GURPS® Fourth Edition
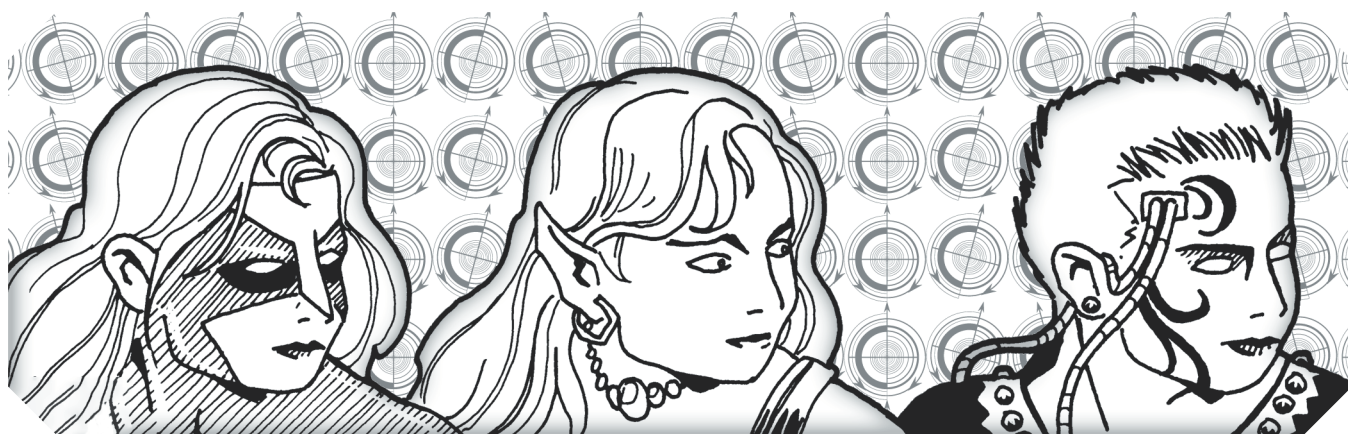
HOW TO BE A *GURPS* GM™
MANAGING EXPECTATIONS™

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STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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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

INTRODUCTION

How to Be a GURPS GM offers a lot of advice on kicking off and running a **GURPS** game. Its tips are eminently practical because that's what a GM needs when diving into a new (perhaps their *first*) RPG. Theory, while often fun, is a rabbit hole – dive down *there* and the game might never start!

Eventually, though, you'll want more than a "starter adventure" or "starter campaign." Even if you follow all the pointers, and all the rules make sense to everyone, you'll have moments where it doesn't feel like you're all on the same page. That has to do less with practical matters than with the intangible world of *expectations:* Not everybody brought the same hopes and desires to the table.

Unless you intend to shuffle gamers and groups – always stressful, rarely practical – you'll want to run a game that works better for the people you have. Doing so involves managing their expectations. When you hit *that* point, it's time to take the plunge into theory.

How to Be a GURPS GM: Managing Expectations takes an honest look at several ways that assumptions can get out of synch between GMs, players, and game systems. For many more such topics, go online wherever gamers discuss games (starting with SJ Games' **forums.sjgames. com** and the Discord server run by ***How to Be a GURPS GM*** author Warren Wilson at **themook.net/gamegeekery/ gurps-discord-server**) and start asking questions. This supplement aims merely to plant some seeds.

As befits the ***How to Be a GURPS GM*** series, these thoughts are aimed at GMs. But while the GM is best-placed to meet expectations at the gaming table, thoughtful players will reciprocate and help realize *the GM's* vision of the campaign.

Thus, everything here could be seen as "How to Be a **GURPS** Player," too.

Finally, although "**GURPS**" shows up over and over again in his supplement, almost all of the advice is system-neutral. The *examples* come from **GURPS,** but the *ideas* hold no matter your preferred RPG. That's the beauty of theory!

REQUIRED BOOKS

How to Be a GURPS GM: Managing Expectations doesn't *require* anything – but it refers to traits and rules in the **GURPS Basic Set,** so that's handy if you learn best from examples. Likewise, although you don't *need* ***How to Be a GURPS GM,*** this work tacitly assumes you've mastered its ideas, meaning it might prove helpful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean Punch set out to become a particle physicist in 1985 and ended up as **GURPS** Line Editor in 1995. In that capacity, he has written, edited, or contributed to hundreds of **GURPS** releases, revised the game into its fourth edition (2004), and been a regular contributor to *Pyramid* magazine. From 2008, he has served as lead creator of the **GURPS Action** and **GURPS Dungeon Fantasy** series; work on the latter led to his design of the **Dungeon Fantasy Roleplaying Game,** released in 2017. Sean has been a gamer since 1979, but devotes most of his spare time to Argentine tango. He lives in Montréal, Québec with *son amour,* Geneviève.

AVOID EDITION WARS

The core message of *Read Rules, Not Titles* (pp. 4-6) and *You Get What You Pay For* (pp. 6-9) is that many expectations are built on the precise wording of the rules. Thus, it's vital that everyone be using the *same* rules! This matters for all but the newest of RPGs – but it's *especially* germane to **GURPS**.

