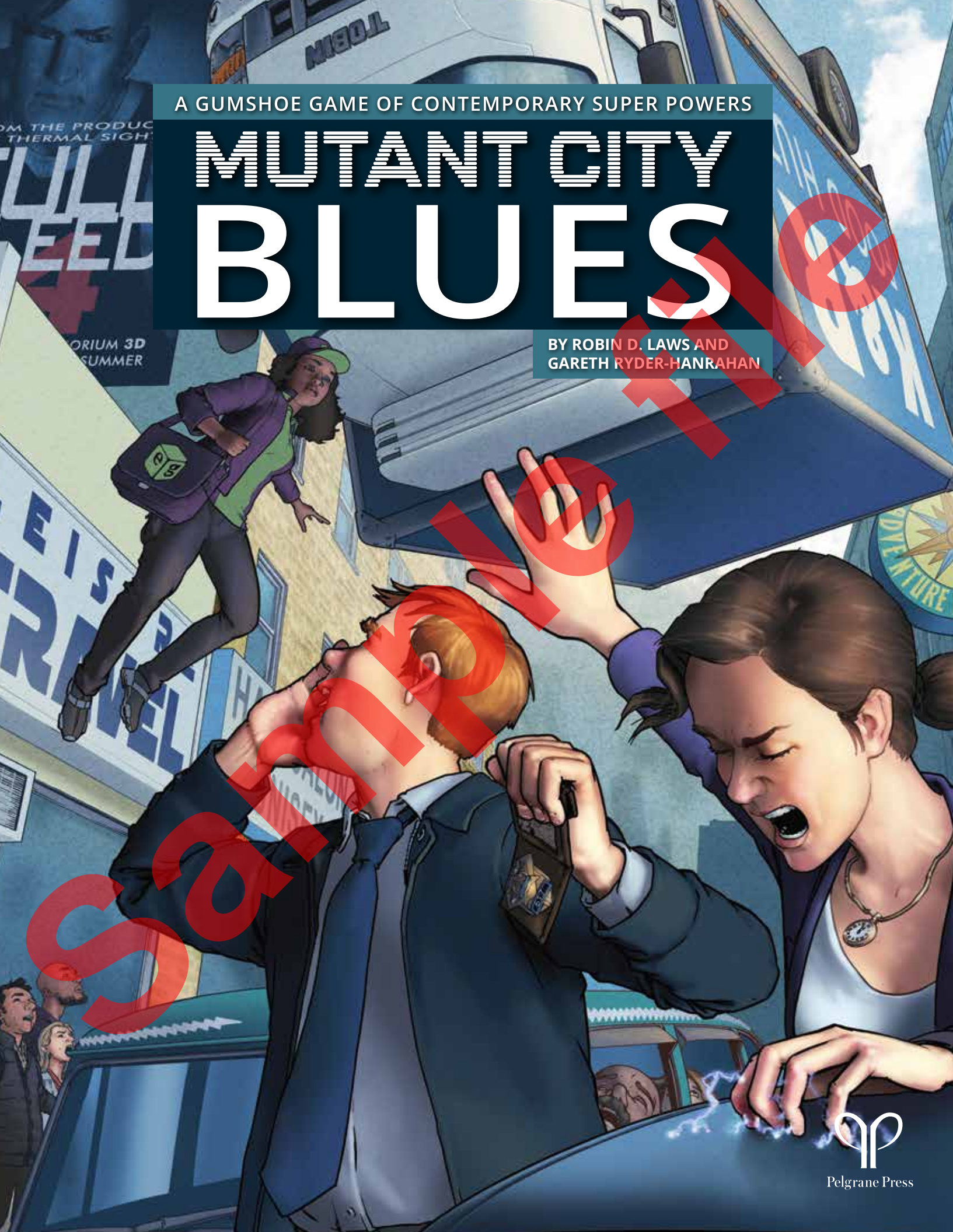


A GUMSHOE GAME OF CONTEMPORARY SUPER POWERS

MUTANT CITY BLUES

BY ROBIN D. LAWS AND
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Pelgrane Press

Sample file



MUTANT CITY BLUES

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It's Not a Bird, It's Not a Plane

There's a particular stink associated with a stakeout. A rich humus of fast food wrappers, takeout cups, the smell of the chemical cleaner the lab rats use to clean off the telephoto lenses. After three days, Rick Lomax's car was thick with it.

