, going into hiding for the following week. Crime ran rampant, and many high-profile targets such as the Federal Reserve were assaulted.

The resulting panic at the disappearance of America's superheroes forced the President to threaten a veto of the Metahuman Registration Act. Not only was the bill dropped, but a Constitutional amendment was introduced to protect superheroes from similar legislation. Dubbed the “Good Samaritan” bill by the media, the law allowed superpowered individuals to hide their identities in public, until such time as they are proven guilty of a felony in a court of law and their appeals are exhausted. The amendment became law three years later by a narrow margin, and has since caused no end of headaches for the law enforcement community. Even today, common thugs often claim to have some sort of obscure superpower in order to keep their identities hidden.

Even with the Good Samaritan act, superheroes had a difficult time with the law. Property damage is a common result of conflicts between primes, and a side-effect of the Good Samaritan act is that a person's superhero identity is legally recognized – which allows the superhero to be sued like any other citizen. In three states where superpowered activity was particularly common (California, New York, and Texas), nearly a dozen lawsuits were filed by the states to recoup losses from massive property damage. Superheroes once again began to go into hiding, and many feared a repeat of the fallout from the Metahuman Registration Act.

Fortunately, the superhero Technomancer, who had used his powers to rebuild damage in his hometown of Middleton, Texas, offered his services to the government for disaster recovery. Under his guidance, a new government taskforce known as the Prime

Repair Squad (PRS) was created in 2002 to repair the worst of the damage caused by superpowered conflicts. The PRS was given a mandate to deploy at any location suffering more than one million dollars of prime-related damages.

Even today, the resources of the PRS are stretched thin, and Technomancer has retired from superheroing to devote his full time to the organization. It is only his efforts that have kept insurance costs reasonable in cities with primes. Interestingly, some cities have gone to great lengths in order to attract primes, in the hope that the resulting property damage will turn them into high-tech metropolises similar to Middleton, Texas and Bayport, California.

Despite the many problems that have resulted from superpowered conflicts, it is the conclusion of this report that we are better off thanks to the influence of primes on society. Technomancer's assistance after Hurricane Andrew is believed to have sped up recovery time from the disaster by months, if not years. The actions of the superhero Teke in holding the Twin Towers up until nearly everyone could be evacuated saved over five thousand lives, and his sacrifice will be remembered. Neither of these disasters were caused by primes, and they are a grim reminder that even without threats like Hiroshima, the world is a dangerous place.

Law Enforcement Agencies

Prime Incarceration Taskforce (P.I.T.)

The Paranormal Incarceration Taskforce was created as a direct response to the soaring population of Primes. It achieved early notoriety for the execution of Hiroshima, after which it was revamped to focus on long-term containment tools. The word Paranormal was replaced with Prime after the leak of a Project Catalyst report to the news media, at which point the term Prime came into the mainstream.

The main accomplishments of the Prime Incarceration Taskforce are the Metahuman Prisoner Lockdown Facility (known to the public as the PIT), and the rapid response teams equipped with battle armor and configurable blaster weaponry (both stun and lethal settings). It is believed that some of their most advanced designs are derived from confiscated suits of Armadillo armor (see the Organizations section).

Prime Repair Squad (P.R.S.)

Created by the superhero Technomancer, the PRS is responsible for rebuilding any location that suffers more than \$1 million in Prime-related damage. Its resources are stretched thin, and Technomancer only goes on PRS missions if the need is great – he spends most of his time working on new devices to enhance the effectiveness of the PRS teams.

Defenders of Humanity - Superheroes

Bayport Alliance

The Bayport Alliance was formed in 1996 by Backblast, a government-sponsored superhero. Based out of Bayport, California, the team is often called on to handle situations across the West Coast. The current membership is as follows:

Backblast (energy absorption and emission)

Apparition (powersuit-wearing martial artist with desolidification)

Mobius (a living dimensional warp)

Trident (half-Atlantean mystical defender)

Psyche (telepath and telekinetic)

Justice, Inc (formerly the Middleton Defenders)

Justice, Inc has the distinction of being the oldest superteam still in existence. It was formed in 1993 by the vigilante superhero Ace of Spades. Although the team's history with the law has been somewhat checkered, it is currently sponsored by Omnicorp and has been granted local police powers by the mayor. Last year, the team scored a major victory by forcing the Dealer out of Mittleton, Texas.

