



GURPS Accelerator

Interview-Based Character Creation

by Thomas Weigel

*This is the first in a regular series of articles on how to speed up your **GURPS** game and make it easier to play.*

Character creation in **GURPS** is . . . well, it's detail-rich. Many potentially excellent players are scared off by the wall of three-column text they have to scale before they get to a character sheet, but there is a way to get rid of this barrier.

This article provides a toolkit for interview-based character creation. Using this approach, you will act as a go-between for the player and the rules, writing down a character sheet from the "real world" descriptions of the player.

I've broken the toolkit into four sections:

- **Method:** How to act as an interface between the player and the system.
- **Ignoring Stuff:** Information the player doesn't need to know yet.
- **Asking Questions:** How to find out what your player wants to play.
- **Presenting the Character Sheet:** How to make the character sheet easy to understand.

Method

There are three methods to interviewing a player about his character. The more involved you are, the better results you will get.

The GM as Decision-Maker

This is the simplest method. Ask the player to describe his character, take notes, and then translate the character into rules from those notes.

The advantage is that it is the fastest and easiest solution (short of pre-generated characters). For a time-pressed GM, making the decisions may be the best option.

The disadvantages are that the character rarely matches exactly what the player wanted, the player still doesn't understand the character sheet, and the player is no closer to being able to create his own character the next time around. To avoid these problems, you need to become a guide.

The GM as Guide

Take the player's initial description and then ask specific questions. Is your player's cop character a beat cop or highway patrol? Is he a skilled veteran or fresh out of the academy? We'll assume he's good at his job, but is he good at it because he has a strong intuition, a logical mind, an intimidating presence, or something else? If he's a veteran, is he still in good shape?

This creates a closer match to what the player wants, and allows you to introduce the idea of characters with strengths and weaknesses. ("For this campaign, I'd prefer you weren't good at *every* cop activity -- pick two?") However, the player is no closer to being able to build his own character next time. If that's a goal for you, it's time to become a teacher.

The GM as Teacher

To be a teacher, introduce the rules the player will need while you are discussing his character. If you are adding a skill -- for instance, Intimidate at 12 -- take a few moments to explain it:

"Okay, this skill represents how good you are at intimidating and bullying people. A '12' is roughly professional skill, but still a bit away from expert. Any time you want to intimidate someone, you will be rolling three six-sided dice and trying to get a total that is 12 or less. Sometimes the situation will make it harder or easier, but we don't need to worry about that right now."

Each explanation should be simple, and to the point. Don't get into a discourse about how influence rolls in general work, or what a skill of 10 means, or the nature of circumstance modifiers. Tell the player just enough to understand the concept of "Intimidate at 12."

Who Writes It Down?

Some players (particularly kinesthetic and visual learners) learn better if they write down the character during the creation process. Others (particularly auditory learners) will learn better if you write down the character for them. This prevents them from being distracted when they're trying to listen.

The easiest way to find out is to ask the player which approach he would prefer, and then change it later if that doesn't seem to be working.

Ignoring Stuff

GURPS is an intricate system. Explaining one rule often brings to mind exceptions and "context" rules. It's easy to overwhelm beginners with too much context, so avoid it by skipping over concepts that the player doesn't need to know yet.

Ignore Point Totals.

Tell the player if he's getting too outlandish, too powerful (or weak), or if his character is starting to sound too much of anything in particular. However, don't get bogged down in whether he can be a professional janitor when he only has 3 points left to spend.

As long as all the players have the abilities they want to have, the system can support a wide range of point totals between player characters. If every character's point total is within 25% of the baseline point total for the campaign, the PCs will be balanced enough for most campaigns. The wider the variation in point totals, however, the more important it is to make sure that one PC's field of expertise doesn't overshadow another's.

If you want to maintain a strict balance of point totals among the PCs, take the character with the most points and give everyone else enough unspent points to bring them up to that character's total points. The players may use these points later, when they understand the system better.

Ignore Most Advantages, Disadvantages, and Skills.

