

GURPS

Fourth Edition

ZOMBIES



By Sean Punch

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

BRAAAINS!



Do you cross the street to avoid the graveyard? Does a viral outbreak make you bolt the door? How about street drugs that turn abusers into cannibals, fungi that change insects into mindless biting machines, or people who swear they've spotted their dead loved ones laboring in the fields?



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GURPS Zombies tackles *all* kinds of zombies – the classic walking dead, drugged Vodou slaves, fantasy undead, the virus-infected, and more:

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- The living: screaming survivors, officials who won't believe their eyes until their faces are ripped off, born zombie-killers, and sinister zombie-masters.
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- Ready-to-go examples, from B-movie ghouls, through necromantic undead, to still-living infected – and beyond, to mad-science monsters created by surgery, nanotech, or memetics.
- Rules for simple horde combat, fleeing for dear life, avoiding infection, curing zombies . . . and creating them.
- Advice on using zombies in any genre – not just horror.

GURPS Zombies requires the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*.
The exhaustive analysis of the undead may save the life of any zombie fan.

By **Sean Punch**

Additional Material by S.A. Fisher, Kenneth Hite, Phil Masters,
William H. Stoddard, and Hans-Christian Vortisch

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STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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Dedicated in memory of Michael Ryan – friend, gamer, and fellow fan of B-movies.

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About GURPS

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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.

INTRODUCTION

Shaun: Don't say that!

Ed: What?

Shaun: The zed-word. Don't say it!

Ed: Why not?

Shaun: Because it's ridiculous!

– *Shaun of the Dead*

Why does **GURPS Zombies** exist? Because everyone loves zombies! In reality, of course, many people – including plenty of gamers – find zombies disgusting, ridiculous, or overused. Even fans have undying debates over what zombies are, how they should behave, and what sources are canonical. Helping gamers have fun even when facing these challenges is the *real* motivation for **Zombies**. Converting rabid non-fans is a job for the zombie plague, but this book hopes to “turn” the curious.

For starters, **Zombies** looks beyond rotting shamblers. An inclusive subject-matter guide rather than a worldbook, it has something to offer all zombie enthusiasts – not just devotees of George A. Romero and his walking dead, but also fans of the fast-moving infected of recent films (like *28 Days Later*), fantasy gamers seeking lowly undead slaves for necromancers, and purists interested in Vodou tradition. These viewpoints and countless others have a home here. Can they all get along? That's up to you!

Zombies doesn't confine itself to horror, either. Zombies are *monsters*, and all kinds of stories need those. They can be antagonists in sword-and-sorcery fantasy, sci-fi action, and many other speculative genres. They're often ridiculous enough to fit comedy. Even when zombies are horror, they needn't be *survival* horror – a lone zombie terrorizing a village yields old-fashioned creature horror or modern splatter, while zombies serving a vampire master suit stylish Gothic horror.

To accomplish all this, **Zombies** delves into many fictional sources but takes the tack that *visual* media offer the best inspirations. Zombies rarely have much to say; the shrieks (or laughs) they evoke stem from their deeds and appearance. It's the *sight* of the shell of a person that thrills and chills. **Zombies** brings this excitement to the tabletop.

Whatever zombies and genres you like best, **Zombies** is sure to inject new life into your campaign!

ZOMBIES 101

GURPS Zombies is a long book. Reading it cover to cover might make a zombie out of you, the dear reader. A few words on avoiding that fate:

Everybody should read Chapter 1. It explores the five Ws and one H of folkloric and fictional zombies, establishing terms and tropes invoked throughout the book. For GMs, it's a treasury of ideas. For players, it's a source of worries – what parts will the GM use? For casual readers, it's the chapter without complex game stats.

Players should then read Chapter 2, on creating and equipping PCs. Those who like to strategize might first review the mechanics governing how zombies find, attack, and infect heroes, in Chapter 4 – but much of this depends on GM decisions, so it won't all be reliable information! Regardless, see Chapter 5 to learn what to expect in a **Zombies** campaign.

Game Masters should follow Chapter 1 with Chapter 5 for further inspiration, visit Chapter 3 to select or create zombies, and finally read Chapter 4 to learn how to use those zombies.

Casual readers will find Chapter 5 a useful source of non-**GURPS** campaign ideas. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 might also be inspiring, but they pull no punches when it comes to rules and stats.

