

**GURPS**

Fourth Edition

# **POWER-UPS™**

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# **WILDCARD SKILLS™**



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# INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest strengths of *GURPS* is also one of its weaknesses: *all those skills*. The skill selection is broad enough that the game lives up to its claim to let you play any character you want. The catch? It's *so* broad that it can be difficult to figure out who that character is!

Hidden within this complexity is a related puzzle: How to decide which skill applies to a task. When the PCs encounter a security system, do they use Electronics Operation, Electronics Repair, or Traps? What's the best skill for an autopsy – Diagnosis, Forensics, or Surgery? And does this even matter for larger-than-life heroes? Sometimes you want to *get on with the game*, shouting, "Of course the world-class cat burglar can neutralize the alarm!" or "Dr. Quincy has years of experience with this!", and then rolling the dice.

Fortunately, *GURPS* includes a solution to these difficulties in the form of *wildcard skills*. And since the *GURPS Basic Set* limits its discussion of this topic to a 400-word box, there's lots of room to explore the concept. Which brings us to the goal of *GURPS Power-Ups 7: Wildcard Skills*, which is to offer new tricks for wildcards, elaborate on old ones, and catalog all such skills published to date.

Get ready to get wild!

## PUBLICATION HISTORY

This is the first edition of *GURPS Power-Ups 7: Wildcard Skills*. It includes all the wildcard skills published in the *GURPS Basic Set* and its supplements up to November 2013, notably those found in *GURPS Action 1: Heroes*, *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 1: Adventurers*, *GURPS Monster Hunters 1: Champions*, *GURPS Social Engineering*, and *GURPS Supers*. Rules and advice for using these traits fill about 75% of this work, and are largely original content – though *Hyper-Competency* (pp. 12-13) hails from *GURPS Monster Hunters 1: Champions* and was developed in *GURPS Power-Ups 5: Impulse Buys*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean "Dr. Kromm" Punch set out to become a particle physicist in 1985, ended up the *GURPS* Line Editor in 1995, and has engineered rules for almost every *GURPS* product since. He developed, edited, or wrote dozens of *GURPS Third Edition* projects between 1995 and 2002. In 2004, he produced the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition* with David Pulver. Since then, he has created *GURPS Powers* (with Phil

Masters), *GURPS Martial Arts* (with Peter Dell'Orto), *GURPS Zombies*, and the *GURPS Action*, *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy*, and *GURPS Power-Ups* series . . . among many other things. Sean has been a gamer since 1979. His non-gaming interests include cinema, mixology, and Argentine tango. He and his wife, Bonnie, live in Montréal with their cat, Zephyra.

## About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of *GURPS* players. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! We can also be reached by e-mail: [info@sjgames.com](mailto:info@sjgames.com). Resources include:

*New supplements and adventures.* *GURPS* continues to grow – see what's new at [gurps.sjgames.com](http://gurps.sjgames.com).

*Warehouse 23.* Our online store offers *GURPS* adventures, play aids, and support in PDF form . . . digital copies of our books, plus exclusive material available only on Warehouse 23! Just head over to [warehouse23.com](http://warehouse23.com).

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*Internet.* Visit us on the World Wide Web at [sjgames.com](http://sjgames.com) for errata, updates, Q&A, and much more. To discuss *GURPS* with our staff and your fellow gamers, visit our forums at [forums.sjgames.com](http://forums.sjgames.com). The web page for *GURPS Power-Ups 7: Wildcard Skills* can be found at [gurps.sjgames.com/power-ups7](http://gurps.sjgames.com/power-ups7).

*Bibliographies.* Many of our books have extensive bibliographies, and we're putting them online – with links to let you buy the resources that interest you! Go to each book's web page and look for the "Bibliography" link.

*Errata.* Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata pages for all *GURPS* releases, including this book, are available on our website – see above.

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.