Hard to Kill is fun, but for a beginning player, a high HT is much simpler to understand. Danger Sense is nifty, but don't ask the player if he wants it unless it is central to his concept. A first character should consist of broad strokes.

Ignore Skills That Everybody Has

In a campaign of police investigators, ask the player what aspect of police work he is particularly good at, but don't ask him how good his character is at every single skill a police character would have. Ask him how competent his character is, set *all* of the skills at that level, increase a couple of skills that the character is particularly good at, and move on.

Ignore Anything That Exhausts You or Your Player

In most cases, a beginning player is willing to take a "default" option for anything not central to the character concept. Use this willingness to keep the time involved in character creation as short as possible. You and your player can always adjust the character later.

Asking Questions

A structured set of questions eases the process of translating ideas into statistics. Here's the questionnaire I use.

Ordering Your Questions

The *GURPS Basic Set* is ordered in the way that is convenient if you are using points to create a character. When a player who is trying to get a character idea across, though, skills are generally the first thing to come to mind. Most character ideas don't start with "12 hit points and Combat Reflexes," but with "history professor with combat experience."

Start your questions by asking about skills. Once you have the skills and skill levels, you can reverse-engineer the attributes, Talents, and other advantages needed to reach that level. This requires some mental gymnastics on your part, but it makes the process much easier for the player.

Ask about attributes after skills. Advantages and disadvantages come last, determined by what the player wants to play and how you want to reconcile skills and attributes.

"What Skills Are You Good At?"

Ask the player what skills the character has, and how good the character is at those skills. Keep in mind that the player doesn't know the skill list -- you will need to translate "Beat Cop" into "Area

Knowledge (Local), Current Affairs (Regional), Detect Lies, Hiking, and Intimidate." (For more ideas, see Wildcard Skills, under Presenting the Character Sheet.)

Also, instead of making the player choose a number for skills, provide a series of descriptions and set the skill number based on that description. Most PC skill levels fall into these five categories:

- *Almost Incompetent*: assign this skill an 8.
- *Competent*: assign this skill a 10.
- *Professional*: assign this skill a 12.
- *Expert*: assign this skill a 14.
- *An Expert's Expert*: assign this skill a 16 (or more).

"How Strong is Your Will? How Perceptive Are You? "

The average result of the skill levels will give you an idea of how smart the player wants the character to be. Use the IQ that is most point-efficient for the skill levels the player chose. Then ask the player how strong-willed and perceptive the character is, and adjust those two sub-attributes to match.

As with skills, use descriptors to set Will and Perception. These vary by campaign, but the following range works in many games:

- *Average*: Unless IQ is unusually high, leave this the same as IQ. Some brilliant characters may have Will or Perception reduced to a 10 or 11.
- *Strong-Willed* and/or *Perceptive*: Set the appropriate characteristic to 11 or IQ, whichever is higher.
- *An Iron Mind* and/or *Eagle-Eyed*: Set the appropriate characteristic to 12 or IQ, whichever is higher.
- *Lantern-jawed Action Hero*: Set Will and Perception to 14 or IQ, whichever is higher.

"How Strong Are You?"

Strength is an easy concept for most players to understand, but these descriptors make it easier.

- *Weakling*: Assign a Strength of 8 or 9.
- *Average*: Assign a Strength of a 10 or 11.
- *Athlete / Heavyweight*: Assign a Strength of an 12 or 13.
- *Super-heavyweight*: Assign a Strength of a 14 or 15.
- *Power lifter*: Assign a Strength of a 16 or more.

"How Athletic Are You?"

Due to its cost and importance in play, Dexterity uses a narrower range of descriptors and attribute assignments than Strength.

- *Not Athletic*: Assign a Dexterity of 10 for all but the clumsiest characters, who get a 9.
- *Typical*: Assign a Dexterity of 11.
- *Athletic*: Assign a Dexterity of 12.
- *Very Athletic*: Assign of Dexterity of 14.

"How Healthy Are You?"

