

G U R P S<sup>®</sup>

# SHAPESHIFTERS<sup>™</sup>



by robert m. schroeck

**STEVE JACKSON GAMES**

# LOOKING FOR A CHANGE?

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This book is designed for use with *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*, and *GURPS Compendium I. GURPS Bestiary, Third Edition* is useful but not required. The character and species concepts, the campaign setting, and the general information on can be used with *any* game system.

## THE BEASTS WITHIN:

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# INTRODUCTION

*Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,  
The arm'd rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger;  
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves  
Shall never tremble.*

– William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act III, Scene iv

Among the most ancient of myths is that of the shapeshifter, the skin-changer, the were-creature. And such creatures are not found only in myth and folklore; shapechangers of all descriptions appear throughout literature, from the oldest of legends to the latest science fiction. While some change at will from form to form, others are less lucky, often living their lives at the mercy of their supposed gift.

This book is the result of several years of thought, debate, and design centering on the were-creature creation rules found in *GURPS Bestiary, Second Edition*. While those earlier rules worked, many players felt that they were needlessly complicated. This edition is an effort to streamline and simplify the process, while offering new options.

Also, the original *GURPS Bestiary* rules leaned heavily toward animal-form characters built for fantasy games. While this was certainly appropriate, shapeshifters are far more specific to that genre, as any fan of *X-Files*, *X-Men*, or Japanese popular culture can tell you. A deliberate effort was made with this book to show more than just the *expected* shifters.

Grab your character sheets and your calculators – it's time to change.

## About the Author

Robert M. Schroeck got into the shapeshifter business quite by accident, through superhero roleplaying. He has handled shapeshifting beasties in three other *GURPS* books: *GURPS Supers Adventures*, *GURPS Bestiary, Second Edition*, and *GURPS Werewolf: The Apocalypse*. His other past efforts in *GURPS* include *GURPS International Super Teams*, *GURPS Camelot*, *GURPS Robin Hood*, *GURPS IST Kingston*, *GURPS Y2K*, and *GURPS Mage: The Ascension*. He has contributed to and edited several *In Nomine* books. Bob is also known for the infamous multigenre *GURPS* tournaments he has created or co-created for various game conventions, including the first official *GURPS* World Multigenre Championship at Dexcon 6.

A gamer since the late 1970s, Bob collects anime, books, outdated software, and dust. He and his wife Peggy (herself a sometime *GURPS* writer, although she'll deny it if asked) live in Somerset, NJ.



## About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of the *GURPS* system. Our address is SJ Games, Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! Resources include:

*Pyramid* ([www.sjgames.com/pyramid/](http://www.sjgames.com/pyramid/)). Our online magazine includes new *GURPS* rules and articles. It also covers *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Traveller*, *World of Darkness*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and many more top games – and other Steve Jackson Games releases like *In Nomine*, *Illuminati*, *Car Wars*, *Toon*, *Ogre Miniatures*, and more. *Pyramid* subscribers also have access to playtest files online!

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

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*Internet.* Visit us on the World Wide Web at [www.sjgames.com](http://www.sjgames.com) for errata, updates, Q&A, and much more. *GURPS* has its own Usenet group, too: [rec.games.frp.gurps](mailto:rec.games.frp.gurps).

*GURPSnet.* This e-mail list hosts much of the online discussion of *GURPS*. To join, point your web browser to [www.sjgames.com/mailman/listinfo/gurpsnet-1/](http://www.sjgames.com/mailman/listinfo/gurpsnet-1/).

The *GURPS Shapeshifters* web page is at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/shapeshifters/](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/shapeshifters/).

