

GURPS

Fourth Edition

HOW TO BE A *GURPS* GM™



By Warren "Mook" Wilson, with Sean "Kromm" Punch

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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Written by **WARREN “MOOK” WILSON,**
with **SEAN “KROMM” PUNCH**

Edited by **NIKOLA VRTIS**

Cover art by **ABRAR AJMAL, BRANDON MOORE,**
CHRISTOPHER SHY, BOB STEVLIC, and JOHN ZELEZNIK

Illustrated by **GUY BURWELL, JOHN HARTWELL,**
JOHN LUCAS, and DAN SMITH

GURPS System Design ■ **STEVE JACKSON**

GURPS Line Editor ■ **SEAN PUNCH**

Assistant **GURPS** Line Editor ■ **JASON “PK” LEVINE**

GURPS Project Manager ■ **STEVEN MARSH**

Production Artist and Indexer ■ **NIKOLA VRTIS**

Page Design ■ **PHIL REED** and **JUSTIN DE WITT**

GURPS FAQ Maintainer ■ **VICKY “MOLOKH” KOLENKO**

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Marketing Director ■ **RHEA FRIESEN**

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Art Direction and Prepress Checker ■ **NIKOLA VRTIS**

Playtesters: Frederick Brackin, Roger Burton West, Leonardo Holschuh, and Emily Smirle

Special Thanks: Scott Caron, Wendy Caron, Jamie Day, Peter Gaffney,
Vickie Josefsberg, Chris Magee, Michele Stuart, Chris Wilson, and Neil Yetts

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About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of *GURPS* players. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! We can also be reached by e-mail: info@sjgames.com. Resources include:

New supplements and adventures. *GURPS* continues to grow – see what's new at gurps.sjgames.com.

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Bibliographies. Many of our books have extensive bibliographies, and we're putting them online – with links to let you buy the resources that interest you! Go to each book's web page and look for the "Bibliography" link.

Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata pages for all *GURPS* releases, including this book, are available on our website – see above.

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.



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INTRODUCTION

GURPS is an incredibly robust roleplaying game (RPG), providing a consistent and flexible rules system for players and Game Masters (GMs) who want to enjoy all sorts of adventures, at all sorts of power levels, in all sorts of genres.

Because of this universality, it's much more of a "tool kit" than other systems limited to a narrow scope. When you tear into **GURPS**, you don't find a model car or plane inside. You find an unlimited building-block set, one you can use to build a car, plane, zeppelin, submarine, motorcycle, spaceship, stagecoach, or anything else you want! The **GURPS** GM is encouraged to envision the game he and his players want, and then use only those rules that support that vision, ignoring everything else.

You can't say it too often: **GURPS** is a tool kit. It's a system that requires tons of GM judgment to work. "As is," it offers dozens if not hundreds of advantages, disadvantages, skills, spells, perks, techniques, etc.; hundreds if not thousands of articles of gear; and many pages of optional rules. The vast majority of all this stuff isn't appropriate for all campaigns. Setting limits isn't about being a control freak or an authoritarian; it's about making the game playable, fun, and true to the campaign's desired genre and setting.

— Kromm

Who Is Kromm?

"Kromm" is Sean Punch, and he has been the **GURPS** Line Editor since 1995. During those years he has overseen the development of the **GURPS** line, including production of the **Basic Set, Fourth Edition** with David Pulver, and has engineered rules for nearly every **GURPS** product released in that time. He frequently answers rules questions on the Steve Jackson Games forums, and his quotes (set off from the rest of the text by lines above and below them) included in this supplement were culled from nearly 10,000 forum posts.

Rules for firearms and modern technology skills are simply not needed for a historically accurate adventure set in ancient Rome. Neither are rules for supernatural or cinematic abilities for a realistic game set in the present-day world. **GURPS** assumes that the GM will take only what he needs for the current campaign and leave the rest aside.

This is particularly true for combat. There are many combat options in the **Basic Set**, even more in **GURPS Martial Arts** (and other supplements), and it's crucial for the GM to have a clear understanding of those he wishes to use. Chapter 6 of this supplement presents guidelines for customizing the feel and flavor of combat.