Cecilia Chu's nose wrinkled as she slid into the passenger seat. "This," she said, passing him yet another coffee, "is fucking pointless."

Across the street, a door opened. A man hurried down the steps and got into the black SUV parked outside. Rick Clooter. Suspected trafficker in illegal dorphing.

"Maybe not." Lomax waited until the SUV turned the corner onto Washington Street, then followed. The heavy chassis of the SUV was like a fleck of dirt in his X-ray eyes; he could see it through the intervening buildings. Made keeping a tail on it easier.

"Where's he off to?" muttered Cecilia. She drummed her fingers on the dash. Little sparks of lightning leapt between her digits; a nervous tic.

"Maybe wherever he's keeping the jolters."

"He's not that sloppy."

"Maybe we'll get lucky."

Somewhere beneath the trashpile, the radio crackled. Chu dug it out and listened as they approached a wide intersection, Washington & 10th. Clooter's car idled at the stop light; they were four vehicles behind.

Movement.

A blue refrigerated truck, on the far side of the intersection. As the lights changed, it swerved into Clooter's lane. Barreling straight towards him, tires squealing, aiming for a head-on collision.

A split second to react.

Chu took it.

She clenched her fists, focused all her intent right at the truck. Lomax knew his partner could control gravity, but in that moment, she pushed her powers beyond anything he'd seen her do before.

A bubble of distortion exploded out from her. Lomax felt it rather than saw it. The coffee cups in the holders between them exploded. His stomach lurched, his heart fluttered. Parked cars all along the side of the street rocked back and forth, a chorus of car alarms.

The onrushing truck rose into the air, bleeding kinetic energy as it took off, an impossible act of

levitation. Turning lazily, end over end, engine still roaring, but harmless as a helium balloon – *until it comes down*, thought Lomax desperately.

The shadow of the truck passed over them. Lomax looked up through the windshield, and for a moment he locked eyes with the truck driver as he sailed overhead. The driver's face was slack, impassive, despite the fact he'd just tried to drive head-on into another vehicle and was now tumbling through the sky forty feet overhead.

Chu couldn't move yet – her face was deathly pale with the effort of lifting something that big. Lomax scrambled out of the car, ran down the street after the truck, waving his hands. "Get clear! Get the hell back!" he shouted. Chu could put the truck down moderately gently, but they couldn't control where it would land. There was a mostly empty parking lot up ahead, but the truck wasn't drifting that way. Of course it wasn't; with his luck, it'd end up landing on a bus full of orphaned nuns or something.

More sirens in the distance. Shouting, screams of panic. A flying woman, dressed in the livery of a courier company. "Hey! You up there!" shouted Lomax. "The truck's weightless – push it over there!" He flashed his police badge at her, and her eyes widened. She swooped around and gave the truck a nudge, pushing it off the street, into the parking lot, and down towards the ground.

Close enough. "Chu! Drop it! Drop it!"

The gravity bubble popped, and the truck dropped heavily, smashing into the ground and the perimeter fence of the parking lot. The front wheels came down first, and then the rear axle hit the tarmac with a dreadful crunch. Lomax ran into the parking lot and checked the driver. Stunned, but still alive. Lomax pulled him out of the vehicle. He didn't resist, didn't react. Totally out of it. Lomax shoved the man down onto the ground, told him to put his hands out by his side. The man complied.

Lomax glanced back towards the intersection, his mutant vision turning the crowd into a sea of skeletons and ghosts. Clooter was gone. Shit.

One of the skeletons stumbled up to him. He blinked, and Chu's face replaced the grinning skull. "You OK?" he asked.

"I think I pulled something in my brain," she muttered. "God, that hurts." She nodded towards the truck driver. "This guy better have a good story."

THE WORLD OF THE ENHANCED

Ten years ago, the world changed. Or, rather, one per cent of people changed, and the world was forced to keep up with them.

The first symptoms appeared on January 12th. Around the world, people from all walks of life experienced flu-like symptoms: nausea, headaches, muscle aches, and fever. Many people still remember these early days of what would later be termed the Sudden Mutation Event (SME) with anxiety and dread.