## Page References

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the *GURPS Basic Set* – e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*. Page references that begin with CI indicate *GURPS Compendium I*. Other references are A to *GURPS Aliens*, BE to *GURPS Bestiary, Third Edition*, BIO to *GURPS Bio-Tech*, CA to *GURPS Camelot*, G to *GURPS Grimoire*, H to *GURPS Horror*, IN to *GURPS In Nomine*, J to *GURPS Japan*, M to *GURPS Magic*, MA to *GURPS Martial Arts*, MI to *GURPS Magic Items 1*, RO to *GURPS Robots*, RU to *GURPS Russia*, SPI to *GURPS Spirits*, STM to *GURPS Steampunk*, SU to *GURPS Supers*, UN to *GURPS Undead*, VE to *GURPS Vehicles*, and VO to *GURPS Voodoo*. The abbreviation for *this* book is SH. For a full list of abbreviations, see p. CI181 or the updated web list at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html).

# VARIETIES AND FLAVORS

No two shapeshifters are exactly alike. This section explores some of the themes and special effects a player can employ in customizing a shapechanger to make him unique and different – even among a race of similar beings.

Some are related to the special enhancements and limitations found on pp. 26-35, insofar as they are specific applications of them. Others are more in the line of “color,” without specific game mechanics.

## Curses and Enchantments

Most of the classic were-creatures of myth and the media are victims of curses or enchantments. This is a long tradition dating back to prehistory, best exemplified in the werewolves of Arthurian lore, French medieval myth, and horror movies from the middle of the 20th century.

Such a victim often suffers a complete split personality with an inimical or savage were-form at the worst, or a bestial one at the best. This type of curse is usually imposed as a punishment or an act of revenge, usually by a skilled spellcaster who specializes in such things, or by a supernatural power. The current victim need not have been the offender – a particularly aggrieved party may turn the curse into a hereditary trait afflicting generations of descendants.

On the other hand, a particularly evil person may embrace a truly monstrous curse and revel in it. Seeing it as a tool for sowing terror and chaos, or simply for inflicting revenge on those who he thinks wronged him, such a character may be so in touch with his own bestial nature that he may not suffer a Split Personality when he enters into his were-form. This was the primary view of werewolves in the medieval church.



### “Minor” Curses

Less severe curses are also possible. Far from being fodder for horror stories, these “minor” curses may be imposed to teach a moral or social lesson to the victim; giving the victim a form subject to problems and stresses usually alien to him may teach him empathy for others or simply much-needed etiquette. Often these shapes are no more than simply inconvenient, either due to their triggers, cycles, or time limits, or due to the attributes of the were-form.

Such a character usually has one or more mental disadvantages that encompass the behavior being punished. Odious Personal Habits, Intolerances, Greed, and other “deadly sins” all make good candidates.

Examples of such curses can be found in many medieval tales of Christian saints, as well as in some modern light fiction. Bottom with his ass’s head in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* could be viewed this way, although the conditions on his enchantment were far less onerous than the usual curse.

## What Makes It a Curse?

While the main text discusses curses in the literal sense of the word, a curse need not be a malicious magic. A “curse” can be metaphorical rather than literal – Dr. Jekyll’s Mr. Hyde was born of science, but the impact Hyde had on the doctor’s life certainly qualified him as a curse!

A literal magical curse need not be malicious, either. The Christian apocrypha are filled with stories of curses cast by saints as tools of moral instruction and correction. One example is the werewolves of Ossory, Ireland, who were cursed for their wickedness by St. Natalis and “compelled to take two by two a wolf-shape for seven years, returning to their own form at the end of that time.” While that particular case is almost certainly not suitable for player characters, this kind of shapeshifting curse can be anything from campaign background color to a convenient plot element.

## Breaking a Curse

Implicit in the concept of a curse is the prospect of breaking it. This is rarely a simple prospect – else what would be the value of a curse as revenge or a lesson? For “minor” curses, the break could simply be learning the lesson or behavior intended – which may be just as difficult as finding the rare gila-gila herb in the jungles of the Amazon, depending on the character.

The player and the GM should jointly determine the were-form’s cure. Properly defined, the curse-break could add an entire level of structure to a campaign even if the were never takes a central role in the game, by virtue of the underlying search motif it imposes. For “educational” curses, they are built-in tools and goals for character development.

