

GURPS Fourth Edition

TEMPLATE TOOLKIT™ 1

CHARACTERS



By Sean Punch

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

A TEMPLATE FOR YOUR TEMPLATES

Character templates eliminate a lot of the fuss and headache of character design for new *GURPS* players, and provide even veterans with inspiration that can help them get over writer's block. The catch? Templates shift much of this load onto GMs, who might suffer from headaches and writer's block of their own!

GURPS Template Toolkit 1: Characters comes to the rescue with practical, step-by-step advice on how to create *good* character templates customized to your campaign. After a quick refresher on what templates are and what they're good for, this primer launches into extensive guidelines on designing templates individually and in sets. Topics include niche protection, player choice, point-cost optimization, lenses, and template notation.

But that's not all! Players will *also* find this supplement useful, even in a campaign that won't use templates. Its detailed advice on template design doubles as a guide to designing efficient characters who can fill solid roles.

GURPS Template Toolkit 1: Characters
requires the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*.

By Sean Punch Cover Art by Dean Spencer

Illustrated by Guy Burwell, Paul Daly, Marcio Fiorito, Ray Lunceford, Dan Smith, and Jason Walton



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CONTENTS

| | | | |
|---|----------|---|-----------|
| INTRODUCTION | 3 | Identify Key Traits | 16 |
| Using This Book | 3 | <i>Templates and Player Perceptions</i> | 16 |
| Publication History | 3 | <i>The Jack of All Trades</i> | 17 |
| About the Author | 3 | Distribute the Goodies | 17 |
| 1. WHAT ARE CHARACTER TEMPLATES? | 4 | <i>Cheap Tricks: Copy and Paste</i> | 19 |
| TYPES OF CHARACTER TEMPLATES | 4 | Build Consistently | 20 |
| <i>What About Racial Templates?</i> | 4 | <i>Cheap Tricks: Modular Templates</i> | 21 |
| Occupational Templates | 4 | Describe the Set | 21 |
| Dramatic Templates | 5 | 3. TRICKS OF THE TRADE | 22 |
| Cultural Templates | 5 | PLAYER CHOICE | 22 |
| ARE TEMPLATES REQUIRED? | 5 | Lenses | 25 |
| Optional vs. Mandatory | 5 | <i>Why Use Lenses?</i> | 25 |
| <i>Are Character Templates Rules?</i> | 6 | GIVING TEMPLATES TEETH | 27 |
| Scope | 6 | Hidden Traits | 27 |
| <i>Templates and Player Freedom</i> | 6 | <i>How Hidden?</i> | 28 |
| WHY USE TEMPLATES? | 7 | Template-Optimal Abilities | 29 |
| 2. DESIGNING CHARACTER TEMPLATES | 8 | Character Improvement Options | 32 |
| INDIVIDUAL TEMPLATE DESIGN | 8 | WRITING IT UP | 33 |
| Concept | 8 | Sample Template | 33 |
| Cost | 8 | 4. NICHES | 35 |
| Traits | 9 | MATCHING TRAITS TO CHALLENGES | 35 |
| <i>No Discounts</i> | 9 | MATCHING CHALLENGES TO NICHES | 42 |
| <i>Flexibility</i> | 10 | One Kind of Challenge | 42 |
| <i>Designing NPC Templates</i> | 12 | Several Kinds of Challenges | 42 |
| Finishing Up | 13 | Splitting Up Challenges | 42 |
| <i>Adjusting for Player Experience</i> | 14 | FROM NICHES TO TEMPLATES | 45 |
| PLANNING TEMPLATE SETS | 15 | INDEX | 47 |
| Span the Space | 15 | | |

About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of **GURPS** players. We can be reached by email: info@sjgames.com. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Resources include:

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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.

INTRODUCTION

For a decade starting in the late 1980s, every *GURPS* world-book included a section recommending traits for suitable character concepts, under a heading like “Character Types” or “Typical Characters and Backgrounds.” In 1997, *GURPS Black Ops* went further, offering partly completed character sheets to hasten character design. That marked the first stab at formal character templates, though the setting’s power level resulted in a sprawling presentation. A year later, *GURPS Wizards* rolled out the more concise format that’s still in use today, with lines for attributes, advantages, disadvantages, and skills; the notion of primary, secondary, and background skills; choices in the shape of point pools and picks from lists; and a “Customization Notes” section. With minor refinements that only an editor would care about, that pattern made its way into the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*.