Patients flooded emergency rooms and walk-in clinics. Panicked news correspondents rushed to the assumption that a global, drug-resistant influenza pandemic had begun — even though the illness proved fatal to no one. It struck all age and demographic groups. Scientists found previously unknown genetic material in the bloodstreams

of affected patients. At the height of the pre-SME hysteria, roughly 1 in 200 people in the industrialized world displayed symptoms. In the developing world, infection rates were anywhere from thirty to forty-five per cent lower, with the lowest rates occurring in sparsely populated rural areas.

Eleven days after their onset, on January 23rd, all symptoms went away, nearly at once. This merely fueled the speculation of a terrified world populace. Was it a biological attack of some kind? The result of some undeclared industrial accident? Did angels of death herald the coming end times?

The mystery illness became known as the ghost flu, named for its sudden disappearance and lack of lasting effects.

It wasn't until months later that the first mutant powers manifested. Tammy Graves, a 13-year-old from the tiny community of Slocum, Texas, took literal flight while attempting to catch a pop fly during a softball game. Over the next few weeks, hundreds, then thousands of people around the globe displayed a sudden command of superhuman powers, from bizarre adaptations of eyesight to the ability to enter others' dreams. These individuals included nonagenarians, young teens, and every age group in between. Only pre-pubescents were unaffected. The eldest early mutant was 103-year-old Eula Skinner, of Griderville, Kentucky who gained the ability to move objects with her mind.

All manifesters, as they were at first known, shared one commonality: they'd been struck by ghost flu.

With the 24-hour cable news channels hungrily following each revelation of a pensioner who could walk through walls, or a firefighter who proved immune to flame, pundits predicted a wave of political hysteria even before the full sweep of the event had become apparent.



Fearful liberals conjured up images of emergency police forces rounding up ghost flu sufferers and imprisoning them in brutal internment camps. Conservatives whipped up fears of super-powered terrorists launching devastating attacks against the centers of government and national monuments.

Both impending disasters fizzled. Displays of initial hysteria proved surprisingly muted, confined to a few isolated incidents of vandalism and harassment directed against known ghost flu sufferers. With one in two hundred people exposed to the virus — or whatever it was — everybody could name multiple friends and acquaintances, if not loved ones, who would be subject to the whims of the state were any kind of quarantine program instituted. A number of popular celebrities, sports figures and politicians were among the affected. Even the most reactionary politicians discovered that their own sons, daughters, mothers and brothers were among the mutants — or heightened, as they soon came to be known. Persecution of a minority becomes difficult when you identify with it.

Other early predictions were also proved wrong. First of all, fewer than half of ghost flu sufferers manifested extraordinary powers during the first year of the SME. In the nine years since then, some sufferers have subsequently manifested. Others, unaffected by the ghost flu, have since demonstrated mutant powers. Today roughly one in one hundred people in the industrialized world possesses one or more heightened abilities, with the US displaying the highest rate (at 1 in 97) and Belgium, Holland and Germany the lowest (at 1 in 103.)

MUTANTS AND GEOPOLITICS

Throughout the world, nations weathered the social upheavals that followed the SME according to their prior political stability. Democratic, highly industrialized nations absorbed the new realities with surprising resilience. Mutant rights, responsibilities and treatment are topics of ongoing fervent debate. Some mutants from groups mistreated by society used their new-found gifts to push back against oppression or marginalisation; in other places, conflicts over the standing of mutants have temporarily eclipsed older arguments about immigration, inequality or social change. A lingering sense of uncertainty permeates even the most stable countries; no assumptions are safe any more.

Effective authoritarian regimes experienced brief spasms of doubt and disorder, then reasserted pre-existing levels of social control. Their governments dragooned mutants into the apparatus of the state,

The Present Day

The game occurs in a fictionalized near future. To keep the game current no matter when you start to play it, we've avoided stating a definite date for the game's present. If you start your game in 2019, the game occurs in 2029. If you're reading this in 2020, the game is set in 2030, and so on.

The game world may occasionally refer to real-life public figures, but supporting characters appearing in heavily spotlighted roles are fictionalized. So, for example, the President of the United States is a fictional character, rather than a contemporary politician.

Alternatively, you may wish to set the game in an alternative present, and put the first appearance of mutants ten years in the past. Pick whichever option feels most comfortable — do you want the freedom offered by the clean slate of future history, or do you prefer to extrapolate based on existing trends and events?

especially as members of their security forces. The unwilling or incapable were either institutionalized or carefully monitored. Failure to report the possession of mutant powers was, and is, treated as an act of sedition.

