

**PYR MID**

The Best in Gaming



## Fun Shui

### for *GURPS*

by Peter V. Dell'Orto

*"the more ridiculous the stunt, the more likely it is to succeed; the more mundane the task, the more likely it is to fail. Jackie Chan's characters can happily ride a 200-foot banner down to earth safely, but will set fire to a friend's house while making a pot of tea."*

--Kyle "JimBob" Schuant, on [forums.sjgames.com](#)

In certain genres, usually action-comedy movies, dangerous stunts like jumping a motorcycle onto a moving train *never* fail, but mundane circumstances with potentially comic outcomes often fail. A fighter will get beaten up by an old woman with an umbrella, but parry every single blow from the evil master's henchmen with ease. Yet the old woman is no match for even one henchman. Why does this happen? Simply put, because the consequences of one fight -- losing to the old woman with her umbrella -- are humorous. They may advance the plot by having the hero kicked out his school because of the humiliation, or look silly in front of the girl he wants to impress, or whatever! The consequences of the other fight, losing to the evil master's henchmen, is disastrous -- evil wins the day *and* the hero looks foolish and weak in the face of opponents he should roundly trounce. This applies to trivial situations as well -- when the kung fu student has to clean his master's room, he will trip over every object and send priceless artifacts tumbling. But that same student will flawlessly pull off the Seven Steps of the Serpent to hop from fence post to fence post to save a falling heroine!

There are two broad categories of ridiculous actions -- cinematic stunts and silly stunts. Cinematic stunts are crazy stunts unlikely to succeed in reality -- not without multiple out-takes and handy safety crews -- yet which succeed in the movies because the hero (or sometimes villain) is cool enough to pull them off. Silly stunts are exactly that -- silly. These stunts shouldn't succeed, yet do because they make the scene funny either through their ridiculous success or ridiculous failure.

Some games solve this problem with Hero Points -- they give the characters a pool of points to spend to influence the results of tasks. PCs will expend these to succeed in difficult stunts. But even the best hero point systems can encourage hoarding, and force the player to guess which tasks are the "big ones" worth blowing a wad of hero points on. No one wants to spend their whole stash only to find out this was the tune-up stunt, not the climactic battle! One additional problem for comedic games is that there is no corresponding negative hero points which make mundane tasks -- ones with potentially comedic or plot-advancing results from failing -- more difficult.

The focus of this article is on *GURPS Fourth Edition*, but GMs of other systems or of earlier editions can use its ideas to transform their own game's bonus/penalty situations. The goal of these suggestions is a fun game -- not a difficult challenge. Massive bonuses for ridiculous stunts will mean they will usually succeed. Thus, the challenge is not succeeding at a hard task, it's coming up with a way to find the most difficult tasks and execute them. GMs rewarding character points based on the challenge should instead reward it based on using the most appropriate genre methods to succeed. Merely succeeding or failing is not the point -- you've got to do it with style!

## Reversed Penalties

Pages 345 & 346 of the *GURPS Basic Set* list bonuses and penalties appropriate to situations based on their difficulty. For these types of games, reverse the penalties; in other words, multiply the listed penalty by -1. So a 10 penalty (disastrously bad circumstances, like clearing a jammed gun while dangling upside down from a rope from a helicopter by your ankle in the rain) becomes  $(-1 \times -10)=+10$ , making even a default Guns roll work at DX+6!

Consequences of failure is the determining factor in whether a "difficult" situation should warrant a bonus, or if an "easy" situation should warrant a bonus. If the possible failure is *comedic* or *plot-advancing*, but otherwise doesn't cause significant harm to the character, what would normally be a bonus will be a penalty.

Actions do not have to be physical -- this explains the "sudden insight" that allows breaking a code without any access to computers (or even the code!) or how movie hackers can spend hours tweaking their computers but only seconds to crack the security of top-secret establishments. This also explains why characters can solve complex riddles while overlooking the fact that their suspiciously helpful new ally's name is an anagram of their enemy's -- deciphering Cretan Linear B to find out where the McGuffin is buried is at +10, but turning "Recnam Ecron" into "Necromancer" is at -10!

If the consequences are "Do this complex task or you die!" you get a massive bonus, encouraging people to swing on chandeliers or toss poor Maggie Cheung Man-Yuk out the window to slide down a cloth to the ground. Truly insane stuff should cap out near the +10 you'd get in a realistic game for utterly trivial activities done in ideal circumstances. So jumping a motorcycle onto a moving train is *easier* than riding down the street on a clear day with no traffic.