Guidelines for *designing* character templates – another adaptation from *Wizards* – also appear in the *Basic Set*. However, these keep things basic; there’s a significant gap between that simple advice and the template sets that drive such series as *GURPS Action*, *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy*, and *GURPS Monster Hunters*. *GURPS Template Toolkit 1: Characters* steps into this breach, exploring the creation process behind templates like these, including how to identify a campaign’s major character niches and develop coherent *sets* of templates for them. Though the average player might want to skip the more intricate nuts and bolts, this supplement doubles as a handy aid for cooking up character concepts and selecting traits to match.

USING THIS BOOK

GURPS Template Toolkit 1: Characters assumes that you’ve at least *seen* a character template. If you haven’t, then peek ahead at *Sample Template* (pp. 33-34). After that, consider reviewing both what the *Basic Set* has to say (*Character Templates*, pp. B258-260 and pp. B445-449) and Chapter 1 (if only for definitions of terms used in this work). Where to go after that depends on your goals.

Players will find it useful to read Chapter 4 next, as it recommends abilities necessary to do important tasks. Then check

out *Individual Template Design* (pp. 8-15), because much of its advice is equally applicable to *character* design: recommended attribute and skill levels, advice on optimization, and so on. After that, skim *Planning Template Sets* (pp. 15-21 and Chapter 3 for insights into extracting the campaign information packed into templates.

The GM will want to read Chapter 2 to learn how to design basic templates and sets of templates, and then Chapter 3 for advanced tools. Even the GM with no intention of getting fancy might want to cap off Chapter 2 by glancing at *Writing It Up* (pp. 33-34) to get a feel for template presentation. Chapter 4 is about defining niches and their abilities, and isn’t a *continuation* of Chapters 2 and 3, but a *supplement*. Peruse it first, bookmark it as a reference, or simply ignore it – it comes last for a reason.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

This is the first edition of *GURPS Template Toolkit 1: Characters*. It builds on content developed for *GURPS Wizards* and revised in the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*. Though it’s new material, it reiterates many key concepts from those earlier works. Some template fragments used as examples of formatting and presentation may also seem familiar!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean “Dr. Kromm” Punch set out to become a particle physicist in 1985, ended up the *GURPS* Line Editor in 1995, and has engineered rules for almost every *GURPS* product since. He developed, edited, or wrote dozens of *GURPS Third Edition* projects between 1995 and 2002. In 2004, he produced the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition* with David Pulver. Since then, he has created *GURPS Powers* (with Phil Masters), *GURPS Martial Arts* (with Peter Dell’Orto), and the *GURPS Action*, *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy*, and *GURPS Power-Ups* series . . . and the list keeps growing. Sean has been a gamer since 1979. His non-gaming interests include cinema, mixology, and tango. He lives in Montréal, Québec.

One way to make character creation less daunting is to use a “quick-start” technique known as a template.

– *GURPS Wizards*

Cheap Tricks: Modular Templates

Another way to create a set of consistent templates *fast*, though not as quickly as *Copy and Paste* (p. 19), is to create a single “base template” that specifies a pool of points to spend on pre-priced “modules” that plug into it. In effect, this is *Lenses* (pp. 25-27) on steroids.

The base template sets the minimum standards for all PCs in the campaign – attributes, everyman traits, and anything else everyone needs – while the modules offer customization, and can cover almost anything. Common possibilities include:

- **Background.** Modules are “mini-cultural templates” reflecting where the character came from; see *Cultural Templates* (p. 5) for ideas.
- **Education.** Modules represent certifications, licenses, stints of job training, university degree programs, etc.
- **Experience.** Modules stand for previous work assignments, military terms or tours, or similar obligations. They might impart the same qualities as education – but the GM may toss in real-world consequences, good (Contacts, Wealth, and so on) and bad (Enemies, Wounded, etc.).
- **Interests.** Modules cover long-term uses of personal time along such broad lines as “fitness,” “martial arts,” “occultism,” and “technology.”

The base template specifies points to be spent on modules, and each module has a cost equal to the sum its component trait costs. If players can select more than one module, use a menu system similar to that used for multiple templates; e.g., “Spend 100 points on one 10-point background, one 50-point MOS, and two 20-point tours of duty.” Modules may have others as prerequisites;

for instance, “Advanced Cryptography” might require “Basic Cryptography.”