*Depend on it there comes a time when for every addition of knowledge you forget something that you knew before. It is of the highest importance, therefore, not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones.*

– Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*



## WILDCARD FAMILIARITY

A goal of wildcard skills is to remove the need to worry about finicky subdivisions of knowledge within a field. It would be consistent with this aim to exempt wildcard-users from *Familiarity* (p. B169) – which epitomizes, even glorifies such complications – and all similar rules. Doing so means that heroes with wildcards are fully acquainted with all of the equipment, personalities, procedures, situations, and so on relevant to the included standard skills, and never suffer any penalty attributed purely to novelty, obscurity, or unfamiliarity. The list includes but isn't limited to:

- The -3 for unfamiliarity with a *culture* (p. B23). Wildcards confer the benefits of Cultural Adaptability (p. B46) with all included skills.

- All penalties for *different models of gear* (p. B169), such as those described under Armoury, Artillery, Boating, Bow, Computer Operation, Driving, Electronics Operation, Electronics Repair, Forward Observer, Gunner, Guns, Liquid Projector, Mechanic, Photography, Piloting, Scuba, Shiphandling, and Submarine.

- The -2 to Artist (p. B179) for an unfamiliar medium, -5 to Dancing (p. B187) for an unfamiliar dance, -4 to Stage Combat (p. B222) for an unfamiliar weapon, -5 to Writing (p. B228) for an unfamiliar subject, and all similar penalties for *artistic experience*.

- *Physiology Modifiers* (p. B181), the -2 to -4 to Gardening (p. B197) for unfamiliar crops, the -2 to Veterinary (p. B228) for an unfamiliar animal type, and any other penalty for not knowing a *species*.

- Penalties to Computer Hacking, Computer Operation, and Computer Programming (all p. B184) for *unfamiliar software*, including programs and programming languages.

- The -1 to -10 that Computer Hacking (p. B184) and Electronics Operation (p. B189) assess for *obsolete knowledge* (“away from the field for a long time”), and the similar -1 per day that Current Affairs (p. B186) imposes for time away from news media.

- Penalties for *new regions*, like the -2 to -4 to Gardening (p. B197), -2 to Merchant (p. B209), -1 to -10 under Navigation (p. B211), -1 or worse for Prospecting (p. B216), and -3 to Streetwise (p. B223). However, if knowledge of time or place is a skill's entire point – as with Area Knowledge – the modifiers in *Geographical and Temporal Scope* (p. B176) apply except when offset by *Other Bonuses* (pp. 13-15).

- The -2 to Shiphandling (p. B220) for an unfamiliar crew, to Teamster (p. B225) for unfamiliar animals, and to any other skill for not knowing the *specific beings* involved.

- Any penalty for a weapon being “exotic,” like the trident, *qian kun ri yue dao*, and three-part staff in *GURPS Martial Arts*, and the penalties that book assesses when using or facing a melee weapon for the first time. This obviates the need for Exotic Weapon Training perks.

These waivers are cumulative – there's no limit to the penalty erased. For instance, when using Dancing for a new dance (-5) from a foreign culture (-3) with a new troupe (-2), a

wildcard lets the dancer ignore the entire -10. Likewise, a wildcard that acts as Physician can wipe out -2 for unfamiliar medical gear *and* -6 for alien physiology simultaneously.

A warning: Such penalties are often overlooked! The GM must remember to enforce them on characters who *aren't* using wildcards for this benefit to be meaningful.

## WILDCARD TECH LEVEL

The /TL designator on technological skills is another example of a fussy subdivision. Generally, heroes with wildcard skills can ignore *Tech-Level Modifiers* (p. B168) for all TLs at or below the campaign TL (or *their* TL, if that differs owing to High or Low TL). For instance, in a modern-day campaign, a shootist with a wildcard that encompasses Guns could use primitive TL3 gones, TL4 flintlocks, TL5 caplocks, the TL6-7 weapons of the World Wars, and the TL7-8 firearms we know today – all without TL penalties. Exactly as with *Wildcard Familiarity* (above), this rule depends on the GM enforcing penalties when standard skills are used; e.g., if TL8 gunmen without wildcards have -2 to shoot and -3 to repair TL6 weaponry, firearms-related wildcards become more attractive.