The current membership of Justice, Inc is as follows:

Ace of Spades (cybernetic master of the bow)

Dragoness (an intelligent, fire-breathing dragon)

Lightstrike (powersuit-wearing hero with light powers)

Kodiak (powerful werebear)

Express (powersuit-wearing speedster)

Technomancer (master of technology, on indefinite leave)

The Conjurer

One of the most powerful mystics on the planet, the Conjurer lives in New York City. Choosing to remain independent instead of joining a superteam, the Conjurer fights crime with various summoned creatures. Often, he will simply send his summoned minion to handle a situation, instead of showing up at a crime scene himself.

Agents of Evil - Villainous Organizations

Armadillo Armor

Originally created by the now-defunct Defensive Design Industries of Amarillo, Texas, Armadillo armor is a modular powersuit with several different weapon options. In the hands of a trained user, the armor makes the wearer equivalent to a low-powered prime. Defensive Design Industries sold several suits to private security firms before being served with an injunction by the U.S. Government. The company declared bankruptcy shortly thereafter, and was dissolved in 1997. Despite this, suits of Armadillo armor continue to make their way into criminal hands. Fortunately, the technology is high-maintenance, and few criminals can afford to keep a suit of Armadillo armor in combat condition for more than a few months.

The Dealer

The Dealer first joined the ranks of the criminal underworld in 1991, with a crime spree that spread throughout Middleton, Texas. His organization distinguished itself from other criminal groups by using exclusively non-lethal, high-tech weaponry with a card motif. Other criminal organizations attempted to wipe the Dealer out – only to have their thugs crippled (but not killed), their lieutenants captured via tips sent to law enforcement, and their leaders either brainwashed or forced into hiding. Though forced out of Middleton, Texas last year, it is believed that the Dealer's organization now extends throughout the nation. The Dealer's actions against other criminals has garnered a lot of positive publicity, and some law enforcement officials have turned a blind eye to his activities.

Flashback

Flashback appeared in the late 90's, though only recently has the organization spread their operations beyond a few select cities. Flashback uses mostly non-lethal equipment, specializing in 'flash' guns that use patterns of light to disrupt a target's neural functions. However, in some cities Flashback's operations have been more vicious, using rifles that can fire focused laser blasts or induce seizures. The FBI believes Flashback operates under a franchise model, explaining the variety of weaponry and criminal activities in different areas of the country.

Promethius

Headed by the billionaire Jonathan Weiss, Promethius is an international corporation that specializes in genetic research. In 1999, the corporation opened a huge artificial island which they named Promethius Isle, and simultaneously invaded a small African nation with its private security forces (armed with advanced armor and blaster rifles). Once they had "liberated" the nation, they applied for membership in the UN, stating that rebels in the nation requested their help in exchange for joining the corporation. The United States attempted to destroy Promethius Isle's military facilities with an orbital laser, only to find out that Promethius had perfected large-scale force-field technology. International outrage over the attack forced the US to relent, and the UN voted to allow the new nation of Promethius to join the international community. It is believed (though not proven) that

several criminal activities involving half-human half-animal crossbreeds can be traced back to Prometheus.

The Third Eye

Little is known about the dimension-spanning organization known as the Third Eye. The Conjuror has stated that the Third Eye is the most dangerous threat to the world today, and only the actions of a few secretive individuals have kept the organization from taking control of the world's magical energies.