Multiple modules allowed together should interface neatly; e.g., two instances of Bow (A) DX [2] become Bow (A) DX+1 [4], and DX 14 [80] and DX +1 [20] yield DX 15 [100]. If overlapping traits don’t add cleanly, offer a catchall for “leftover” points. This can be general (“Spend leftover points on known skills”) or specific (“Leftover points go into the following skills, in this order”). Optimization (pp. 13-14) gets tricky, because different modules may distribute points among skills that benefit from diverse attributes and advantages. It’s easiest to give the base template good attributes and keep skill expenditures in modules modest.

The payoff? A single template acts as a whole set! There’s no duplication of effort in the form of repeatedly writing out basic infrastructure (like template cost and the “Attributes” line) or shared traits. You need just *one* description and *one* collection of customization notes, which double as your set description (so they should be moderately detailed). You worry about everyman abilities *once* and you optimize *once*. Consequently, all the PCs will be consistent and unlikely to vary in ways that someone might deem unfair.

This method works best for templates for characters for whom a high degree of uniformity *makes sense*, like soldiers or officers of national services. It’s also great for NPCs who don’t vary much – consider a “thug” template with modules like “sword,” “spear,” “big,” and “quick.” However, it’s unsuitable for high-powered PCs who have radically different abilities (e.g., magic, psi, and martial arts).

DESCRIBE THE SET

After you’ve planned your template set(s), designed all the templates, and made any adjustments, it’s advisable to put your thoughts on the whole shebang into words for the players. Doing so fills a purpose similar to *Finalize the Description* (p. 15) – but for *all* the templates, not just one. Given the number of “moving parts” in a template set, it’s best to do this last.

At a minimum, summarize why you’re offering templates and what the underlying campaign assumptions are – things like power level, disadvantage limit, and available abilities. Some other important points to touch on:

- State whether templates are optional or mandatory (*Optional vs. Mandatory*, pp. 5-6). If they’re optional aside from some special cases, mention the exceptions.
- If there are several template sets, then group occupational (pp. 4-5), dramatic (p. 5), and cultural (p. 5) templates, and label each set accordingly.
- If players may choose more than one template – and especially if they *must* – spell out how many choices are allowed off what “menus,” and what the total budget is. For further thoughts, see *Pricing Prescriptive Templates* (p. 9) and *Multiple Sets* (p. 15).
- Point out any templates that are exceptions to your system, like *The Jack of All Trades* (p. 17).

● List everyman traits (p. 17) somewhere so that players buying templates that offer ability choices don’t overlook them, while those creating PCs freeform know what you consider “standard.”

● Indicate whether the same templates will be used for NPCs. If only *some* will, note which ones. (For a discussion of why this matters, see *Templates and Player Perceptions*, p. 16.)

This doesn’t have to fill pages! Using symbols can reduce word count even further. For example:

This campaign is about a secret UN antiterrorist group with agents from every major nation. Since Cédéric and Letta are new players, and I want everybody to meet agency standards, I’m using templates. Everybody gets to pick a template from the “Specialties” menu; most are worth 200 points, but freelance ones are worth 250 points and marked *. People who aren’t freelancers should also pick a 50-pointer from the “National Service” menu. Disadvantage limit is -50 points, including quirks, and these templates use up -30 points, so you can take -20 more points for customization. Most NPCs won’t be as good as you, except in the Specialties marked †. If you really want to make your own PC, we can talk – the campaign is 250 points with -50 in disadvantages, you need all of the skills on the “Minimum Training” list at 12+, and no attribute should be below 11.

Hidden traits can help explain why templates are mandatory (“In this campaign, all PCs are special in some way”) or prescriptive (“You were born, chosen, or transformed to be this one thing”). Not every template in the campaign has to cite the *same* reasons, though! For instance, *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy* uses such thinking extensively, but its barbarians, scouts, and thieves are shaped by being born into tough societies that teach important early lessons; bards and wizards have some doors opened and others closed by dint of innate magical talents; clerics, druids, and holy warriors are chosen by deities to bear gifts unavailable to other mortals; knights and swashbucklers are archetypes (“born leader” and “dashing hero,” respectively); and martial artists are mystics enlightened in monasteries.

Zero-Cost Unusual Backgrounds

The most common kind of hidden trait originates from a campaign decision that only characters built on particular templates may acquire certain capabilities. In effect, those gifts call for an Unusual Background (p. B96) that costs 0 points, and this is an implicit part of templates that feature those abilities. Such a situation might have a game-world explanation (“Everybody knows that only one-eyed Northerners have The Sight!”) or be in the name of *Niche Protection* (pp. 18-19) – although these are often one and the same in a good story.