*The dead don't walk
around, except in very bad
paperback novels!*

– George,
*in Let Sleeping
Corpses Lie*

PUBLICATION HISTORY

This is the first edition of **GURPS Zombies**. It was strongly inspired by the author's earlier work, **GURPS Undead** (for **GURPS Third Edition**), portions of which have been updated to **GURPS Fourth Edition** in this book.

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), and the **GURPS Action, GURPS Dungeon Fantasy**, and **GURPS Power-Ups** series . . . and the list keeps growing. Sean has been a gamer since 1979. His non-gaming interests include cinema, cooking, and wine. He lives in Montréal, Québec with his wife, Bonnie, and their two cats, Banshee and Zephyra.

What Are We Dealing With?

Before delving too deeply into zombies, it's necessary to establish some ground rules.

Mindless, Not Brainless

GURPS Zombies assumes that zombies are, with rare exceptions, *mindless*. In game terms, this doesn't mean that all zombies have IQ 0, like brand-new clone bodies. Some might, but here, "mindless" means that zombie "racial" templates drastically penalize IQ (racial IQ modifier of -2 or worse); restrain or remove free will via Reprogrammable (p. B150), Slave Mentality (p. B154), or Automaton (p. B263); and/or impose disadvantages consistent with animalistic behavior, like Bestial (p. B124). It doesn't follow that when individuals or races have such traits, they're zombies – only that when someone acquires or is afflicted with a template that stacks atop his racial one, inflicting one or several of these mental shortcomings, *Zombies* reserves the right to call him mindless (it's shorter than this explanation!) and label him a zombie.

Dead or Transformed?

Many zombie fans insist that a corpse is a prerequisite for a zombie. *Zombies* doesn't assume this, for several reasons. First, while the earliest traditional monsters that one could call "zombies" were undead, this line blurred later on, and there's a good case for the term "zombie" to mean a mind-controlled living slave; for details, see *Historical Zombies* (pp. 11-14). Moreover,

fiction (see *Fictional Zombies*, pp. 14-17) often borrows from tales of demons that were never alive, or applies zombie-movie tropes – notably cannibalism, contagion, and mindlessness – to strangely afflicted living people. Finally, even in strict zombie canon, *it isn't always clear* that the erstwhile human expired from the infection or curse that zombified him; some zombies crawl from graves or rise after being pronounced dead, but often all we see is victims sickening, falling immobile, and rising. Thus, we accept acquired mindlessness as sufficient.

Slow vs. Fast

Another vocal debate concerns whether zombies must be slow-moving. This image originates from tales of drug-addled Vodou zombies, which came along relatively late in zombie lore, amplified by the opinions of influential horror filmmaker George A. Romero, who strenuously insists that zombies *must* be dead and the dead *can't* move quickly. Asserting that rot and rigor should slow a zombie is applying logic to an illogical subject, however – traditional undead are typically *faster* and *stronger* than the living, and it's valid to claim that zombies, pushed beyond human limits by inhuman forces, should move quickly. Also, the "atrophied corpse" argument isn't applicable to living zombies modeled on drug-using maniacs (*Zombies in the News: Zombie Drugs*, p. 22) or on rabies victims (*Zombies in the News: Zombie Diseases*, p. 20), who may be very fast indeed.

WHY ZOMBIES?

Why not?

More seriously, zombies make compelling monsters – perhaps even a great theme for an entire campaign – for a wide variety of reasons. For one thing, they are *us*, minus a working mind, staring back with hollow eyes. That alone is plenty scary, and might be all that's needed for pure horror!

Zombies also tend to be *straightforward* in a way that other monsters aren't. While a curtain of secrecy similar to that popular in vampire and werewolf tales can make them scarier (see *Conspiracy*, p. 146), it isn't required; gamers don't expect scheming subtlety from creatures as dumb as zombies. This directness can spare the GM significant world-building effort. Related to this is the fact that while using devious, powerful monsters as day-to-day antagonists is hard on suspension of disbelief ("We fight vampires 24/7, yet nobody believes they exist?"), an unrelenting backdrop of zombies is a traditional device for *enhancing* the mood. This can save the GM even more time, as he needn't dream up alternative threats or new scenery on a regular basis – the zombies are a constant, visible danger to everyone.

