



# GURPS Third Edition (Revised)

Mon, 12/03/2012 - 22:11 ? rpgrev



Of all the RPG systems I have had the pleasure to play, GURPS third edition must certainly rank as one in the top five which I have played the most over the decades. It still provides a default when a variety of setting choices even to this day. So whilst I could review GURPS first, second, or fourth editions (all of which I have also played), it is GURPS 3rd edition, and specifically third edition (revised) which is being reviewed here. One could accuse me of cherry-picking a particular edition that I have a preference towards, and to a certain extent I accept that charge.

With that caveat stated, GURPS is a game with high aims. It seeks to be, as the name suggests a generic (i.e., modular) set of rules, that is universal according genre, that emphasises roleplaying integrated into the game system itself, and provides a consistent system throughout. With claimed influences from Champions (certainly true), Empire of the Petal Throne (er, no), and Tunnels & Trolls for its appeal to solitaire gamers (some justification), GURPS is most heavily influenced by Steve Jackson's earlier game, The Fantasy Trip. Those familiar with both GURPS and The Fantasy Trip will very much see the lineage in core design elements.

## The Physical Product

The revised rulebook comes in an attractive hardback which is very well-bound and stitched. The cover art by Jeff Koke (also responsible for the interior layout) is a subtle presentation of fantasy-medieval and high-tech sf scenery. The interior art dominated by the sharp line drawings by Dan Smith has its own evocative flavour and is presented appropriately to context. There is a good three pages for the table of contents, a two page glossary, and a five page index. The internal text is densely packed into two columns of serif text, typically a single column of game material and a thinner column of sidebar information. Each page is clearly marked with page number and chapter. The writing style is clear but informal with a propensity towards essentially *random* use of italics.

## Character Generation

Character generation is based around a point-buy system, with expenditure on attributes (Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence, and Health) with a default level of 10 and a typical human range of around 8 to 12. Player-characters tend to be "heroic" level characters with significantly more character points than an average person. From the characteristics there is a notable advantage in purchasing higher levels of Dexterity and Intelligence as these are the attributes which most skills default from. In addition to the core attributes, characters also come with "Advantages, Disadvantages and Quirks", by now a very well established model which integrates numerous social, personal, and physical modifications to the character in an extremely clear manner that is very well integrated into the game system. There are a couple of moments of design confusion (for example the relative cheapness of Musical Ability, the power of Eidetic Memory).

Skill levels are determined by the expenditure of character points cross-referenced by the difficulty of the skill (easy, average, hard - and for mental skills - very hard), and the type of skill (mental or physical). Increases in physical skills become fairly difficult at a certain level compared to mental skills, a realistic albeit slightly more complex feature. In contrast, the use of half-point skills is a very minor design flaw. Overall however the skill selection is very strong; around two hundred skills with further specialisations, tech-level requirements, prerequisites, and defaults.

There is a fairly minimal equipment list (in the Charts and Tables), mainly orientated towards the adventuring profession, combined with rules on encumbrance, which are again based on real-world abstractions (i.e., lose benefits

of zero encumbrance quickly, have a relatively high level of potential encumbrance). This chapter also includes a basic damage chart (distinguishing between "swinging" damage and "thrusting" damage). This follows with the character development rules, at this stage mainly based on training etc., with a general default of 1 character point per 200 hours. One very controversial component is the double cost for improving attributes and the issue relating to advantages and disadvantages gained in play. Decline in attributes due to age is also included in this chapter.

## **Resolution Methods**

The resolution methods used in GURPS are all based around a 3d6 roll. However, contrary to claims of being consistent system there are multiple resolution methods and multiple methods of effect determination. For many actions, no success roll is needed at all; these are generally based on a direct association with a particular attribute, and again there is excellent attention to reaching "playable realism". This is mainly applied to physical feats such as running, jumping, climbing, lifting and moving things, throwing, digging, and swimming.

