How To Make Friends And Influence People In *GURPS*

by Matt Riggsby

Most RPGs have lots of rules for combat but few for social interaction. The **GURPS Basic Set,** for example, has its reaction table and a few pages of social skills, but two long chapters on combat plus weapons and armor tables, and that doesn't count extensive optional combat rules and combat-oriented equipment lists in other books. In part, this is because of roleplaying's traditional focus on violent action. But more than inertia keeps game rules concentrating more on attacks than acquaintances. Ignoring the difficulty of modeling the process (just what do you roll against to fall in love?), there's the question of appropriateness. Does a RPG need rules for social interaction? What could be more essential to playing a role than having players interact with one another and the GM, outside of the realm of dice and rules? Arguably, such rules do have their place. Using a rules-bound method of developing relationships lets socially adept characters do things less articulate players cannot, just as other rules allow non-technical players to play engineers and out-of-shape players to play sturdy warriors. A player still has to make "strategic" choices in social situations (make friends with the undersecretary before trying to get an introduction to the president) just as in combat (draw the sword before entering the dragon's den) but skills and rules can smooth over gaps between player and character abilities.

GURPS provides two core mechanisms for social interactions: the Reaction Table and rolls against social skills. However, there is little guidance for how relationships change after first encounters, and social skills work inconsistently. The goal of this article, then, is to integrate the basic mechanisms, to regularize the use of social skills, and to extend the results of reaction rolls through long-term relationships.

First Impressions

On any first meeting, the GM should make a reaction roll. A character may attempt to use of one of the social skills below to influence the results of the roll. The skill roll is *unmodified*. All modifiers, including the character's advantages and disadvantages and the reaction roll modifiers on p. B204, are applied to the reaction roll, not the initial skill use roll. Also, having a social skill at high levels does *not* itself modify the reaction roll; a social skill must be used directly to modify the reaction roll. The reaction roll is modified by one-sixth of the skill roll's success or failure (round down) in addition to advantages, disadvantages, and any situational modifiers the GM feels appropriate. In addition to the reaction level (Good, Poor, etc.), record the results of the skill roll as the Reaction

Number. The subject's reaction level will usually be apparent from his behavior, but the GM should keep the Reaction Number secret.

For example, Timmy, an elementary school student, wishes to befriend Bobby. As an opening gambit, he attempts to trade a package of Oreos in his lunch for Bobby's Twinkies. He makes his Merchant roll by two, for no modifier (2/6 rounds down to zero) to the initial reaction roll. For that, he rolls a 13 (Good) reaction. Assuming Timmy has no advantages or disadvantages which will change a reaction roll, he keeps his Good reaction with a reaction number of 13.

Certain skills have an additional effect on the first reaction roll, and most can only be used in certain circumstances as detailed here:

- **Administration:** May only be used in the context of working within organizational procedures. For example, Administration could be used by a lawyer dealing with a court clerk or a business executive dealing with another department head.
- **Carousing:** May only be used in purely social situations.
- **Diplomacy:** May be used for any encounter. It's hard to alienate someone with Diplomacy; treat reaction rolls worse than Poor as Poor (reaction number 7) and better than Good as Good (reaction number 15).
- **Fast Talk:** May be used for any encounter. After a Fast Talk attempt, the subject may have second thoughts. After the initial encounter is over, reroll the reaction roll. If the second result is worse than the initial roll, reduce the reaction number by three. If the subject has been seriously duped or swindled, skip the reroll and reduce the reaction number by six.
- **Intimidation:** Intimidation may be used only in confrontational situations, such as a police arrest or an ambush by bandits. Intimidation may get immediate results, but rarely works well in the long term. After the initial encounter, as for Fast-Talk, reroll the initial reaction. If the new reaction is worse than the original reaction, reduce the initial reaction number by 3.
- **Leadership:** May only be used in situations where hierarchy or organization are important. For example, it would be out of place at a party, but it might be used during a meeting to plan and organize a party.
- **Merchant:** May only be used in situations where an exchange is in the offing. This can include exchanges of favors as well as exchanges of goods.
- **Savior-Faire:** May only be used in situations where one of the characters is Status 1 or higher.
- **Sex Appeal:** May only be used in purely social situations. Moreover, Sex Appeal can be risky if used in the wrong context. If Sex Appeal is used against an inappropriate target (say, a woman using it on a heterosexual woman or a gay man), roll the reaction roll two times and take the worse result.
- **Streetwise:** May only be used for dealing with criminals or pursuing criminal activity. For example, buying contraband, hanging out with outlaw biker gangs, or hiring assassins.