Still, it's possible to dig deeper, identify some broad thematic categories, and expand on them. Understand that these explanations aren't exclusive, though – many campaigns with zombies will invoke all of them. What varies is the mix.

ZOMBIES AS FEARS

Obviously, zombies can be scary. When trotted out in the modern media – when made the subject of cute video games, funky dance numbers, and trendy "zombie walks" (p. 16) – they lose some of that. Scratch the surface, though, and *zombies are fear*. No stylish wardrobe or coy dialog hides the fevered aggression of the infected, the inexorable advance of the sorcerer's slaves, or the shreds of rotting flesh caught in the ghoul's teeth. And this never quite goes away, even in soft focus; the zombies in the film *Fido* may be tame, and those in *Shaun of the Dead* might seem silly, but neither would hesitate to tear you apart under the right circumstances.

Zombie Command: You can only control *zombies*. Each target's racial template must be worth less than your own (fewer than 0 points, if you're human). In a campaign with many zombie types, you may limit scope further using Accessibility. -25%.

Resistant

see p. B80

All the usual forms of this advantage exist in a *GURPS Zombies* campaign. Resistant to Disease is of particular value against zombies carrying *mundane* disease (many do), or in a flyblown, corpse-strewn apocalypse where water-treatment plants, pharmacies, and hospitals are things of the past.

If the story features zombie contagion, the GM must decide how resistance to *that* works. Several options follow, and *Heroes, Resistance, and Immunity* (below) offers more. Players beware: The GM isn't obliged to share this decision – uncertainty among survivors may be essential to the campaign!

Extraordinary Symptoms: A zombie plague could be an "ordinary" bacterial, fungal, parasitic, or viral disease with astonishing symptoms. The resistance roll may be difficult (as severe as -6 for infectivity), but a robust immune system helps. In that case, Resistant to Disease functions normally. Certain forms of contagion make a roll to infect instead of

offering a roll to resist; against these, treat +3 or +8 to HT as -3 or -8 to the *disease's* success roll. Whatever rolls are involved, Immunity completely blocks an "ordinary" zombie plague.

Extraordinary Disease: The cause might instead be some weird-but-comprehensible factor such as chemical toxins, nanomachines, or prions. If a HT roll is allowed, then it's reasonable to permit PCs to buy extra resistance, but separate from Resistant to Disease. Resistant to Poison involves a "Common" category (base 15 points); Resistant to Nanomachines, an "Occasional" one (base 10 points); and Resistant to Prions, a "Rare" one (base 5 points). These protect from zombie contagion just like an equivalent level of Resistant to Disease – *if* you have the right trait. Restricting ordinary humans to +3 in these categories is most realistic.

Unique Disease: A zombie plague needn't make *any* sense in real-world terms. If the GM rules that it's its own thing, then it is. It counts as "Rare," but it *isn't* a subset of an "Occasional" group such as disease or poison – it's a whole other specific item. Base cost is 5 points, and the GM decides whether PCs may buy Resistant to Zombie Plague. There are plenty of examples in the source fiction where no hero can resist!

Resistant to Curses

Curses *can* work like plagues, but with the "Mental Resistance" rule in effect so that Resistant aids Will rather than HT.

Heroes, Resistance, and Immunity

When planning any campaign that features a zombie plague, the GM must answer a vital question: Can the PCs be resistant, perhaps even immune? The answer may well be "no." This is prevalent in zombie fiction, but it *does* mean either a short-term campaign or one where creating new PCs is a regular feature. If that isn't desirable, other options exist.

The approaches listed under *Resistant* (above) are all straightforward. Where Resistant to Disease, Poison, Prions, or Nanomachines is involved, *immunity* is implausible for humans, but a modest level of natural resistance is reasonable. The GM might even adopt "all survivors have an amazing immune system" as a campaign premise, and require the PCs to have a minimum total resistance roll, whether they get it from high HT, Fit/Very Fit, or a suitable variety of Resistant.

Another possibility is that the PCs are *immune* to zombie infection. This, too, appears in fiction, and makes a fun campaign premise: The heroes are among the lucky few, be they humanity's last hope or genetically engineered monsters themselves. Such immunity can alter the game's entire tone, and thus should be a campaign advantage, mandatory for all PCs. The "unique disease" approach works best here – that is, Immunity to Zombie Plague [5] – because it avoids general Immunity to Disease, Poison, etc. which would deprive the GM of other dramatic tools. The GM might

want to add an Unusual Background, but that's unnecessary; if *all* the PCs are immune, nobody is more unusual than anybody else, and power level is better preserved by adjusting starting points.