If the consequences are "Do this trivial task or you fail with humorous consequences!" you get a massive penalty to the roll. You'll likely fail. The -10 you'd get for disastrous circumstances is appropriate for the easiest activities, done in circumstances where failing can be much more entertaining than succeeding. *Every* trivial task is not subject to this penalty -- that would rapidly derail a game and remove any semblance of humor. Only tasks with humorous plot-significant consequences will get this. Walking down the street isn't penalized. Walking down the street with Master's antique teapot might be. Walking down the street with Master's antique teapot, which he doesn't know you've borrowed, when the Master is watching you, *is*.

Reward both appropriately in-game and out of game (bonus character points, spotlight time, in-game benefits) and you shouldn't have too many problems getting people to go along. Ideally, if you reward appropriately, you'll get PCs who are far more likely to try crazy stuff in combat or during adventures, but who get more silly goofiness outside of dangerous circumstances.

There are two ways to implement this.

## GM Control

Under this system, the GM simply sets penalties and bonuses for tasks. Players may take extra risks to ensure a better chance of success, but generally the GM makes the determination. There is no accumulation of penalties or bonuses -- especially hard actions get a bonus, especially easy ones get a penalty, depending on how the GM sees the consequences and the difficulty. The reward for attempting dangerous stunts is a bonus, and you look cool if you succeed! Consistently attempting cool and appropriate stunts during a game is *definitely* good roleplaying. GMs should look at page 498 of the *Basic Set* for appropriate rewards.

**Pros:** The upside to this approach is that it is simple, easy to implement, and minimizes attempts by players at working the system by making their own task more difficult -- thus making them more likely to succeed.

**Cons:** The downside is that the weight of deciding what is appropriate falls squarely on the GM. Another downside is that the players do not get input on what would make a scene especially interesting or a stunt particularly impressive.

## Bonus Pool Bidding

An alternative to GM control is a Bonus Pool Bidding System. Instead of the GM assigning penalties to actions based simply on their relative difficulty and potential consequences, the player bids up difficulty on mundane situations, in order to build up bonus points to later take penalties. This is essentially a hero point system, but where hero points are *only* accumulated by making other situations harder!

Players *bid* up the difficulty on situations. The GM will state the base penalties or bonuses for a situation, reversed as above. Then the PC can attempt to bid up the penalty on situations by describing possible bad consequences for their actions. For example, Jackie is riding his two-seater bike with his NPC girlfriend Maggie when they suddenly turn the corner and down a steep flight of stairs! In a dangerous action sequence, this would be worth a bonus. In a non-combat situation, it's a penalty. Jackie's player says "I bump down the stairs terrifically fast, and I may lose control and send Maggie flying over my head into a pillow-maker's big feather pile, mussing up her new dress!" The GM thinks it over and says "Okay, that's fine -- it's worth a -4 on your Bicycling roll. Roll for it." Succeed or fail, Jackie has earned 4 points for this action.

For each -1 taken by a player, he gets a +1 that can be used later that session (or in later sessions) in a difficult situation. These points accumulate and are separable. A PC who takes a -4 on one action, a -5 on another, and three -2s will have  $4+5+2+2+2=15$  points in his Bonus Pool to use for bonuses later. They can be used for a single +15 to a roll (!) or 15 +1s, or any combination totaling 15. As points are used, mark them off -- totals may go up and down rapidly in a game session.

When a situation arises, the PC will describe the extra difficulties (for bonuses) or potentially plot- or genre-friendly consequences for failure. These *must* be roleplayed. "I take a +5 to my Climbing roll and +2 on my ST roll" is *not* acceptable, while "I hop from flaming ladder rung to flaming ladder rung with both feet and one hand, while my other hand holds onto my Dependent! I take a +5 to climbing and a +2 to ST." The GM can veto or modify a bonus or penalty to fit the circumstances. A task may be too trivial or the justification by the PC too thin to be worth a big bonus.

**Pros:** One positive benefit of this approach is it makes players work to fit their actions into the genre. Another is that the GM is not the sole arbiter of difficulty -- the PCs will actively try to make their own mundane life more complicated to earn points, and pour in exciting details in dangerous situations to justify spending their points.

**Cons:** One downside is that it gives more rewards to good roleplayers, and may leave inexperienced or hesitant players in the dust. Those who "get it" will reap lots of rewards (and many pratfalls)

while those who do not will have to depend on the luck of the dice. Another downside is that players may still seek to "game" the system, by ensuring as many goofy problems as they can imagine occur so they can get lots of points to win the big fights. This may or may not suit the genre -- for kung-fu comedies this is ideal, but for more serious games or pseudo-gritty action movies, it may make the game too silly and lose its edge.