Several cures from various cultures can be found in the box on pp. 53-54.

## Undead and Shapeshifting

Traditionally, vampires are shapeshifters as well as undead; wolves and bats are the two animals into which they most frequently change. While the *GURPS* standard vampire package already accounts for such abilities, GMs or players may choose to create their own custom variants. In such a case, combining the vampire’s basic abilities with a full were-form or two – or worse, Morph – can result in a subtle and deadly character – or foe.

Other undead-were connections can be found; possibly best known is the undead state of the victims of a werewolf described in the film *An American Werewolf in London*. But many traditions provide a more immediate link.

## The Werewolf-Vampire Connection

In Eastern Europe and other parts of the world, were-creatures and the local variety of vampires are often intimately

# Vulnerabilities

It is usual in both legend and cinema for werewolves and other shapechangers to be invulnerable to all forms of damage – save for silver. But a curable were who is immune to all other forces must be vulnerable to the means or methods of his cure! While this is far from universal in legends and stories across the globe, it does raise the question of the frequencies of appearance for various countermeasures, so that Vulnerabilities (p. CI106) can be properly priced at character creation?

*Silver.* The traditional weakness of werewolves is available at TL1. Although it is a precious metal, it is easily acquired in almost every culture that has metalworking. (TL0 societies often have access to native silver, but seldom shape it into weapons.) It is not, however, omnipresent. Silver is an *Occasional* substance, worth -10 points per level as a Vulnerability.

*Holy or blessed objects.* In myth, this almost always refers to items consecrated to the dominant religion in the region. In such a case it's likely that, as in medieval Europe, almost every town and village has at least one priest and sanctuary of that religion serving its people. Assuming that no complications (disbelief in weres, legal strictures, and so on) cloud the issue, getting or making consecrated items is relatively easy, making them *Common*, worth -15 points per level.

*Alchemical compounds.* Any mixture of ingredients intended to be applied to the were, whether or not it is actually prepared by a real, magically gifted alchemist, falls under this heading. These recipes can vary wildly from legend to legend; the rarest item in the ingredient list sets the availability level of the mixture itself. In folklore and fiction, alchemical counteragents are usually *Rare*, worth -5 points per level.

*Other.* For everything else, this rule of thumb may be helpful:

If you can't walk down the street without running into it, it's *Common*.

If you can walk into a stranger's house or a mall and be pretty sure you'll find it, it's *Occasional*.

If you can only find it by going to a nearby specialty store, or if it costs a lot of money, it's *Rare*.

If you can only get it by mail order from a distant dealer, or it costs vast amounts of money, it's *Very Rare*.

# Knowing Your Own

Opposition that knows what it's facing may develop some explicit method of identification that can't or won't be copied by any kind of shapechanger. This is possible in many worlds, regardless of background or technology. For example, it's possible in virtually any TL6+ setting to give vulnerable personnel regular doses of stable but uncommon isotopes (carbon-13 and nitrogen-15 would be a good bet). Upon their return from field missions, personnel would be quarantined until the isotope ratio could be confirmed by whatever means was at hand, be it mass spectrometry or a multiscanner. Someone *without* the isotopes, or with the isotopes in the wrong quantities, would be examined far more carefully – or maybe even summarily executed.

Magic can provide similar benefits. Use *Ensorcel* from p. G39 to imbue possible targets with a minor spell (possibly a custom one developed for the purpose), using an unlikely but simple spell-break provision to make the process as cheap as possible. Using *Mage Sight* or *Identify Magic*, scan personnel on a regular basis, and examine anyone who has been in the field immediately upon his return. Anyone who is found to be lacking his ensorcelment is a possible morph.

Sufficiently motivated players or GMs can no doubt come up with even more effective methods, regardless of the setting.