For example, in China, during the first year of the SME, mutants associated with both the Falun Gong spiritual protest movement, and various regional independence organizations launched a number of uncoordinated actions in defiance of Communist party authority. Though these were chiefly peaceful demonstrations, the Politburo used its control over the media to label the protests as terrorist activities. Dispatching the new People's Army squadron of enhanced anti-terror soldiers, the party destroyed not only the mutant protestors, but the broader movements they fought for. Anti-mutant fears were used as a pretext for a wider crackdown. This triggered a diplomatic crisis and a temporary cooling of relations with the west, which reversed itself only in the face of a mini-recession. At present the Chinese government has returned to its previous status quo, in which an arbitrarily-enforced authoritarianism paradoxically coexists with unfettered

capitalism. The mutant uprisings have receded into memory as atrocities have a way of doing. Mutants who serve the state apparatus or enjoy connections to the wealthy and powerful prosper. Those who do not skulk in the shadows, or lie in state-sponsored hospital beds in perpetual induced coma.

The world's most vulnerable nations, including those finally embarking on a recovery from past colonial horrors, fared worst of all. Terrorists, mercenaries, and fugitives from all around the world flooded into weak states, turning them into havens of violent lawlessness.

Also proved wrong was the initially common idea that people with incredible powers would feel compelled to emulate comic-book heroes. A small handful of people adopted colorful costumes, secret identities, and thematically appropriate nicknames, declaring themselves crimefighters. An even smaller number obliged them by using their powers to commit high-profile crimes, giving them someone to fight. Most people, however, carried on with their ordinary lives, trying to forget that they could shoot bolts of lightning from their fingertips or freeze a glass of water just by looking at it. Many mutants, especially those living outside cosmopolitan cities, either downplay their powers or pretend not to have them at all.

After ten years, the existence of mutant powers has been thoroughly assimilated into the public consciousness. Mutant characters appear not only in action movies and adventure TV series, but as token characters in sitcoms and dramas. Heightened movie stars, pop singers, and heiresses rub shoulders across the tabloid pages. Professional sports leagues now allow heightened athletes on their teams, using complicated point systems to decide how many mutants, with which particular powers, any given team can field. When a superbeing is seen rocketing over the skyscrapers of the city, passers-by may stop and point, but they don't ask themselves, in slack-jawed wonder, if they're seeing a bird, a plane, or an ubermensch. Instead, they think, "Oh, hey, that guy has Flight powers. I wonder if he also has Heat Blast or Strength, or maybe both..."

Aiding acceptance of mutant rights were the undeniable economic and social benefits afforded by many of the strange new powers. Individuals capable of curing inoperable cancer with a laying-on of hands became highly-paid fixtures of hospital oncology departments. The ranks of the psychiatric profession flushed with new entrants who could observe their patients' dreams, or literally share their feelings. People who could turn lead into industrial-grade gold found lucrative jobs in the manufacturing sector. Mutants who could withstand fire or toxic gases and inhaled smoke were sought after as firefighters.

New Genes, New Science

The ultimate origin of the SME remains a hotly debated topic. Scientific theories abound, and piles of grant money await anyone who can float a solid research plan to prove any of them. In the absence of a definite answer, conspiracy theories about bioweapons, escaped experiments, forced evolution, aliens or mystical awakenings fill the void.

That central mystery aside, understanding of mutant powers has advanced rapidly in the decade since their initial onset. Leading the scientific charge is the mediagenic, indefatigable Dr. Lucius Quade. He coined the term for the scientific study of mutant genes and abilities, anamorphology, and is routinely called on to weigh in on any social or political controversy surrounding mutant rights. At first affiliated with the top technical university in the area where you choose to set your series, Quade struck out on his own to found the Quade Institute, a cutting-edge research facility located in the series' home city. QI, as it is abbreviated, attracts the world's top bioscience experts and is an occasional target of anti-mutant activists. It is funded by a constellation of private and public institutions, most notably the research foundation of famous venture capitalist and mutant Galen Birch.

Although Quade maintains that the QI's primary focus is always pure research, rumors persist of the imminent announcement of various practical applications of his work. Sources claim that he's working on a vaccine to prevent the development of mutant powers, and/or genetic therapies to counter the effects of risk factors associated with them. Others accuse the QI of working on means to induce latent mutant powers in those who have yet to manifest them.

A more detailed profile of Quade appears on p. 139.