Players who *don't* select relevant templates can't simply declare, “Since the Unusual Background costs nothing, I'll just write it down and buy the associated traits anyway.” That's no more valid than someone playing a human PC noting “Feature: Breathes 95% carbon dioxide, 3% nitrogen, 2% argon [0]” and expecting it to be true. The point cost isn't the issue . . . such an Unusual Background is part and parcel of a character template, exactly as a zero-cost racial feature is inherent to a racial template. It isn't available piecemeal.

Overall, zero-cost Unusual Backgrounds are fairest in campaigns that use mandatory templates, each guaranteeing access to interesting abilities. Exclusivity isn't necessary; lists can overlap from template to template. Equality isn't a big

deal, either – that is, not all templates need to offer the same number or point value of “reserved” traits – because everything still *costs what it costs*, meaning that characters with access to fewer special options but the same number of starting points can simply spend more on common-but-valuable gifts such as above-average DX and IQ. However, it better serves the cause of *fun* if every PC can do one or two things that others cannot.

If character templates are mandatory but only *some* of the set enjoys access to cool stuff, if there are special-case templates (p. 6) for certain abilities, or if templates are entirely optional, then it becomes important to consider “dramatic balance” – which is about time in the spotlight, not “game balance” or point costs. Several methods might prove useful here, individually or concurrently:

- Give *other* templates greater leeway on general campaign limits. For instance, if the “pilot” template lacks the cybernetics of the “cyborg,” the psionic powers of the “esper,” and the vast mental training of the “human computer,” then it would be fair to make him a paragon of sharp eyes and reflexes, able to buy up to +3.00 to Basic Speed instead of the usual limit of +2.00, and even DX and Per 25 instead of the human norm of 20 . . . or maybe he can acquire new Piloting specialties out of the blue whenever he has enough points, for entirely dramatic reasons (“He's the pilot – *of course* he can fly that!”). Such approaches work best when templates are mandatory for all.

- Give templates with zero-cost Unusual Backgrounds matching implied taboo traits (below) that forbid useful capabilities. This means that such people enjoy access to some abilities at the cost of other doors being shut. The most common example is a simple inversion of the previous approach: subject individuals who have special gifts to stricter limits than the campaign norm. That mundane “pilot” might be limited to DX and Per 20 – but perhaps the more remarkable character types can have only DX and Per 15. This kind of approach works well when freeform character creation is allowed but special-case templates are the only route to extraordinary abilities.

- Give templates that have zero-cost Unusual Backgrounds mandatory disadvantages associated with their abilities. For instance, if only the “cleric” template can have Power Investiture, buy True Faith, or cast theurgic spells, then make sure that clerics *also* have a set of restrictive self-imposed mental disadvantages (p. B121) such as Disciplines of Faith, Honesty, and Vows. When using *GURPS Powers*, required disadvantages might even form the basis for a power modifier that suspends the wielder's powers if he strays from a moral code, exercise regimen, etc. This approach doesn't require *anybody* to use a template; fiction is full of special gifts with downsides. However, it's useful to concoct templates for such people to illustrate the campaign's ground rules for their capabilities.

Implied Taboo Traits

The flipside of zero-cost Unusual Backgrounds is hidden traits that *forbid* particular choices to characters built on some templates. Like members of many nonhuman races, such people are bound to attribute or secondary characteristic ranges that are stricter than the campaign norms, or cannot buy specific advantages, disadvantages, or skills. There are two basic ways to handle these “taboo traits”:

How Hidden?

In a campaign with prescriptive, mandatory templates, hidden traits (pp. 27-29) can be left truly implicit, because each player *must* pick a template that specifies *everything* available. By virtue of appearing on the template, special abilities are allowed without any need to state that they're due to a built-in zero-cost Unusual Background. Similarly, anything not on the template is “taboo” by dint of omission, the template's baseline attributes plus modifiers included with its advantages and disadvantages handle attribute minima and maxima, and there's no requirement to spell out such things.

In any other campaign, be more explicit. Making “Available Special Abilities” and “Taboo Traits” lists for each template is work, but the players will appreciate the effort and honesty. To save time, preface the template set with a statement that every template's “taboo traits” include all special abilities listed for another template but not for it, define categories such as “military skills” and “magical abilities” campaign-wide for quick reference, and keep each template's lists short by picking only those gifts or constraints that the concept truly requires.