### Wildcard Ultra-Tech

If the campaign includes limited or secret “future-tech” or superscience, the GM may decide that since a wildcard is intrinsically cinematic, it includes comprehension of that, too. This can range from knowledge of a few bits of “bleeding edge” tech (effectively a built-in version of the Cutting-Edge Training perk described in *GURPS Power-Ups 2: Perks*) on up to the functional equivalent of High TL (p. B23). If nothing else, heroes should be able to function at full wildcard level when a mad inventor hands them some completely new device relevant to their skills!

If a wildcard exists specifically *for* mad inventors, and acts as a cinematic skill to accompany Gadgeteer, it ought to waive the first -5 for working at a TL above that of the campaign; see p. B475.

And if the campaign includes *weird* tech that penalizes ordinary folks, cross this rule with *Wildcard Familiarity* (above) to wipe out that penalty for wildcard-users. Wildcards are cinematic, so it's only fair that they're ideally suited to cinematic equipment – be that TL(5+3) “steampunk” gear, TL3^ magitech, or wonders too strange for a numerical TL.

## EXTRA-BROAD PERKS AND TECHNIQUES

Two classes of traits that enhance skill use often require specialization by skill: *perks* (pp. B100-101) and *techniques* (pp. B229-233). Unless the GM rules otherwise, wildcard skills are legitimate specialties for these abilities. The player buys the perk or technique once – at the usual cost, *not* at triple cost like the associated wildcard – and it works with every applicable standard skill the wildcard covers. As this can save a lot of points, it makes wildcards more attractive to characters who would have many such traits, notably martial artists.



If nothing else, the GM might want to use *Hyper-Competency* (pp. 12-13), *Compensating for Difficulty* (p. 25), and *Using Wildcards Together* (pp. 25-26) to offset the higher failure rate that accompanies somewhat lower overall skill levels.

*Can NPCs have wildcards?* If wildcards are truly the only skills, this is a given. But in cinematic campaigns that pit shining heroes against faceless hordes, it's more fitting to declare that NPCs are still stuck with standard skills. If so, it's important to keep their skill levels modest, and there are

but two sorts of NPCs: worthies who boast wildcards at levels at or near the heroes', and supporting cast with standard skills at the same *relative* skill levels or below. For instance, if the typical PC has DX 14 and combat-related wildcards at attribute+2, for skill 16, then NPCs should have at most 16 in their standard combat skills; the GM should avoid "logic" that has NPCs spending the same 48 points on combat skills so that even DX 10 cannon fodder are running around with skill 22!

# WILDCARD SKILL ROLLS

Success rolls for wildcard skills work identically to rolls against standard skills: they use the same rules for success and failure (and *critical* success and failure), margins, and so on. However, the fact that a wildcard can replace *several* standard skills – whatever attributes normally control them – affords the GM greater flexibility.

## SELECTING THE SKILL

The typical wildcard skill replaces a specific set of standard skills. When a rule or an adventure calls for a particular skill, any wildcard that encompasses that skill can stand in for it. Add the wildcard's relative skill level to the appropriate attribute (see *Finding the Target*, pp. 24-25) and get rolling!

### Off-Label Use

Don't let the canonical skill list tie your hands, though. A wildcard skill isn't merely shorthand for a collection of standard skills – it embodies an *idea*. Any action directly related to its "high concept" is a legitimate use, even if it isn't explicitly mentioned. If a task governed by a skill not listed for the wildcard is clearly in keeping with its concept, then it's fairest for the GM to allow the wildcard to work. It's much easier to be flexible about this than to spell out every last skill that *might* fit, subject to complicated conditions. A major goal of wildcards is to get away from big lists, after all!