To those new to **GURPS**, this wealth of options can give the false impression that the rules are more complex than

other systems, harder to learn, or harder to play. **How to Be a GURPS GM** was written to put those mistaken impressions to rest.

GURPS has precisely *one* task-resolution mechanism: "Take a score, add a modifier, and roll three six-sided dice under the result." If you can "get" a game where some success rolls are $d20 + \text{modifiers}/\text{roll high}$, others are $d\%/ \text{roll low}$, and yet others are $\text{sum } Nd < \text{whatever} > / \text{see if you can get } X$. . . well, you can certainly "get" rolling 3d6 under a score, every time. Even if you drag in effect rolls (reactions, damage, Fright Checks, whatever), it's still only two sorts of rolls, and they all use the ordinary d6.

Its basic character-creation and game-play rules are just about trivial, with lots of modifiers for success rolls and lots of choices to spend points on. Almost everything is optional – and clearly marked as such – so the GM has lots of control, and there's never any requirement to go whole-hog and use the whole darn game.

This book is aimed squarely at the GM new to **GURPS**, whether new to the RPG hobby altogether or looking to switch from another system; however, familiarity with the basics of RPGs is assumed. It strives to be a bridge between reading the **Basic Set** and actually running that first session. Three chapters detail a low-tech fantasy game with 150-point player characters (PCs) as an ongoing example. The general principles evident in that walkthrough apply equally well to other sorts of games.

There is absolutely no One True Way, no "official" way, of running or playing **GURPS**! The whole purpose of the rules is for everyone, the GM and players alike, to have fun, no matter how they do it. **How to Be a GURPS GM** is *one* way, a useful guide to preparing and running games with the **GURPS** rules. The name of this book could have been "**One Way of Many to Be a GURPS GM, With a Particular Focus on Beginners**," but the current title is already long enough.

My sincere hope is that this book removes some of the misperceptions of **GURPS**. It is a game of extraordinary flexibility, with mountains of ongoing support – and most of all, it is really fun!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Warren "Mook" Wilson began playing roleplaying games in 1982. He ran his first game the following year and instantly fell in love with being the GM, especially after discovering **GURPS** in 1991. Over the decades, he has been blessed with fun, creative players who made running games a joy. Outside of gaming, he amuses himself in Los Angeles with reading and writing fiction, watching movies, and spending too much time on the computer. Online, he lives at **themook.net**. This is his first official **GURPS** product.

Generally, you have to read skill descriptions to learn about possible skill uses. This is because a full list of actions and necessary skills would be as long as Chapter 4!

The next example from Kromm demonstrates different ways to gather information.

In *GURPS*, as in real life, there are dozens of ways to get info using one's skills.

- *Administration* to glean info from a bureaucrat, either through discussion or by filling out the right forms to request it.
- *Area Knowledge* to know where people with useful information hang out so that you can bribe, trick, spy on, or otherwise interact with them.
- *Carousing* to buy a few rounds and get information at a pub or a tavern.
- *Current Affairs* – a simple roll will often suffice once you've spent some time catching up on the latest news.
- *Fast-Talk* to pry information from somebody who knows what you need to know and who shouldn't talk . . . but who is easily bamboozled.
- *Intelligence Analysis* to discover useful info in the reports of people who use these other skills.
- *Interrogation* to squeeze information out of somebody you corner or capture.
- *Lip Reading, Observation, Shadowing, Stealth*, etc., to spy out information the hard way.
- *Merchant* to buy information legally.
- *Politics* to glean info from a politician, perhaps by promising cash support or by convincing him that something untoward is going on under his nose and that you can help if he fills you in on a few facts.
- *Research* to find information in records of some kind.
- *Savoir-Faire* to glean info from somebody in the relevant social group by convincing him that you're a peer who "needs to know."
- *Sex Appeal* to get information from a horn dog.
- *Streetwise*, either to find people to bribe, interrogate, and spy on, or simply to walk the streets, make contacts, and hear rumors.

Action 2: Exploits, pp. 11-30, further outlines ways of using skills to find and hide information, penetrate and secure locations, etc. For a discussion of skills specifically beneficial to interaction encounters, peruse *Social Engineering*.