In all cases, it's important to pick only the traits that suit the campaign's genre and TL.

Animals

Beasts come up in most adventure genres, whether this means a cowboy or knight's horse, the fantasy druid's pets, guard dogs, or wild animals encountered as monsters or the subjects of study. In some campaigns, dealing with them is a niche in itself.

Advantages: Allies, in the form of highly capable pets; Animal Empathy; and Animal Friend.

Disadvantages: Any self-imposed mental disadvantage (p. B121) tied to animal welfare.

Skills: Animal Handling; Disguise (Animals); Falconry; Mimicry (Animal Sounds or Bird Calls); Mount, when the PC is a beast; Naturalist; Packing; Riding; Teamster; and Veterinary. At higher TLs, add Biology (Zoology), an IQ/H optional specialty, and Paleontology (Paleozoology).

Combat

Almost every adventurer needs abilities useful in a fight, because battles take a while to game out and an incompetent PC means a bored player. However, combat challenges *also* define niches. The difference is that characters who fill pure combat niches require higher skill levels and more supporting attributes and advantages than their associates.

Attributes and Secondary Characteristics: ST; DX; HT; HP; Basic Speed; and Basic Move.

Advantages: Ambidexterity; Combat Reflexes; Enhanced Defenses*; Extra Attack*; Fit; Gunslinger*; Hard to Kill; Hard to Subdue; High Pain Threshold; Peripheral Vision; Rapid Healing; Trained by a Master*; and Weapon Master*. Traits with an asterisk (*) may be too cinematic for some campaigns.

Disadvantages: Berserk, which brings both benefits and risks; Bloodlust, especially for assassins; Callous, ditto; and Sense of Duty, to one's own side or some great cause worth fighting for.

Skills: All combat/weapon skills! Countless niches encompass combat tasks, so pick matching skills. For example, an assassin might prefer Fast-Draw, Garrote, Guns (Pistol), Knife, and other skills for concealable weapons; a sniper needs Guns (Rifle); and a space marine is likely to know Battlesuit. Common supporting skills are Armoury, Connoisseur (Weapons), and Tactics; Animal Handling and Riding, for cavalrymen; and Savoir-Faire (Dojo), and possibly cinematic martial-arts skills, for martial artists.

Communications

Handling an adventuring group's communications calls for a clear-voiced language expert. Intercepting enemy messages demands a good ear, too. At TL6+, add technical proficiency to all this. If the PCs aren't prepared for such challenges, the adventure may grind to a halt the first time they encounter a code or a foreign tongue.

Attributes and Secondary Characteristics: IQ and Per.

Advantages and Perks: Acute Hearing; Cultural Familiarity; Language Talent; Languages; Penetrating Voice; and Voice.

Disadvantages: Xenophilia.

Skills: Computer Operation; Cryptography; Electronics Operation (Comm, EW, Media, or Surveillance); Electronics

Repair (ditto); Gesture; Heraldry, because *visual* codes are communications, too; Linguistics; Lip Reading; Mimicry (Speech); Public Speaking; Savoir-Faire, in settings with strict social protocols surrounding messages; Typing; and Writing.

When you are genuinely interested in one thing, it will always lead to something else.

– Eleanor Roosevelt

Crafting

Adventurers often face difficulties posed by broken or missing gear, or otherwise find themselves making hasty material preparations. Entire stories have been written about such things: raising the barn before winter, building a plane from the crash wreckage, etc. If adventures will involve such elements, then at least one niche should be up to the challenge. In low-key "slice of life" campaigns, *each* niche might have a trademark craft.

Advantages: Artificer; Gifted Artist; and High Manual Dexterity.

Disadvantages: Workaholic.

Skills: Armoury; Artist, especially Interior Decorating, Pottery, and Woodworking; Carpentry; Electrician; Electronics Repair; Jeweler; Leatherworking; Machinist; Masonry; Mechanic; Scrounging; Sewing; and Smith. If the campaign features relevant Professional Skills such as Clothmaker, Distiller, Glassblower, and Tanner, add those. Engineer should be an option for very talented individuals.

Deceit

Many campaigns feature criminal or espionage activities. In those that do, some niche should handle the art of bypassing security not through force, stealth, or technology, but by pretending to be somebody else.