GURPS has been around since 1986 and is in its Fourth Edition. It has a vast library: some 500 to 1,000 titles, depending on how you count. That depends on how you count in part because – between and sometimes *within* editions of the core rules – new editions of individual supplements have replaced older ones. Even new printings can incorporate changes like errata fixes and author re-thinks, and these aren't always minor (printing number is the smallest number in the little sequence of numbers near the bottom righthand corner of the title page). And specialized supplements often replace general rules; e.g., there's the three pages of *Improvement Through Study* (pp. B292-294) and then there's the *forty*-three pages of **GURPS Social Engineering: Back to School.**

Some gamers have been playing **GURPS** through much or all of that. If that describes you or someone in your group, it's crucial to establish what's "official" in your game. For the core rules, it's usually best to use Fourth Edition simply because it has the most players and is the only edition officially supported and receiving new content. If not, make sure everybody knows that – and be aware that Third Edition Revised differs enough from Third Edition that there are really "four and a half" editions.

After that, establish editions and printings for any supplements you're using. "The newest version of everything!" is easiest, but that's also the most expensive approach. There's no crime in going with the latest version *the group has access to.* Similarly, if a specialized supplement changes key rules of importance to the campaign, decide whether you're implementing the changes.

It's best to do this in advance for rules tied to characters, because creating a character, only to learn you can't do what you thought you could do, is a gross breakdown of expectations! But doing this for *every possible rule* means you'll never get to play, which is an even bigger letdown. It's expedient to go with whatever is in the materials you have to hand – and if someone pulls out another version, and you like it better, adopt that moving forward. If you mix and match this way, remember to *write down* decisions to avoid later arguments and save the sanity of new players.

Who decides what versions to use? Some groups vote, but it's customary for the GM to have a veto – or at least the power to break ties. That goes beyond traditional to *fair* if the GM is expected to buy the game materials. On the other hand, a policy like "If you want to use the latest rule, buy the supplement and bring it to the table!" can lead to a larger "group library" that's more up to date overall.

are just the tip of the iceberg! As already mentioned, super-speedsters also require complex sets of traits. Groups of advantages linked by origin and "flavor" of effect like this are *powers,* and the subject of **GURPS Powers.** That book provides many worked examples, as do its supplements and several others, like **GURPS Psionic Powers, GURPS Supers, GURPS Thaumatology: Chinese Elemental Powers,** and **GURPS Thaumatology: Sorcery.**

Styles. An entire body of training viewed as a "skill" in real life or taught as a unified whole in some setting might be deemed a whole *collection* of traits in **GURPS.** The best examples are fighting styles; if you know judo or karate, you need more than just Judo or Karate skill, and **GURPS Martial Arts** (and its supplements) list exactly what's involved. The GM can use that approach to create other sorts of styles, as **GURPS Thaumatology: Magical Styles** does for wizards. These could be extended to anything that's learned but not quite a character template, like pilot's licenses and business certifications – anywhere multiple skills that work as one are learned together.

Talents. These versatile advantages, described briefly on pp. B89-91 and at length in **GURPS Power-Ups 3: Talents,** increase your ability with groups of related skills. They don't provide the skills, nor traits frequently associated with those skills (that's what character templates are for), but they *do* serve as one-stop lists of skills tied to common character concepts. For instance, what some games might call an "Artificer" ability isn't a skill in **GURPS** but *is* a Talent; even if the GM hasn't specified a style or template for artificers, you can find the relevant skills listed under that Talent. Talents are thus handy checklists, whether or not you buy them.

Wildcard skills. These are described as optional on p. B175, and in most campaigns they will be. In those where they're used, they cover much of what a character template, style, or Talent does with a single trait. In others, the listed skills *still* serve as checklists – the GM might not permit Science!, but anyone playing a scientist could review the skills listed for Science! to make sure everything is covered. For lots of wildcards, see **GURPS Power-Ups 7: Wildcard Skills.**

While the above discussion is mostly in terms of character abilities, it also applies to rules used in play: If a rule *doesn't* say something, don't read the rule as if it does!

For instance, *The Rule of 16* (p. B349) doesn't mention Influence rolls (p. B359) or Feints (p. B365), so obviously it doesn't affect those Contests. *Extra Effort in Combat* (p. B357) says nothing about Will rolls or skill rolls like standard extra effort, so it clearly doesn't use those things. The Attack maneuver (p. B365) notes "*Active Defense:* Any.", so that's what it does – it doesn't matter that in some other game, attacking and defending are exclusive.

Powers. So, you're a telepath . . . you'll have some mix of Mind Control, Mind Probe, Mind Reading, Mind Shield, Possession, Telesend, and several less-obvious advantages, as p. B257 notes. Or a psychokinetic – who might lift objects with Telekinesis, fly using Flight, block bullets with Damage Resistance, and so on. But psionics (pp. B254-257)

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*My sincere hope is that this book removes some of the misperceptions of **GURPS.***
*– **How to Be a GURPS GM***