# JAGUAR WARRIORS

... and as we cantered up through the marsh we saw the jaguar high among the forked limbs of a taruman tree. It was a beautiful picture – the spotted coat of the big, lithe, formidable cat fairly shone as it snarled defiance . . .

– Theodore Roosevelt,  
*Through the Brazilian Wilderness*

On a remote tropical continent, there is an ancient and savage Bronze Age empire. This land of bloodshed and splendor endlessly contests for power and land against the other empires with which it shares its mountainous and jungled land. Each kingdom has special strengths in this eternal confrontation; this empire's advantage is its Beast Warriors, fearless fighters of great skill, bound by vows and magic to serve their emperor. In doing so they gain a divine power with which to crush their enemies – the ability to change into one of the fierce predators native to their land. This power comes in the form of an animal skin that each wears as a cape (their only garment in battle, except for a weapons harness); with its enchantment and their own training, they may take the shape of that beast in order to destroy their nation's enemies.



United into various brotherhoods by the shapes that they can assume, these warriors live for nothing but combat – and they don't care whether it's with the enemies of the Empire, or with another order of Beast Warriors. They know nothing but violence. Their only pastime is death, their only love war. It will come as no surprise that the nations bordering on the Empire, as well as the many and varied enemies of both the Empire and its priesthood, look upon the Beast Warriors with a superstitious but not unjustified fear.

There are almost as many orders of Warriors as there are predators in the Empire, but first among them are the most powerful of their kind, the two great rival bands: the Jaguar Warriors and the Eagle Warriors. The Coyote Warriors are a distant third in prestige and influence, and almost every other jungle predator native to the Empire has at least a few Warriors

honoring it and drawing upon its strength. With the GM's approval, any of them would be suitable for a Beast Warrior.

All Beast Warriors are at least 125-point characters, heavily specialized in combat skills. They can be used as enemies or as rather one-dimensional player characters. Note that the skill levels listed are bare minima; many Warriors exceed these.

## Jaguar Warrior 168 points

**Attributes:** ST 11 [10]; DX 11 [10]; IQ 10 [0]; HT 11 [10].

**Advantages:** Alertness +2 [10]; Combat Reflexes [15]; Legal Enforcement Powers [10]; Shapeshifting (Werejaguar; Cure/Cursebreak, if Vow broken, requires cooperation, -45%; Requires skin, Awkward, -10%, Breakable and Irreparable (DR 1, HP 10), -30%, Can Be Hit at -2, -20%, and Can Be Stolen by Stealth or Trickery (not usable by others, absorbed in change), -2%; limited to -75%) [74]; Status 2 [10]; Unusual Background (Jaguar Warrior training) [10].

**Disadvantages:** Bloodlust [-10]; Callous [-6]; Selfish [-5]; Uncongenial [-1]; Vow to always serve the Empire and the gods faithfully, and to not misuse beast form [-10].

**Quirks:** Lives for fighting and bloodshed. [-1]

**Skills:** Axe/Mace (P/A) DX+1 [4]-12; Brawling (P/E) DX+2 [4]-13; Performance/Ritual (Beast warrior cult) (M/A) IQ [2]-10; Running (P/H; HT) HT [4]-11; Shield (P/E) DX+1 [2]-12; Spear (P/A) DX+1 [4]-12; Spear Thrower (P/A) DX+1 [4]-12; Spear Throwing (P/A) DX+1 [4]-12; Survival (Jungle) (M/A) IQ+2 [6]-12; Tactics (M/H) IQ [8]-10.\*

\* -2 from Callous.

**Taboo Traits:** Empathy, Pacifism, Savoir-Faire, and most other social skills.

## Jaguar Form 280 points

**Attributes:** Enhanced ST +13 (No Fine Manipulators) [84]; DX +4 [45]; HT +5 [60].

**Advantages:** Alertness +7 [35]; Attractive [5]; Catfall [10]; Combat Reflexes [15]; Double-Jointed [5]; Faz Sense (3-hex range; -20%) [8]; Four Legs [5]; Night Vision [10]; Penetrating Call [5]; Sharp Claws [25]; Sharp Teeth [5]; Silence 3 [15]; Thick Fur [29].