In contrast most skill and success rolls (e.g., sense rolls, will checks) are based on a 3d6 roll-under method. Whilst many like the bell-curve for aesthetic reasons, it really should be used for determining a distribution of results, not checks. As a checking method the curve wrecks havoc with modifiers. The result of skills checks, with the exception on critical results, are based on a binary succeed/fail, except with contests of skills where the degree of success is important. For combat resolution however a success also requires an additional damage roll to determine effect. Whereas for Reputation and Reaction checks a 3d6 roll high method is used, with success and the degree of success embodied in the single die-roll. Finally, there is the decidedly unrealistic Fright Check table, based on will rolls and an additional 3d6 "damage" roll added to degree of failure to determine a specific result.

## **Combat and Injury**

The combat system is the most modular system in the rules and one cannot help but be impressed by how much was packed in the thirty or so pages of text that make up the basic and advanced combat systems. Turn sequence is either based on a single d6 initiative, or more realistically (and just as easy in practise) according to Move values. Combat rounds are an extraordinary 1-second in duration, allowing for a variety of maneuvers which are, unsurprisingly, rather well based on turns on what the action would actually take in seconds. One of the nice components in the system is the choice of maneuver has a real effect on the results of the conflict with a wide-range of options from the highly defensive to a devil-may-care assault, or attempts to be very tricky (in an abstract way). In the advanced combat system these maneuvers are portrayed in a hex-grid with attention to facing issues.

As mentioned the core skill test is 3d6 roll-under with, of course, various modifiers. This is, however, a contested roll with the opponent being able to take an active defense (dodge, block with shield, parry) added with a passive defense from the reflective quality of armour. This does slow the game down significantly, and perhaps would have been better if the defenses were simply declared by the opponent, making them a modifier to the attacker's die roll (for example). Added to this is the need for hit location rolls in advanced combat and, of course, damage rolls, with the additional addition of realism being the variation in damage that occurs according to the weapon type. For example, thrusting weapons that impale do additional damage after they penetrate armour (damage minus defensive resistance) compared to slashing or crushing weapon.

Ranged weapons make use of a combined size, speed, and range table to calculate negative modifiers. On the positive side, ranged weapons have an accuracy bonus, acquired after a turn of aiming. There is a rather crunchy rule of snap shots, which applies an additional -4 if the modified chance to hit is less than the snap-shot number. As a realistic game, GURPS has appropriate rates of fire, range, burst effects, and damage values for modern weapons which typically means PCs panic if someone pulls out a gun - as it should be. Also on the realism stakes, is the rapid reduction in damage from concussion grenades, and the deadliness of fragmentation grenades.

After receiving various wounds, reference to the injuries chapter explains in some detail their effects. At a low level of hit points (derived directly from Health), a character's Move is halved. At 0 or less hit points a check is made against

basic Health each turn to ensure consciousness. At negative Health, the check is made against death, and then for every -5 Health thereafter to -5x Health, which is automatic failure. Every time a character receives a wound, their IQ and DX are reduced by the same value as the injury for the next turn, reducing the effectiveness of most skill rolls, including the ability to attack. Any blow to the brain may also cause unconsciousness, although this is (unrealistically) regardless of hit points. Characters are stunned if they receive more than half their HT in a single blow, and various break-points determine whether limbs are crippled from blows. First aid and medical care reduce immediate damage and improve healing rates relative to technology.

There is, of course, rules for drowning and falling, along with flaming and freezing, falling objects, poisons, diseases, and infections; although much of this is treated in a very abstract manner, an unfortunate lost opportunity to go into the glorious detail of such natural hazards. In addition to physical damage there is also the matter of Fatigue, a Strength-derived level of hit points based on physical exertions or the use of magic. Unusually thrown in at this point is three woefully short chapters on Mounted and Vehicular Combat, Flight, and a Animals, the latter particularly disappointing. For what they are however, these are a good collection of rules dealing with movement and damage, turning radii, encumbrance, and the difficult split between Health and hit points from an animal perspective.