Attributes: IQ is *crucial* to impersonators (see p. B174).

Advantages and Perks: Cultural Adaptability*; Honest Face; Social Chameleon*; Voice; and Zeroed. Traits with an asterisk (*) may be too cinematic for some campaigns. People with *established* alter egos might have Alternate Identity.

Disadvantages: Compulsive Lying; Enemies; Secret; and Trickster.

Skills: Acting; Disguise; Fast-Talk; Forgery, if the deceiver prepares his own fake ID; Makeup; Mimicry (Speech); and Psychology. Savoir-Faire and Streetwise are useful for passing oneself off as a "generic" member of a particular social class.

Detective Work

It's the rare adventure that *doesn't* involve tracking footprints, questioning captives, searching bodies, tossing rooms, and so on. Most plots have at least one place where the PCs – be they principled cops, gritty bounty-hunters, or greedy dungeon-raiders – must follow a trail of clues.

INDEX

Accessibility limitation, 30.
Advantages, *challenge suggestions*, 36-42; *choices*, 22-23; *limits*, 7; *modifiers*, 30; *niche suggestions*, 43-45; *required*, 10-11; *template-optimal*, 29-30; *see also Traits*.
Adventures, *matching traits to challenges*, 35-42; *perceptions and*, 16; *see also Challenges*.
Attributes, *challenge suggestions*, 36-42; *choices*, 22; *improvement choices*, 23; *levels*, 9; *reduction choices*, 23; *required*, 9-10; *see also Traits*.
Boring templates, 19, 20.

*Once we accept
our limits, we go
beyond them.*
— Albert Einstein

Challenges, *Animals*, 36, 43; *categories*, 35-42; *Combat*, 36, 43; *combinations*, 43; *Communications*, 36, 43; *Crafting*, 36, 43; *Deceit*, 36, 43; *Detective Work*, 36-37, 43; *Esoterica*, 37, 44; *Establishment*, 37; *Exploration*, 37, 43; *Inventing*, 37-38, 44; *kinds of*, 42; *matching to niches*, 42-45; *matching traits to*, 35-42; *Medicine*, 38, 44; *Military*, 38, 44; *Mobility*, 38, 44; *Money*, 38-39, 44; *Nautical*, 39, 44; *Outdoors*, 39, 44; *Performing*, 39, 44; *Plants*, 39, 44; *Research*, 39-40, 44; *Sabotage*, 40, 44; *Science*, 40, 44; *Security*, 40, 44; *Sneaking*, 40; *Social Engineering*, 40-41, 44; *Social Sciences*, 41, 44; *Space*, 41, 45; *splitting up*, 42-45; *Stealing*, 41, 45; *Streets*, 41, 45; *Technical Means*, 41, 45; *Transportation*, 42, 45; *see also Adventures*.
Characters, *boring*, 19, 20; *choices for*, 6, 10, 22-27; *improvement*, 15, 32-33; *reasons to use templates*, 7; *recommending concepts*, 7; *requiring templates*, 5, 6; *template types*, 4-5; *types of concepts*, 4-5; *see also Traits, specific types of traits*.
Cheap tricks, 19, 21.
Commando team example, 45-46.
Cosmic enhancement, 30.
Cultural templates, defined, 5; *see also Design*.