Let Each PC Shine

Be sure every PC will have a chance to be in the spotlight. A party consisting of a computer hacker, a demolitions expert, and an ex-soldier is not well-served by a constant stream of firefights. The hacker and the demolitions guy need scenes, too, where their skills at computer wizardry and blowing things up will be of value.

PLAYER FREEDOM

One of the great advantages RPGs have over other mediums is the freedom afforded to players. Even the best computer game doesn't come close to the experience of interacting with a live GM. Within that context, though, lies a spectrum of play styles as to how adventures are written, and how much freedom the players truly have.

Linear Plots

On one end of the spectrum are linear plots. The party starts at point A and is assumed to proceed to point B, then point C, continuing to follow preset encounters until finally reaching the climactic final scene. A great framework for this kind of game is PCs who work directly for an NPC who gives them specific missions – a police sergeant, military commander, spymaster, etc.

Though often negatively referred to as "railroading," linear encounters are an entirely valid style of play, enjoyed by many. The advantage to the GM is that it's much easier to prepare encounters, since the PCs have fewer options of what they can do and where they can go. For players who prefer a more open approach, this is also the disadvantage.

The Sandbox

The other end of the spectrum is sometimes called "sandbox gaming," referring to the group's ability to go anywhere and do anything, regardless of its impact on the story ("playing in the sandbox"). If the GM prepared a series of encounters revolving around tracking down an escaped fugitive, and the PCs decide they don't care about that and would rather rob a bank instead, that work was wasted (unless he recycles those encounters – see *The Illusion of Freedom*, p. 26). Although the players have much more freedom, it's not a style of play for the GM who prefers preparation to improvisation.

Following the Players' Lead

One way to combine all of these approaches is to let the players provide the ideas for how the game will progress. As they roam free (like a sandbox game), pay careful attention to where their interests lie, and what sorts of things they enjoy. Then place those things in their path (preserving the illusion of freedom), ultimately leading the group through a linear plot they themselves constructed.

For example, let's say a group of PC mercenaries has just completed a long contract. As they spend time recuperating, two of them have a conversation about the miserable backwater country they're in – it's always hot, the bugs are a nightmare, and the possibility of attack is nearly constant. The GM also remembers that before this modern-day campaign started, some of the players were raving about a new horror movie, about a werewolf loose in Victorian London.

Putting these things together, the GM offers the mercenaries a job through their usual contact: someone, or something, is killing people in the back alleys of Chicago, and the government, unable to find the culprit, wants to hire an "off the books" team to covertly investigate. If they take the job, this gets the party back to a more urban environment, and a break from the constant firefights. The GM has no idea who or what is killing in Chicago, but the players have no shortage of theories for him to choose from; as their adventurers fly back to the U.S., cultists, a serial killer, monsters, and aliens are all mentioned as possibilities.

A GM who likes to improvise, with communicative players, can sustain a campaign like this indefinitely!

Permanence of Death: An important factor in the discussion of combat lethality is how permanent death is in the setting. For magical realms where heroes can be easily resurrected, or futuristic settings where incredible technology can return the dead to life, the threat of dying in battle loses some of its sting. However, when death means creating a new adventurer, the stakes are higher.

Unconsciousness (p. B423): There are many ways to be rendered unconscious, things like failing the immediate HT roll for going below 0 HP, some critical hits, failing a knock-down roll by 5 or more, being at or below -1xFP, etc. Unconsciousness is a valuable tool for capturing the party alive, or defeating them without killing them.

SELECTING OPTIONS

With such a variety of options to choose from, new GMs often ask which they should use. Below are some very concrete groupings, from few to many. Nonetheless, just because every option *can* be used doesn't necessarily mean it *should* be.

I put all of those rules in there so that 1,000 different gaming groups could run 1,000 different, custom-fitted rules-light versions of **GURPS**. I didn't really imagine that there would be people who would want to turn on *all* of the switches. I saw my work as setting out a really complete buffet. But I guess some people just have to have some of everything, even if 90% of it doesn't taste good together and they only need 10% of the calories.