**Disadvantages:** Attentive [-1]; Dull [-1]; Horizontal [-10]; Mute [-25]; No Fine Manipulators [-30]; Reduced Hit Points -1 [-5]; Sleepy (50% of the time) [-10]; Staid [-1]; Stubbornness [-5].

**Skills:** Climbing at DX [2]; Jumping at DX [1]; Stealth at DX+1 [4].

**Customization Notes:** The commonest alternatives to the jaguar form are the eagle and coyote forms. Shapeshifting (Coyote) costs 28 points; Shapeshifting (Eagle) costs 5 points. The Coyote Warrior template costs 122 points, and the Eagle Warrior template costs 99 points.



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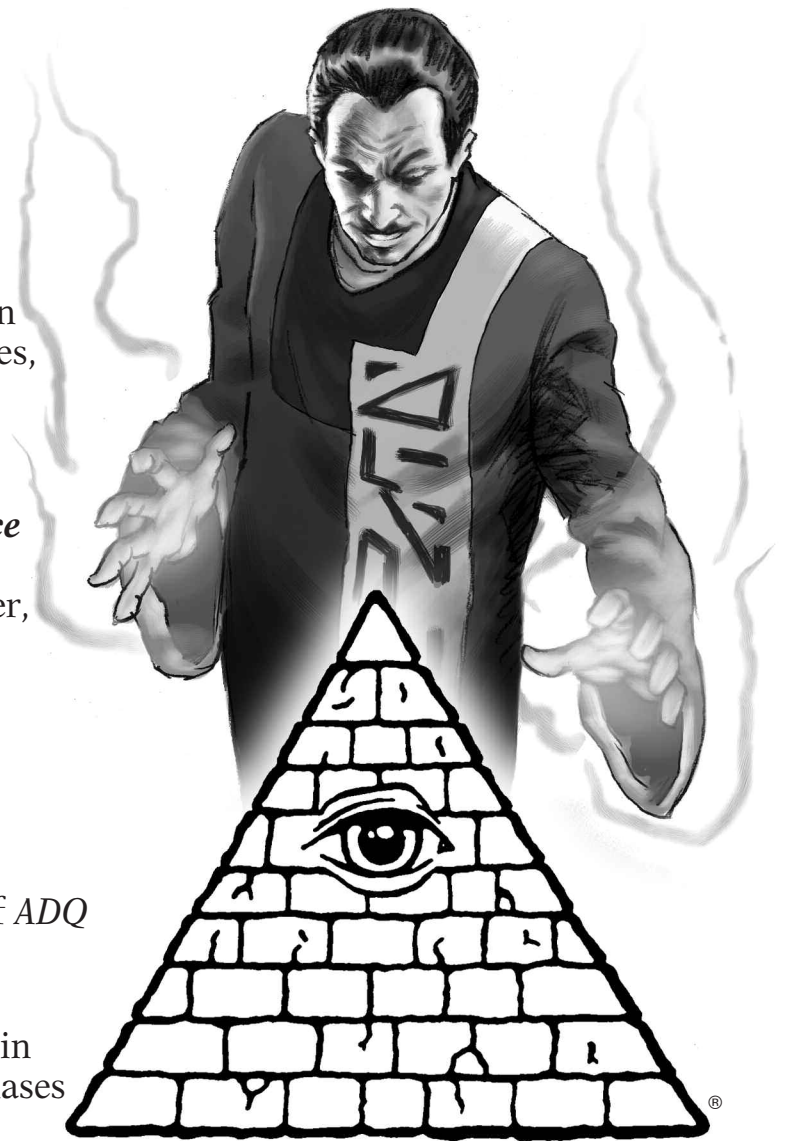


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