Instead of focusing on descriptors, give the player characters what they need to survive. Most PCs should receive an HT of 11 or 12. Assign a 13 or 14 to player who wants to play an unbreakable character, and a 9 or 10 to a player who wants to play a sickly character.

Suggesting Advantages & Disadvantages

Rather than ask an exhausting list of questions designed to suss out exactly what sorts of advantages and disadvantages the character should have, listen to the general type of character the player is trying for, then suggest one or two appropriate advantages and disadvantages.

In most cases, this will be sufficient. When it isn't, the player (once given the germ idea from the suggestion) will be able to make an intelligent suggestion which you can then turn into an appropriate advantage or disadvantage.

Quirks

When dealing with beginning players, treat Quirks as personality traits instead of rules. If the player is playing a naïve, fresh-from-academy beat cop, he *has* a quirk, and the GM's complicated version of the character sheet should represent that . . . but if the player thinks it is a system element, it will occupy the part of his mind concerned with mechanics, and make it seem that much more byzantine.

Most players roleplay quirky characters as a matter of course. If the character truly has no quirks, a suggestion to the player that the character needs something "unique, to distinguish him from all the other action cop show protagonists" will usually fix it quickly.

Presenting the Character Sheet

Once the player has answered your questions, you can finish the character sheet. You can use the standard sheet, or a simplified version that will cover only what the player needs to know. (An example of simplified character sheets will appear in the next GURPS Accelerator article.) These last four tools can help you make the character sheet easier to understand.

Sets of Three

Taxonomic division is one of the most basic mnemonic devices. Where possible, divide the character sheet into sets and subsets of three or less. It is easier to remember that your character is a Professor and a Psychic, *and* that "Professor" includes the elements of Status, Perks, and Patron, *and* that "Psychic" includes the elements of Intuition, Illuminated, and Psychometry, than it is to remember that your character has Intuition, Illuminated, Patron, Perks, Psychometry, and Status.

Wildcard Skills

The Characters book says that wildcard skills are for cinematic games, but it's also great for NPCs, pre-generated convention characters, and beginning players. A wildcard skill doesn't have to be cinematic or omniproficient. In fact, it can be very specialized. What makes a wildcard skill useful is that it cuts down the size of the character's skill list to something the player can digest and remember.

Instead of handing a player a sheet full of professional skills, try a wildcard skill like "History Professor! (Medieval Europe, IQ+0) Part politician, part publisher, you know how to survive and succeed in the cut-throat world of grants and non-tenured teaching. Also includes some actual teaching skill, and a considerable body of historical knowledge."

This skill includes aspects of Administration (academic environment), Fast-Talk, Accounting, History (Medieval Europe) -- everything a history professor should know to be good at his job. Most players will have no trouble applying different aspects of a broad professional skill to game situations.

Meta-traits

Meta-traits are the "wildcard skill" for advantages and disadvantages, because they don't just have to be for races! For example, "Professor (Status +1, various Perks, Patron/University)."

As you put the list of advantages and disadvantages together, look for common elements that you can group them by. In some cases, it will be suggested by the player! A player who wants to play a professor will say so, and many of that character's advantages and disadvantages can go in a meta-trait called "Professor."

Don't try to capture every aspect of a meta-trait at once. Instead, add 5 to 10 unspent character points to the trait. The extra points can be spent later to fill in any aspects of the trait that were left out during its creation. (If you don't need the points after all, they can always be allocated to something else later.)

Quirks

Whenever possible, put the PC's quirks in the descriptive elements of the character sheet. A mathematician who has a Cuban-cigar habit might have a quote under his name extolling their virtues. A naïve beat cop might have that mentioned in his character summary. A character who is archetypally nerdy (but only has the *disadvantages* Skinny and Bad Sight) could have a "nerd" meta-trait.

Tucking the quirks away in these places makes it difficult to figure out how many points the character gets for them, but much, much easier to remember. Adding quirks to the list of disadvantages, on the other hand, makes point calculations easier, but violates the "Sets of Three" rule.

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