Curses, Foiled

Against curses, the GM might wish to use Magic Resistance or Mind Shield *instead* of Resistant. This keeps resistance to the zombie curse consistent with resistance to other curse-like effects. It also makes it easier to tune characters to a minimum resistance score, if all PCs are required to be tough but not immune.

However, Immunity is still best handled by Resistant – as Immunity to Zombie Curse [5] – and should still be a campaign advantage.

Typhoid Mary, Zombie Larry

Heroes who are immune to a plague or a curse are ideal subjects for another twist found in fiction: They're carriers! For a zombie, this is a 0-point feature (see *Infectious*, p. 67), because creating new zombies isn't a bad thing. It's definitely bad for people, though, so it counts as Social Disease (Carrier) [-10] (pp. 33-34). The GM can make this disadvantage a prerequisite for Immunity to Zombie Plague [5] or Immunity to Zombie Curse [5], setting the net cost to be an asymptomatic carrier at -5 points.

THE INFECTED

The infected are *living* zombies made mindless by plague – often one contracted in a top-secret facility, from a test subject (human or animal), or even from human remains sealed in an ancient tomb. They're driven to bite and eat the living, but their condition weakens them enough that their attacks are unlikely to *kill*. They only take flesh sufficient for a meal, leaving a wounded victim who has good odds of becoming infected himself.

These zombies are nobody's slaves and have no ties to the supernatural. In theory, science might even be able to cure them. Regardless, their disease has effectively turned them into a species different from humanity – perhaps literally, as it seems to alter DNA.

All infected share a basic template, which can be used as a meta-trait when creating new subtypes.

Infected

-285 points

The infected are sickly and dull, with no motivation beyond biting chunks out of uninfected humans (missed meals cause slow starvation, not rapid HP loss; see p. B426), though sometimes they appear to be captivated by a building or a person. While of little danger individually, it's rare to encounter just one – their condition drives them to shriek hideously upon sighting prey, bringing nearby infected stumbling to dinner, groping as they try to bite off a mouthful. Dissuading them is difficult, as they don't experience pain and tend to survive horrific wounds.

Observation suggests that the infected don't sleep as such but mill around in some sort of daze between meals, which appears to serve a similar purpose. Beyond the behavioral signs, they're easily recognized by their red eyes, green-gray skin, and staggering gait (not to mention the smell of their last meal rotting between their teeth). The condition is known to kill within a year, and all attempted "cures" have proven fatal.

This affliction is of course contagious. Bites that reach flesh start the infection process, visible as a spreading "spider web" of black veins. Anybody with unhealed wounds from bites *or* the ensuing infection (Plague Bite) – from one or several infected – must roll vs. total HP of injury from these sources upon awakening from any sleep. Subtract 3, 8, or 15 from injury for Resistant to Disease (+3), (+8), or Immunity to Disease, respectively. Any "success" means the victim wakes up infected!

Attribute Modifiers: ST-1 [-10]; IQ-2 [-40]; HT-1 [-10].

Secondary Characteristic Modifiers: Basic Speed+0.25 [5].

Advantages: Acute Hearing 2 [4]; Hard to Kill 3 [6]; Hard to Subdue 3 [6]; High Pain Threshold [10]; Plague Bite (p. 53) 1d [9].

Perks: Penetrating Voice [1].

Disadvantages: Bad Smell [-10]; Bad Temper (9) [-15]; Cannot Learn [-30]; Disturbing Voice [-10]; Inhuman (p. 70) [-45]; Restricted Diet (Human Flesh) [-20]; Social Stigma (Monster) [-15]; Terminally Ill (1 year) [-75]; Unnatural Features 5 [-5]; Weakness (Cure; 1d/minute; Difficult to Administer, Injection, -50%; Irreversible, +100%) [-15]; Wealth (Dead Broke) [-25].

Quirks: Glimpses of Clarity [-1].

Features: Affected as Living; Infectious; Sterile; Taboo Traits (Social Position).

