

An Alternate Reality in Reality A



By Joshua Gannon-Salomon

It's not often that one comes upon something great while it's still in its infancy. But this past weekend, my girlfriend got the paws, claws and strength of a bear, our mutual friend Ben gained the ability to talk to anything with a power switch, and I got magickal powers. And all of this thanks to a relative newcomer to the world of tabletop gaming called Reality A.

Reality A is the brainchild of Herbie Hicks, a veteran gamer from Rhode Island, who started with basic Dungeons & Dragons at the tender age of 9. He invented the game one night in 1999 as an on-the-spot alternative to the usual tabletop games for his gaming buddies. He liked the idea of a world where magick and psychic powers existed side-by-side, two concepts that he had not found fleshed out to his satisfaction in other role playing games. The original campaign was a hit with first his friends, running for a year and earning him his first die-hard fans. Encouraged, Herbie wrote up the rules, and today the first edition of his Reality A handbook has sold out after its debut at NecronomiCon in October, and Reality A Games is a growing small business.

The game begins with a series of odd events beginning around the year 2000 and culminating in a red mist engulfing the planet. The mist sends most of the population into a deep sleep, after which they wake up with extraordinary powers. Some are Altered, changed into part human, part animal chimeras; others become psychic; still others gain unnatural affinities for technology or the power to cast spells. The GM (game master) decides which characters are affected in which ways, using what they know about the person in our so-called 'real world.' After that, the players have free reign to discover their characters' powers and the limitations that come with them.

I played the game with my friend Ben and my girlfriend Kelley, and our friend Fox is our GM. After we were swallowed by the enigmatic Red Mist, Ben became a techno, a person psychically linked with — and obsessed by — technology; Kelley became an Altered — in her case, part bear; and I became a mage, a user of magick, though I did not know any 'spells' at the outset. We escaped a gun-wielding NPC (non-player character) known only as The Collector, and learned more about ourselves at a campground full of similarly changed people. After Ben nearly got the place shut down because of semi-illegal Internet shenanigans and Kelley nearly killed a part-wolf Altered in a friendly sparring match, I began to experiment with magick. We then encountered a hooded being of great power who fed vampirically on others, and failed miserably attempting to fight him off, getting beaten quite badly in the process. Of course, this only made the three of us hungrier for more, and we have since been

badgering Fox for the next gaming session — our next visit to that strange, yet familiar world. To quote Ben's oft-repeated query to our beleaguered GM, "When can I throw fireballs again?!"

Technically speaking, Reality A is interesting because instead of a system based on the d20 (twenty-sided die) of Dungeons and Dragons and innumerable other role playing games, Reality A uses percentage dice and a simple chart to determine the degree of success or failure of a character's actions. Damage and healing are all based on d6s (six-sided square dice), and a powerful character like Kelley's bear-Altered can roll an astonishing number of them for one strike. Herbie puts it this way: "In Dungeons and Dragons, combat is part of the wonder of it all, In Reality A, combat is kinda deadly." Psychic powers and magick are fueled by Karma, which can be positive or negative, and accrues according to your in-game actions, though certain GMs are not above a little harmless bribery (massages and food are good places to start). You can also invest Karma in improving your character's statistics and skills. Furthermore, players' powers are affiliated with one of the four elements, which predispose their characters toward different kinds of magick or psychic abilities. The user-friendly gameplay is refreshing, a snap to learn, and may prove to be an advantage when dealing with first-time tabletop role-players, aka n00bs.

Since I basically play myself in the game, the experience has been one of self-discovery, and though Herbie has guidelines to fit just about any character you could wish to create, I recommend playing this way above all. You find out how you would react to a world suddenly full of magick and exponentially advancing technology, and the portrait that comes out is like the image in a magic **mirror** — it's you only more so. Similarly, it is extremely interesting to see what others do in the situations we find in the game, and you get a distorted but oddly truthful view of your friends. For example, I knew that Ben had an aptitude for technology and an appetite for destruction, and that Kelley feels extremely protective of her friends, but the world of the game allows us each to live those feelings to an epic extent. That kind of situation, used correctly, is always dramatic and often cathartic. It is for this reason that Kelley wisely advises new players thus: "Don't try to make your character an ideal you. Make it yourself and just watch what happens when you give into the game heart and soul."

What's next for Reality A? Herbie is currently editing the next edition of the rule book, doing everything from fine-tuning the game rules to revising the illustrations — in his own words, "making it worthy to be out there with the greats." He is also looking for some help updating the company website. For those of you for whom tabletop role playing games are too tame, I can also substantiate the rumors that Reality A is working on a live action version of the game. Herbie confirms that he is working on the rules for a Reality A LARP, has found a suitable indoor space for an inaugural game, and he is looking into finding space for an outdoor game as well.

Needless to say, my friends and I highly recommend the game, and we are far from alone. There are currently Reality A games running throughout New England, Florida, Ohio, and up to Quebec. Herbie himself will be going to TempleCon in February to run games there, and hopefully Origins in Ohio, and MegaCon in Florida to spread the word still farther. To find a game in your area or to learn more, visit facebook.com/realityagames or Reality-A-games.com/