While not directly applicable to the skill or reaction rolls, characters may roll against Savior-Faire or Anthropology skills to determine whether or not a particular approach would be useful. For example, a successful Anthropology roll might reveal that it would be inappropriate to appear overfamiliar to a tribal elder (using, say, Carousing) and an attempt to trade goods (Merchant) would be safer.

Asking for Favors

Once the initial impression has been made, the biggest use to which social skills are put is trying to persuade people to put themselves out for somebody else's benefit, sometimes against their better judgement (or at least against their usual tendencies). This may mean anything from agreeing to major treaty concessions to agreeing to a romantic tryst. When a character attempts to talk another into performing a non-trivial task for him (sharing restricted information, giving him a ride to the

airport two hours away, etc.), he must win a contest between an appropriate social skill and the target's Will. The skill roll is modified as follows:

Reaction Level	Modifier
Disastrous	-10
Very Bad	-5
Bad	-3
Poor	-1
Neutral	+0
Good	+1
Very Good	+3
Excellent	+5

If the request involves betraying the interests of someone the subject has a positive reaction to, apply the same modifier as a penalty and treat as a [check -1]. For example, if the subject is being cajoled into stealing a computer password belonging to his employer, to whom he has a Very Good reaction, the skill roll is at -3.

Effort On The Target's Part

Moderate effort (changing a car's oil or doing a few hours library research)	-1
Significant effort (performing major vehicle maintenance or doing a few days library research)	-3 [check -1]
Heroic effort (undertaking extensive travel, changing jobs)	-5 [check -3]

Apparent Risk

Moderate risk (small financial losses, slight loss of status, some trouble with spouse or workplace)	-2 [check -1]

High risk (moderate financial losses, serious trouble with spouse or workplace)	-6 [check -2]
Extreme risk (heavy financial losses, enormous loss of status, or permanent injury)	-8 [check -4]

Multiply risk modifier by .5 if the subject believes there is a very low risk of the subject being harmed, add 2 if there is a better than average chance, add 3 for a nearly sure thing.

Appropriateness

Mildly inappropriate request (hire employee illegally, reveal small personal secret)	-2 [check -2]
Extremely inappropriate (betray family or nation)	-6 [check -4]

Appropriateness is a measure of how "wrong" the subject believes an action is rather than how risky it is. For example, propositioning a prim Victorian matron isn't necessarily placing her in any danger, but it is, for her society, wrong and hence less likely to get a good reaction. Appropriateness and risk are, of course, relative. These modifiers assume an "average" person; thugs and soldiers will accept physical risks more readily, while career criminals are far more likely to perform illegal activities.

It's easier to talk people into indulging their mental disadvantages and harder to talk them out of them. If the target has mental disadvantages which would prevent him from doing what the attempting character is asking for, take the total number of points in appropriate disadvantages, divide by three (rounding *up)* and subtract from the skill roll. If the target has mental disadvantages which would make him attempt what he's being asked for, divide disadvantage points by three and apply as a bonus. The target may have disadvantages that cancel each other out.

It's also easier to get someone to do something they've done for you before. If the subject has granted a similar favor once or twice in the past, the social skill roll is at +1, +2 for three or four times, and so on to a maximum bonus of +5. This can be useful for simulating a "slippery slope," such as seduction over time or gradually drawing someone into a criminal conspiracy.

Any advantages or disadvantages which provide a modifier to reaction rolls, such as Charisma and Social Stigma, modify the skill roll as well. Finally, the GM may apply other modifiers as he sees fit.