## **Magic and Psionics**

Following the time-honoured literary conventions for fantasy and science fiction, GURPS offers two supernatural-cum-paranormal systems of power, magic and psionics, each of which follow their own means of acquisition and resolution. Magical abilities, for characters with the Magery advantage, are learned individually as skills, with prerequisites, and organised into colleges of related abilities. Casting magic typically takes a "full turn" (i.e., the casting completes at the beginning of the character's next turn) and typically comes with a Fatigue-based energy cost, measured in mana. Magical spells may be resisted (typically by Intelligence) and "missile" spells, require a magic casting plus a throwing skill check, which may be blocked or parried. There is options for ceremonial magic, which takes longer, but allows for greater power which can also be traded off for skill check improvements, and the creation of magic items. Whilst there is some amusement in the suggestion that the author is a believer in magic (reference to the real world as being a "low mana"), the GURPS magic system is logical, wide-ranging, and ultimately quite flavourless. An opportunity to make use of "realistic" historical traditions was completely overlooked in favour of replicating something not dissimilar to *The Fantasy Trip* (again!).

In contrast psionics typically costs no Fatigue, as it is as easy as thought. There are some exceptions, usually the "mental blow" type attacks. The two factors important to psionics are power, an advantage for a broad category of abilities that determine range or mass, and skill, an ability within a power category (e.g., Telepathy is Power, the skills include Psi Sense, Emotion Sense, Telesend, Telereceive etc). Powers can be purchased at a substantially reduced cost if there is only one skill in the category. Overall, the system works although it is somewhat brief in its description and one must also wonder whether it is entirely necessary to separate power from skill, except for the purpose to simulate "wild but unskilled" characters - which surely would be more exceptional.

## **Gamesmastering and More**

The gamesmastering chapter gives a brief run-down on some of the basic requirements for preparation, and the cautious navigation of player, GM, and character knowledge. None of this is particularly ground-breaking, even for the time of publication. The awarding of character points is, in an unpopular but consistent opinion, problematic for a realistic game as characters improve in accordance to the roleplaying of the player's who ran them. GURPS, at this stage, did not have a narrativist method for character point expenditure (and even in fourth edition it is only grudgingly implemented at best).

Elaboration is also provided for various game worlds, the most important characteristic being their abstract "Tech Level", which determined their method of transportation, medicine, personal weapons, power and so forth. Tech Levels range from 0 (Stone Age, a combined paleo, meso, and neolithic period) to 16 which is beyond matter transmission levels of technology. There are relativistic and normatively variable approaches to laws and customs, and an economics

system abstracted to the value of the late twentieth century USD for ease of play - although issues of variable supply in demand in different Tech Levels should have been addressed. Usefully in actual play, is a "jobs list" which provides role titles and monthly incomes - and sometimes random checks for those that come with a degree of danger.

With an extensive collection of Charts and Tables, sample characters, and a fairly enjoyable solo adventure, there is also an Appendix (the "revised" part), included in the back of the book rather than integrated, to ensure correlation with existing GURPS books, and neatly fitted with the removal of the previous adventure "Caravan from Ein Arris" (which was quite enjoyable, it must be said). This "new, revised" appendix includes new advantages and disadvantages, new skills, superhuman strength, and societal control ratings linked to weapons).

## Conclusion

GURPS (3e, revised) is a solid product. It is extremely well produced, fair well-organised, attractive, allowing for a variety of game-play, with a system that starts off a being well "reality checked" (albeit with a couple of bugs), particularly fun to play with the integration of roleplaying characteristics into the system itself, and generally a very good system overall. As given it provides an excellent entry point for novice gamers as nearly everything "just makes sense", but with sufficient crunch for experienced gamers to get the most out of the system. Plus, it is sufficiently well-structured that - rather like the best of Chaosium games - one can make house-ruled modifications to what is presented without causing the system to engage in a cascading collapse.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .8 (art) + .7 (coolness) + .8 (readability) + 1.0 (product) = 5.0

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + 1.0 (text) + .8 (fun) + .8 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 5.0

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