Customization notes, *design and*, 14-15; *format*, 33.
Design, *concept*, 8; *consistency in*, 20-21; *copy and paste*, 19; *cost*, 8, 20, 33; *customization notes*, 14-15, 20; *description*, 8, 15, 20, 21, 33; *examples*, 33-34, 45-46; *flexibility*, 6, 10, 20, 22-27; *individual templates*, 8-15; *matching expertise to templates*, 18; *math checking*, 14, 20; *modular templates*, 21; *NPCs*, 12; *optimization*, 13-14, 20; *player experience and*, 14, 20; *scope*, 6; *template format*, 33; *“three Ss,”* 17-18; *see also Lenses, Niches, Sets, Traits*.
Disadvantages, *challenge suggestions*, 35-42; *choices*, 23; *limit*, 7, 11, 23; *required*, 11; *see also Traits*.
Dramatic templates, defined, 5; *see also Design*.
Everyman traits, 17, 19-20; *see also Traits*.
Generalists, template for, 17.
GURPS, 3-5, 7, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 23, 29, 32, 33; **Action**, 3, 7, 9, 16, 26, 29-31; **Banestorm**, 26; **Basic Set**, 3, 7, 10, 16, 22, 29, 33, 35; **Black Ops**, 3; **Dungeon Fantasy**, 3, 7, 16, 20, 27-30, 33; **Dungeon Fantasy 15: The Henchmen**, 26; **Dungeon Fantasy 3: The Next Level**, 27; **Fantasy**, 16; **Gun Fu**, 16; **Horror**, 9, 20; **Magic**, 7; **Martial Arts**, 7, 13, 16, 19; **Monster Hunters**, 3, 7, 9, 16, 29, 31; **Power-Ups 1: Imbuements**, 24; **Power-Ups 2: Perks**, 30, 31; **Power-Ups 3: Talents**, 10, 29, 30; **Power-Ups 4: Enhancements**, 30; **Power-Ups 5: Impulse Buys**, 31; **Powers**, 7, 28, 30, 31; **Psionic Powers**, 24; **Social Engineering**, 16; **Tactical Shooting**, 16, 19; **Thaumatology: Magical Styles**, 13, 19; **Wizards**, 3.
Higher Purpose advantage, 29.
Jack of all trades, template for, 17.
Lenses, *add-on*, 26-27; *character improvement and*, 32; *designing*, 25-27; *example*, 25; *exclusive*, 27; *format*, 33; *general*, 26; *reasons to use*, 25; *sets and*, 25-26; *stackable*, 27; *template-specific*, 25; *variant*, 26; *see also Design*.
Limited templates, *cost of*, 9; *defined*, 6; *see also Design*.
Mandatory templates, defined, 6, 28; *see also Design*.
Modifiers, 30.
Niches, *design overview*, 35; *determining*, 35-42; *example team*, 45-46; *generalist*, 17; *matching challenges to*, 42-43; *protecting*, 7, 18-19.
NPC templates, 12.
Occupational templates, defined, 4-5; *see also Design*.
Optional templates, defined, 5; *see also Design*.
Pact limitation, 30.
Perks, 13, 24, 30; *challenge suggestions*, 36-41; *see also Traits*.
Players, *freedom*, 6, 10, 22-27; *mixed choices*, 24-25; *perceptions*, 16.
Power level, 7, 33.
Power-ups, 32; *format*, 33.
Powers, 13, 31-32; *see also Advantages, Traits*.
Prescriptive templates, *cost of*, 9; *defined*, 6; *see also Design*.
Secondary characteristics, *challenge suggestions*, 36-40; *choices*, 22; *reduction choices*, 23; *required*, 10; *see also Traits*.
Sets, *boring templates in*, 19; *character improvement*, 15; *consistency in*, 20-21; *defined*, 15; *defining roles and backgrounds*, 15; *description*, 21; *designing*, 15-21; *distributing traits*, 17-20; *example*, 45-46; *generalists in*, 17; *key traits*, 16-17; *lenses for*, 25-26; *multiple*, 15; *see also Design, Niches*.
Skills, *challenge suggestions*, 36-42; *choices*, 24; *format*, 13; *levels*, 12-13; *niche suggestions*, 43-45; *required*, 11-13; *template tiers*, 13; *format*, 33; *see also Traits, Wildcard Skills*.
Soldier template, 33-34.
Special abilities, 7, 13, 24, 31-32; *see also Advantages, Skills, Traits*.
Special-case templates, defined, 6; *see also Design*.
Spells, 13, 24; *combined challenges*, 43; *skill levels*, 12.
Talents, 10, 29-30; *power*, 31; *see also Advantages, Traits*.
Techniques, 13, 24; *see also Traits*.
“Three Ss,” 17-18.
Traits, *challenge suggestions*, 35-42; *choices*, 6, 10, 22-27; *distributing*, 7, 17-20; *everyman*, 17, 19-20; *fair distribution*, 19; *format*, 33; *hidden*, 27-29; *implied taboo*, 28-29; *improvement*, 32-33; *key*, 16-17; *limits*, 7; *matching to templates*, 18; *mixed choices*, 24-25; *niches and*, 18, 43-45; *no discounts*, 9; *overlap of*, 18; *perceptions of possible*, 16; *permitted*, 7; *required*, 7, 9-13, 20; *template-optimal*, 29-32; *see also specific types of traits*.
Unusual Background advantage, zero-cost, 28.
Wildcard skills, 13, 24, 30-31; *format*, 33; *see also Skills, Traits*.

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