To continue the example, Timmy wants to Fast-Talk Bobby into confirming to their teacher that his dog ate his homework. Bobby's reaction to Timmy is Good for a +1 modifier. The effort involved is trivial for no modifier. It does present a risk of mild punishment (good enough for the -2 modifier), but Bobby believes that the possibility is remote, taking it down to -1. Bobby has Honesty (-10 points), giving Timmy a -4 to his Fast-Talk roll. However, he also has a Schoolboy's Code of Honor (-5 points), which includes always taking sides with schoolmates against teachers, for +2, giving Timmy a total of -2 for Bobby's disadvantages. Timmy has a grand total of -2 to his Fast-Talk roll.

Reaction Checks

This is fine for single encounters, but relationships change through time. This is where keeping track of the Reaction Number comes in. Granting favors and other actions may cause Reaction Checks,

rolls to see how the subject's overall feelings change.

Just doing large favors can put a strain on a relationship. Some of the modifiers in the Asking for Favors section have [check -n] next to them. Whenever the subject of a request grants a favor that uses a [check] modifier, roll an unmodified reaction roll. If the Reaction Level is less than the current Reaction Level, reduce the current Reaction Number by the amount indicated by the [check]. For example, a character with a Good reaction (reaction number 15) is asked for a favor which requires significant effort, which has [check -1]. If there are multiple [check] modifiers, roll multiple reaction checks. A favor which involved both considerable effort and considerable risk would require two checks. In our example, the GM checks Bobby's reaction due to the risk. He rolls a 13 (Good), so Bobby's reaction is unchanged. If the roll were a 12 (Neutral) or less, the reaction number would be reduced by one.

Positive and negative outcomes can change a relationship. The GM may require a check, as above, if the subject is harmed as a result of granting a favor. For example, a check may be called for if Bobby has to stay after school for corroborating Timmy's story. In the case of a very negative outcome (losing a great deal of money, physical harm, etc.), reduce the reaction number by 1d6 or more, as the situation seems to call for it. On the other hand, if the subject benefits from granting a favor, roll a check, but instead of reducing the reaction number if the check is less than the current reaction level, increase the reaction number by 1 if the check is greater than the current reaction level. Strongly positive results (getting lots of money, gaining social advantage or a long-sought goal) can increase the reaction number by 1d6 or more.

Certain skills can effect or even cause checks. If a character asks for a favor using Diplomacy skill, reaction checks will not drop the subject's reaction level below Bad, although the results of granting the favor may. Fast Talk always triggers a [check -1]. Intimidation always triggers a [check -2].

Left to themselves, relationships can fade over time. For every month two characters have little or no interaction, roll a check. If the current reaction level is Good or better and the check is at least *two* levels less than the current reaction level, reduce the reaction number by one. If the current reaction level is Bad or worse and the check is at least two levels better, increase the reaction number by one.

Characters may maintain and improve their relationships. Once a week, a character may attempt to improve his relationships with others. This requires business dealings, social calls, doing favors in return, or other significant interaction as defined by the GM. The character may roll against an appropriate social skill. On a failure, there is no effect, although the attempt will prevent a check for no interaction. If the roll succeeds, roll a check. If the check is better than the current reaction level, increase the reaction number by one. On a critical success, skip the check and increase the reaction number by one; on a critical failure, skip the check and decrease the reaction number by one.

Conversely, characters may attempt to undermine other relationships by innuendo, pointing out faults, or simply blatant lies. Instead of maintaining his own relationship, a character may use an appropriate skill to force a check on another character's reaction number. If the skill roll succeeds, roll a normal [check -1]. If it fails, there is no effect. On a critical success, automatically reduce the subject's reaction number by one. On a critical failure, the subject reacts poorly to the attempt, reducing his own reaction number by 1d6.

Finally, external events may force sudden shifts in reactions. For example, most reaction numbers will drop by three if a character's -5-point secret is revealed, or by six or more if a -10-point or greater secret is revealed. Political stances, changes in familial relationships, and other changes to characters' situations may likewise force changes in relationships. NPCs may themselves be subject to coaxing by other PCs and NPCs, so even a socially adept character may have to work hard at cultivating his relationships to keep from being undermined.

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