*We Don't Need No Stinkin' Skills!* Don't feel obliged even to specify a skill. If a task fits, pick a suitable attribute and allow a roll. This is how *Ultimate Template Wildcards* (p. 18) works, and it's a perfectly reasonable way to handle *any* wildcard – at least when nobody feels like scouring the **Basic Set** for the skill that "officially" applies.

### Some Restrictions May Apply

Things aren't *always* free and easy, though.

*Conditions, Conditions:* As *Conditional Skills* (p. 8) explains, applicability can be more than a matter of the right standard skill appearing on a list – some wildcards attach conditions to certain skills. If these stipulations aren't met, no skill roll is allowed. Here, too, don't let canonical lists tie your hands. The GM is free to rule that a task is so far outside a wildcard's high concept that the conditions on *some* of its skills apply to others that normally lack them. For instance, a wildcard for snipers might include fully general Guns (Rifle) and many skills qualified with "for rifles" – but

if an unscoped rifle has its barrel and stock sawed off to convert it into a hand-cannon, the GM would be within his rights to rule that it's functionally a pistol, not a rifle, and fired using Guns (Pistol), or wildcard-2.

*Decisions, Decisions:* Sometimes it's essential to pick a skill. If a task allows a roll against any of several skills, *and* modifiers or outcomes applicable to those skills differ, *and* the wildcard can stand in for more than one of those skills, the player must specify which skill he's using his wildcard as before rolling the dice. "All of them!" is a valid answer only if the campaign uses *Hyper-Competency* (pp. 12-13) – in that case, if the player spends even a single Wildcard Point from the wildcard, for whatever reason, he enjoys the *most favorable* modifiers and outcomes from among its skills.

## Negotiations

Everything under *Selecting the Skill* (above) and *Finding the Target* (pp. 24-25) is up to the GM. A player who feels that a wildcard should apply to a task has the right to ask permission to use it. If the GM agrees, then it's settled – work out the target number and roll them bones! If the GM *doesn't* agree, there are options besides outright forbidding the attempt:

*A Matter of Degree:* Not all justifiable uses of a wildcard are *equally* justifiable. The GM may allow a wildcard to work but apply a penalty from -1 to -10 based on how far he feels the player's proposed use deviates from the high concept.

*Not Quite What You Wanted:* The GM might permit the attempt but shift the roll to another controlling attribute – perhaps one that's less favorable. This can be combined with the previous option; e.g., if the player asks to use Gun! as First Aid by firing off a magazine and then using the hot barrel to cauterize a wound, the GM could allow it at -5 . . . *and* rebase the roll from Mr. Hot Shot's high DX to his mediocre IQ, since First Aid is IQ-based.

*Law of the Instrument:* If using *Hyper-Competency* (pp. 12-13), the GM may let the player spend two Wildcard Points *from the wildcard he wants to exploit* to invoke *Player Guidance* (p. B347) *before* dice are rolled. This alters the situation to one where the wildcard genuinely applies, eliminating any penalty for deviating from the high concept. The GM might further allow this to change the attribute base; e.g., so that a hero with good IQ and so-so DX can capitalize on his expertise to turn a feat of pure agility into a matter of wits.

# CHAPTER THREE

# EXAMPLES

Many wildcard skills have appeared in *GURPS* supplements to date. What follows is a compilation of these. Wildcards created for specific genre treatments (*GURPS Action*, *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy*, *GURPS Monster Hunters*, etc.) or campaign settings (e.g., *Transhuman Space*) have been edited to be more generic. Each entry notes its source(s) for gamers who want to understand it in its original context.

The top goal of this collection is to furnish inspiration. These examples collectively illustrate most of the concepts in Chapters 1 and 2, and therefore aren't uniformly broad, cinematic, or generic; thus, using them all in the same game isn't recommended. Instead, pick those that fit *your* campaign – either “as is” or with adjustments – and approach the rest as a source of insight when designing wildcards to fill any gaps. This inventory is canonical and exhaustive only in the sense that it includes every wildcard published so far . . . there's boundless room for innovation!