Speed of Play vs. Realism

The spectrum along which the combat options run has "fewest options, fastest play, least detail" on one end, and "most options, slowest play, greatest detail" on the other. The fewer options used, the quicker resolution will be – but as more are added, scenes become filled with more detail.

Deciding how to categorize these rules is very subjective. Still, the lists can guide the new GM toward full rules familiarity; they offer a starting point for customization at "Fewest Options . . ." and provide a path to follow. (Each list expands the suggested rules of the previous one.)

Once you find a category that fits your group, and the players are happy with the way combat works, there's no reason to continue adding options. These categories certainly aren't "all or nothing" either; even after finding the point where your group is most comfortable, you could pick one or two interesting rules from the next category up and give them a try.

Fewest Options, Fastest Play, Least Detail

This is the minimum needed to run any kind of combat. There's not a lot of detail, but turns go extremely quickly, and you can embellish combat descriptions with whatever fits the scene.

Maneuvers (pp. B363-366) – all but Change Posture, Evaluate, and Feint.

Movement (pp. B367-368) is abstract, with no movement points.

Hit Location (p. B369) defaults to torso.

Attacking (p. B369) follows the usual "attack, defense, damage" series of rolls.

Unarmed Combat (p. B370) – striking and grabbing only.

Dodging, Blocking, and Parrying (pp. B374-377) – only one parry and one block per turn.

Damage and Injury (pp. B377-381), excluding wounding modifiers, shock, major wounds, and stunning.

Critical Hits and Misses (pp. B381-382).

Dying Actions (p. B423).

GURPS Martial Arts

A lot of combat rules in the **Basic Set** were deliberately left vague on the grounds of "it works well enough for those who don't want nit-picking detail in their games." We assumed that readers who cared about fine details would get **Martial Arts** when it came out.

All the expanded and new rules in **Martial Arts** easily double the size of the core combat system! If you're new enough to the game to still be feeling around the **Basic Set**, the extras found in **Martial Arts** will likely be a bit overwhelming. Let the group get a solid grasp of how combat plays out with the core rules before incorporating new options from **Martial Arts**.

Light and Quick

Although previously sacrificed for speed (particularly wounding modifiers), including these basic options can maintain a quick pace while increasing combat possibilities.

Maneuvers (pp. B363-366), including Change Posture, Evaluate, and Feint.

Unarmed Combat (p. B370-372), including grappling, slam, and shove.

Rapid Fire (pp. B373-374).

Wounding Modifiers and Injury (p. B379).

Shock (p. B419).

Size and Speed/Range Table (p. B550) for ranged attacks.

Balanced

These options bring the game to a good balance between detail and speed. Many of these rules cover special cases not likely to come up frequently. Options included from **Martial Arts** are generally those not requiring additional die rolls.

Extra Effort in Combat (p. B357) – Flurry of Blows, Feverish Defense, and Mighty Blows.

Deceptive Attack (pp. B369-370).

Rapid Strike (p. B370).

Acrobatic Dodge and Sacrificial Dodge (p. B375).

Parrying Heavy Weapons (p. B376).

Retreat, Dodge and Drop, Sacrificial Dodge and Drop, and Diving for Cover (p. B377).

Flexible Armor and Blunt Trauma (p. B379).

Knockback (p. B378).

Hurting Yourself (p. B379) when attacking unarmed.

Hexes (pp. B384-385) instead of abstract movement.

Wild Swings (pp. B388-389).
Reach of a Weapon (p. B388).
Close Combat (pp. B391-392).
Surprise Attacks and Initiative (p. B393).
Visibility (p. B394).
Hit Location (pp. B398-400).
Striking at Weapons (pp. B400-401).
Special Melee Weapon Rules (pp. B404-406) – cloaks, flails, stuck picks, shield bash, shield rush, etc.
Shotguns and Multiple Projectiles (p. B409).
Special Ranged Weapons (pp. B410-411) – bolas, flaming arrows, hand grenades, etc.
Dual-Weapon Attacks (p. B417).
Major Wounds (p. B420).
Knockdown and Stunning (p. B420).
Crippling Injury (pp. B420-423).
Postures (p. B551), along with attack and defense modifiers.