*KV had a 90% kill rate,
that's 5.4 billion people dead.
Crashed and bled out. Dead.
Less than 1% immunity. That left
12 million healthy people . . .*

*– Robert Neville,
in I Am Legend*

Variant Strains

Basic infected aren't *that* daunting for people in armor or who are athletic enough to stay ahead of mobs. Some cinematic interpretations are scarier! Add one or both of these lenses to crank up the terror. Such modified zombies might be the standard variety (as in many films) or unusual subtypes.

Enraged

+45 points

The infection's standard lifecycle is "a weak zombie bites someone, who's left alive to sicken and then infect many others before dying." This calls for aggressive, inhuman behavior, but not ripping victims apart. The enraged variant deprives the infected of all concern for their own survival as they violently tear into prey. It's either a less successful strain or one that selects for the fittest carriers.

Advantages: Indomitable [15]; Striking ST 6 [30]; Unfazeable [15].

Disadvantages: Berserk (Vicious, +0%) (9) [-15].

Fast

+45 points

More useful to the pathogen's success is an enhanced ability to run down and bite prey.

Attribute Modifiers: DX+1 [20].

Secondary Characteristic Modifiers: Basic Speed+0.75 [15].

Advantages: Enhanced Move 0.5 (Ground) [10].

Prognoses

Two further options could fit any infected:

Returner: Add Extra Life (Reanimation, -20%) [20]; remove Terminally Ill (1 year). *Notes:* When the infected die, they're back a few seconds later as undead – perhaps as plague ghouls (pp. 90-91). 95 points.

The Zombies Won: Remove Wealth (Dead Broke) [-25]. *Notes:* Since wealth won't matter in an apocalypse, apply this adjustment to get a fair cost. 25 points.

Setting the Schedule

Once the general timescale is settled, note its units (seconds, minutes, hours, or days) and get specific. Schemes include:

Flat: This is quickest and easiest! Pick a fixed number within the desired range: 10 minutes, two hours, seven days, or whatever feels right. This is always one second for Dominance (No Onset Time) or Infectious Attack (Instant Karma). When using a real-life disease's incubation time as a model, the average will do – zombies don't require high realism.

Variable: Roll dice to add fear and uncertainty. For seconds or minutes, more than 17d is really minutes or hours, respectively; for hours, more than 7d-1 is really days. For a wide range, use a small number of dice and a large multiplier; e.g., 1d×6 instead of 6d. For an *almost*-predictable time with a frustratingly tricky error, convert all but one or two dice into adds (each die equals +3.5); e.g., 1d+18 instead of 6d.

Margin-Based: If there was a roll to become a zombie, the margin of failure to resist or margin of success to transform might subtract from a flat or variable time, down to some minimum (usually *one* second, minute, hour, or day).

Attribute-Based: Or just use some function of HT or Will to determine time. If high scores resist zombification, then

use a positive multiple of the attribute, possibly adding a flat or variable interval: 2×Will seconds, (HT - 10) minutes, (HT + 1d) days, etc. If a good score facilitates the process, then have a negative multiple subtract from a flat or variable time: (20 - Will) minutes, (6d - HT) hours, (100 - 5×HT) days, etc. Again, set a minimum.

SYMPTOMS

Once zombie contagion afflicts a living person, he'll become a zombie at the end of the onset period. There may be *no* symptoms in the interim, but this needn't be the case. Classic alternatives, which can be combined, include:

Cosmetic Changes: The victim acquires progressively nastier outward signs but is still a human . . . until the end, when he changes. This seems to happen a lot in zombie movies! While specific Appearance and/or Unnatural Features levels aren't required, it can be fun to introduce such things gradually ("Every 1/4 of the onset time that passes, the victim loses an Appearance level and gains Unnatural Features 1.").

Gradual Zombification: The victim gains the zombie template a little at a time. As such templates vary so much, this requires GM oversight. Typically, subtle traits appear before severe ones, usually in the same order for everyone.

If Thine Eye Offends Thee

If zombification isn't instant and relies on bites or contact, then *cutting out* the exposed area might halt the process. The GM decides whether this is true and whether zombie contagion has been around for long enough for the truth to be known. Experts might recall this on a successful roll against Biology or Diagnosis for pathogens; Ritual Magic, Thaumatology, or Theology for curses; or a suitable Hidden Lore specialty. Knowing isn't a prerequisite for *trying*, though – deciding whether to chop has spiced up many a zombie flick!