Prime Threats - Supervillains

Demons (various)

On multiple occasions, demonic creatures have come to Earth in order to wreak havoc. Two of the most notable are Chill and Malice. Chill is an ice demon that nearly turned Middleton, Texas into a frozen wasteland before the Middleton Defenders (now Justice, Inc) banished him. Malice is a demon so powerful that multiple superteams worked in concert to capture him. He was convicted of mass murder. The death sentence was carried out via a nuclear device, which destroyed his corporeal form and sent his essence back to his home dimension.

Elemental Force

Not much is known about this group of supervillains who wield the might of the elements. Thus far, they have restricted themselves to thefts. They normally operate in two or four-man teams. Their current membership is as follows – Stratos (leader), Turbulence, Behemoth, Terra, Inferno, Meteor, Blizzard, and Wake.

The Fist of Justice

Although the Fist of Justice claims to be a superhero team, law enforcement has labeled them dangerous vigilantes. Led by a mystical superbeing known only as the Black Hand, the Fist of Justice has cut a bloody swath through America's underworld. They mainly concentrate on non-superpowered targets, and it is believed the mob has placed a eight-figure bounty on the Black Hand.

M.E.C.H.A.

The original M.E.C.H.A (Mechanically-Enhanced Combat Heavy Armor) was created by Gregory Robertson, a former government contractor now serving a 20-year sentence for armed robbery. He has said in interviews that a second suit was created and stolen from his workshop before he was captured.

Mythos

Claiming to be mythical beings of legend, Mythos pursues a doctrine of eco-terrorism across the globe. Mythos' current membership consists of Medusa (leader), Troll, Gremlin, Siren, and Dryad.

The Riders

This group of supervillains is based in the southwestern United States. Their main motivation appears to be profit, and they specialize in robbing banks and armored cars. However, some of their members have their own personal crusades, such as the claim by Comanche and Warcry that the Indian tribes have been "enslaved" by the government. Their current membership is as follows – Marshal (leader), Posse, Maverick, Showdown, Comanche, and Warcry.

Terminal Velocity and Warp

These two vigilantes work outside the law to kill superpowered criminals. Acting as judge, jury, and executioner, these two individuals have made it onto the FBI's most wanted list. Terminal Velocity has been captured twice, escaping once under his own power, and another time via a portal created by Warp. He has been convicted of murder in absentia, and law enforcement has been given permission to unmask him the next time he is caught.

Bastions of Hope - Campaign Cities

Bayport, California

Bayport is located roughly 150 miles from Los Angeles, on the coast near Santa Barbara. After the demon Malice destroyed the city of Lompoc in 1994, the entire area was evacuated, and the PRS began a massive project that took over a year to complete. When they were finished, the new city of Bayport became the most technologically advanced coastal city in the world. Within a few months, Bayport became the largest shipping port in the country, and the government sent the superhero Backblast to found a superteam there.

Military Bases: The underground facilities of Vandenberg Air Force Base survived Malice's attack, and the base was rebuilt. Though it is no longer the centerpiece of the local economy, the base employs a significant number of Bayport residents.

Middleton, Texas

Formed by the merging of three cities located between Dallas and Fort Worth, Middleton has had the longest continuous presence of Primes of any location in the United States. Nearly driven into bankruptcy from property damage, the city was rebuilt into one of the ten most advanced cities into the world thanks to the efforts of the hero Technomancer.

Newspaper: The Middleton Herald. The Herald is the first newspaper to have articles submitted by superpowered beings, starting with Ace of Spades. Articles have also been sent in from villains, including a letter believed to be from the criminal mastermind known as the Dealer.

Silverstone, Colorado

Silverstone was founded in 1987, and is located between Denver and Boulder. The city is fairly affluent, with several corporations drawn to the area for its scenic location near the mountains and a large urban renewal project that finished in 2008.

Newspaper: Silverstone News. The newspaper is currently experimenting with a microtransaction format for their website, where headlines and brief summaries are posted for free, and full articles can be bought for \$0.05 to \$0.25 each.

Schools: The city's largest school is Whiterock High, which offers several advanced programs funded by corporate donors. The largest donor to the school is OmniCorp, which recently opened a theoretical physics laboratory two blocks away.