From **Martial Arts**:

All-Out Attack (Long) (pp. 97-98).
Change Posture (p. 98) – diving forward, falling backward, and acrobatic stand.
Committed Attack and Defensive Attack (pp. 99-100).
Feint (p. 100) – specifically, resisting feints with the best Melee Weapon or unarmed combat skill.
Who Draws First? (p. 103).
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Parrying with Two-Handed Weapons (p. 123).
Multiple Attacks (pp. 126-128).
Extra Effort in Combat (p. 131) – Giant Step, Great Lunge, Heroic Charge, and Rapid Recovery.
New Hit Locations (p. 137) – ear, jaw, joints, nose, spine, and veins and arteries.
Improvised Weapons (p. 224).

Most Options, Slowest Play, Greatest Detail

These further options are for “full bells and whistles,” and result in the most detail and complexity at the cost of some speed. This is definitely *not* to say that using some or all of these slows combat to a crawl. Experienced GMs and players, who spend time to learn and use these rules as they do any others, will find they become second nature.

Familiarity (p. B169).
 Combat techniques (pp. B230-232).
Facing (p. B385).
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Hitting the Wrong Target (pp. B389-390).
Overshooting and Stray Shots (p. B390).
Opportunity Fire (p. B390).
Pop-Up Attacks (p. B390).
Defending in Tactical Combat (pp. B390-391) against attacks from the side, the rear, and “runaround” attacks.
Changing Posture in Armor (p. B395).
Attack from Above, Combat at Different Levels (pp. B402-403).

Firing Upward and Downward (p. B407).
Malfunctions (p. B407).
Cover (pp. B407-408).
Overpenetration (p. B408).
Special Rules for Rapid Fire (pp. B408-410) – spraying fire, suppression fire, etc.
Optional Rules for Injury (p. B420) – bleeding, accumulated wounds, and last wounds.

From **Martial Arts**:

Realistic Techniques and Cinematic Techniques (pp. 65-89).
Targeted Attacks (p. 68).
Using Your Legs (p. 79) for grappling.
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Move and Attack (p. 107).
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Defensive Grip and Reversed Grip (pp. 109-112).
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Harsh Realism for Unarmed Fighters (p. 124).
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Severe Bleeding and Lasting and Permanent Injuries (pp. 138-139).
Weapons of Quality (p. 216).

Speaking as a guy who has spent 25 years playing **GURPS**, 16 years working on it, and two years revising the **GURPS Basic Set**, I'd say that if you rate each of “fast-moving” and “realistic” from 1-10, we shot for and attained something like 6.5+6.5. I don't believe that 10+10 is possible; most games would probably have an aggregate score of 11, or dead-average, and typically break 9+2 if they favor ease of play, 5.5+5.5 if they shoot for balance, or 2+9 if they try to be reality simulators. I'm saying that **GURPS** shot for balance and beat the average by at least a point in each category. People make a big deal out of its realism because *most* games opt for that 9+2, and a 6.5 in realism is many orders more realistic than a 2.

My point is that the game can balance speed and realism as SJ claims, and be more realistic than most games as its fans often claim, without being as realistic as possible. There will as a result be many places where it tosses realism because it would be too expensive in its impact on playability.

Options adjust speed of play and realism.

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Gabe: Lie to them. Rob them. Drive them mad. Concoct impossible scenarios whose only outcome is their death. And then, when their eyes glisten with shame and rage, drink their tears.
– Penny Arcade, “DM 101”

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*The enjoyment you get out of a game is
largely about who you're playing it with.*

– Steve Jackson

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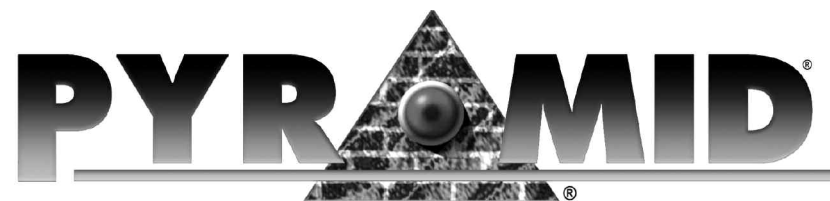
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