The wildcard skills are sorted alphabetically. For each, the name is followed by the attribute most often used for rolls against it – which, as *Controlling Attribute* (p. 5) explains, isn't a hard-and-fast association. Then comes the following information:

*Skills:* Standard skills the wildcard encompasses, including conditional skills and skill-like benefits.

*Suggested Benefits:* Possibilities from *Additional Benefits* (pp. 10-15) that would fit especially well even if the campaign doesn't otherwise use those options.

*Source(s):* The *GURPS* supplement(s) the wildcard comes from. The title(s) alone should hint at especially appropriate and inappropriate genres and TLs.

*Notes:* Any further comments, comparisons, and suggestions.

## Art!

IQ

*Skills:* Architecture, Artist, Camouflage, Carpentry, Cartography, Connoisseur (for all Artist specialties), Current Affairs (High Culture), Engineer (Civil), Jeweler, Makeup, and Smith (Lead and Tin). Also replaces Counterfeiting to fabricate fakes but not to spot anti-counterfeiting measures; Forgery to create artistic replicas but not false documents; and Propaganda to place subtle-but-pervasive messages in artworks. Can further act as Mathematics (Applied) when the previous skills require it, though not in general. Make a DX-based roll for any “craftsman” Professional Skill that the GM feels has a significant artistic component.

*Suggested Benefits:* *Wildcard Familiarity* (p. 11) for artistic experience, and to avoid obsolete knowledge with Current Affairs; bonuses to reaction rolls toward works created using Art! (*Sample Bonuses*, pp. 13-15).

*Source:* *Pyramid #2* (March 7, 2008).

*Notes:* The original version – called Artist!, but renamed here to avoid confusion with the standard Artist skill – was intended for European Renaissance games. In that context, it can substitute for Physiology; artists were expected to understand the workings of the human body, and would visit dissections and medical schools to educate themselves. At TL5+, add Photography instead. In magical settings, Art! might replace Symbol Drawing in applications that depend more on rendering symbols properly than on grasping their use and meaning.

## Assassin!

DX

*Skills:* Fast-Draw (Knife and Pistol), Garrote, Knife, and Stealth. Doesn't stand in for ranged-weapon skills in general, but for aimed or surprise shots *out of combat*, the user can roll against the higher of this skill or his combat skill with *any* ranged weapon. Make an IQ-based roll for Acting, Camouflage, Disguise, Holdout, Poisons, Shadowing, or Smuggling, or a Per-based roll for Tracking.

*Suggested Benefits:* Bonuses to rolls for poison damage and/or to spot rival assassins (*Sample Bonuses*, pp. 13-15).

*Source:* *GURPS Action 1: Heroes*.

*Notes:* Originally a template wildcard.

## Barbarian!

IQ

*Skills:* Camouflage, Disguise (Animals), Mimicry (Animal Sounds and Bird Calls), Naturalist, Navigation (Land), and Weather Sense. Make a HT-based roll for Hiking, Running, or Swimming, or a Per-based roll for Fishing, Survival (any), or Tracking.

*Suggested Benefits:* Bonus to resist natural hardships (*Sample Bonuses*, pp. 13-15).

*Source:* *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 1: Adventurers*.

*Notes:* Originally a template wildcard. Compare Hunter! (p. 31).

## Bard!

IQ

*Skills:* Acting, Current Affairs (any), Diplomacy, Fast-Talk, Heraldry, Musical Instrument (any), Performance, Poetry, Propaganda, and Public Speaking. Make a HT-based roll for Carousing or Singing, or a Per-based roll for Detect Lies.

*Suggested Benefits:* *Wildcard Familiarity* (p. 11) for artistic experience and culture; bonuses to reaction or Influence rolls after successfully using the wildcard to perform (*Sample Bonuses*, pp. 13-15).

*Source:* *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 1: Adventurers*.

*Notes:* Originally a template wildcard.



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*He speaks a dozen languages, knows every local custom; he'll blend in, disappear, you'll never see him again.*

– *Indiana Jones, in  
Indiana Jones  
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