## Variants

The above methods can be tuned to fit a particular campaign. These are only a few starting suggestions. GMs are strongly encouraged to make up more to fit the genre they are playing in.

**Restriction: Skilled Only:** You *must* have the skill to get these benefits. Default use doesn't count, but even a single point (or half point under the *Third Edition*) is enough to activate these rules.

**Restriction: Heroes & Villains Only:** Only PCs and plot-critical NPCs -- often major villains, allies of the PCs, and comic foils of no allegiance -- get the benefit of these rules. Flunkies and bystanders use the normal system. The hero gets a +5 for jumping over the rack of sharp knives, but the pursuing henchmen get the normal -5 . . . making it very likely he'll succeed and his pursuers will crash into the rack, losing ground in the chase.

**Restriction: Non-combat skills Only:** Only non-combat skills get the benefit of these rules. Combat skills are unaffected. This encourages high-skilled fighters to fight like they would under realistic conditions, while still allowing for crazy stunts both in and out of combat. PCs won't be able to get a bonus for eye shots and massive Deceptive Attacks, but they *will* be able to slide down banisters or run across a pool by stepping on a series of swimmer's heads with relative ease.

**Two Heads Are Better Than One:** If two or more characters are affected, the penalties or bonuses are *additive*. Apply the highest penalty or bonus, and for each additional character, add half again (round *down*). For example, Jackie throws Maggie out the window for Sammo to catch her. Jackie has a +4, Maggie also a +4, while Sammo's task is trivial (and failure to catch her would be very funny!) so he is at -6. Jackie throws at a +6 (+4, half of +4) and Sammo catches at a -6 + 6 or a 0. Because his friends had such a hard task, his is easier!

**Double or Nothing:** If a PC takes a penalty on a trivial task, he can *choose to fail* instead of rolling. The task automatically fails, with the most comic results the GM or players can think off. Treat this as a critical failure, but without actual serious consequences. Any Bonus Pool points earned from this action are *doubled*. However, as a balance, if the PC takes a penalty and succeeds in his task, no Bonus Pool points are earned.

## Important Notes

In the movies, the characters are usually unaware they are *in* a movie. They do not know that it is safer to slide down a 200-foot banner or swing from chandelier than it is to ride a bike to work or start a campfire. Players in an RPG are extremely aware of the game rules. The players in an RPG are like the actors in a movie -- while Jackie Chan's character doesn't know the modifiers are reversed, while Jackie Chan the *actor* does. Because the *characters* do not know how the universe works, they believe that more dangerous tasks will be harder and more trivial tasks easier. Players who can separate their player knowledge from character knowledge will mesh well with this system. Players who have difficulty may do better with the Bonus Point Bidding Pool, where their out-of-game knowledge of the rules must be parleyed into in-game benefits with agreement from the GM, not just abused for bonuses or penalties.

GMs should take care PCs aren't working the system instead of using it to make the game more fun. If the player says "I'm on fire and they're shooting at me? Well, I'll do cartwheels across the floor, grab the rope with one hand in mid-wheel, and swing across the room through the window and into the water to put it out!" he gets a +8 to +10 to the appropriate rolls. If he says "I'm trying to make tea in a totally unimportant scene? I'll do cartwheels around while making it!" he gets a -10, because he's being needlessly silly and there is no serious consequences. He's probably only going to get a flat roll (if that) if there are no possibilities of humor or actual injury. And if there *are* . . . that -10 may ensure he gets it.

**Natasha Fatale:** *Boris, is Moose you said you killed in previous episode?*

**Boris Badenov:** *Look, it's his show. If he wants to be hard to kill, let him.*

--*The Bullwinkle Show*

Of course, in some movies and television shows -- such as *Last Action Hero* or *The Adventures of Rocky & Bullwinkle* -- one or more characters are aware of some of the rules of the universe. The villains may know they're the villains and must lose. This "fourth wall" breaking is useful for certain games -- generally ones with comic overtones, although the scenario is possible in other games as well. PCs forced into a "artificial reality" setting may realize the rules have changed and be able to take advantage -- this makes a good "change of pace" for games with normal, non-reversed modifiers.

This type of system requires good GM control and emphasis on consequences. Simply reversing penalties for situations means players will never do anything the easy way. No one will simply drive to work or make a pot of tea; they'll drive to work backwards blindfolded or make tea while standing on their heads on the counter. This will rapidly lead to a *verysilly* game. This may be exactly what the GM and Players are looking for!

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