If this works, it becomes important to note hit location when zombies attack. In detailed combat, this is standard. When using *Horde Action* (pp. 114-117) or *Splatter* (p. 125), hit location is rolled randomly (p. B552). Out of combat, it always seems to be a hand or an arm, bitten when the hero reaches under the bed for his gun, fumbles for the light switch, etc.

The GM decides how rapidly contagion spreads through the body. A generic suggestion: at up to 5% of the condition's delay time, localized excision works; up to 10% calls for amputation of the affected part; and anything longer is too late. For a hand or a foot, this might become 5% for excision, 10% to lose the extremity, or 15% to lose the limb; e.g., if infection turns the living in an hour, a surgeon would have three minutes to excise flesh, six minutes to amputate a hand, or nine minutes to remove the whole arm. For parasites, excision might work right up to the end.

The procedure requires a Surgery roll; apply -3 for excision from the head or chest. This takes an hour, so

fast-acting infection means haste penalties (p. B346). Modifiers for equipment, anesthesia, etc. also apply. Success inflicts 2d injury to the head or torso, or amputates a limb or an extremity, and halts infection. Failure inflicts 3d injury regardless of location, amputates a limb or an extremity, but doesn't stop infection. Failure leaves the option of a more serious amputation, time permitting.

Alternatively, heroes bent on amputation can use cutting attacks. This is fast – each blow takes a second at most. Roll to hit at +4 (a Telegraphic Attack, in **GURPS Martial Arts** terms), but with the usual hit location penalty; the attacker may use All-Out Attack for +4 to hit or +2 to damage. For an unconscious target, there are no other complications. A conscious, restrained one is in close combat: -2 to hit, and misses strike the restraining object or person on 9 or less. A conscious, unrestrained subject must roll a Fright Check; failure means he attempts his best active defense, at +2 because he knows what's coming. Dismemberment (p. B421) removes the body part and the danger.

Either way, if *Living Carriers* (p. 127) applies, then so does *Splatter* – treat the whole affair as a single splash on everyone within two yards. Wise surgeons take precautions.

For infection that doesn't zombify until the victim sleeps, the time limit is the patient's ability to stay awake. Surgery must be done without anesthetic, for an extra -2, while weapon attacks face the complication of restraint or the risk of a flinching target.

To take the gore and the criticism up another notch, add totalitarian troops, shooting anyone who might be infected or who tries to leave the hot zone.

Where historical or occult horror calls for supernatural zombies, splatter relies on the weird-science sort: plague zombies, radioactive zombies, toxic-waste zombies, and all manner of zombies created by failed experiments and weapons of mass zombification (p. 23). It's all about keeping it in your face, and that doesn't just mean violence. You can't blame God, The Devil, or the old Indian burial ground for this one. *People* did this – our dollars and votes supported the corporations and governments responsible for the disaster.

Survival Horror

What a lot of zombie fiction is going for – even as it achieves splatter – is a hard look at survival in dire times. This is scary for many of the same reasons as splatter: you can be killed by or become a zombie, your allies are getting picked off, and if things continue that way for long, you'll have to face disease, death, and perhaps even cannibalism. The difference is that the zombies often aren't your biggest worry. *People* get scary, as the situation brings out the worst in them: supposed friends grow desperate and turn on you, while strangers go after your supplies or try to use you as bait. Long-term, there's also the fact that Death might not visit in the guise of bite or bullet, but as cholera or slow starvation.

Survival horror usually invokes something between a large local outbreak and a full-on apocalypse – though the latter *isn't* necessary, and many storytellers sharpen the fear by not revealing how far zombies have spread. These approaches depend on growing numbers of zombies, which customarily means contagion, and that's as likely to affect the dead (yielding B-movie ghouls, pp. 90-91) as the living (who become the infected, p. 97). It's trickier to arrange for survival horror in fantasy settings simply because fantasy heroes have too many ways to cheat both the survival (“I cast Create Water.”) and the horror (“I cast Bravery.”), but it *can* be done if the PCs are low-powered. What's hardest is building such a mood with just one zombie; this calls for a seriously powerful monster that none of the heroes can deal with. In all cases, a survival-horror campaign should be set up as such from the start, so that either the players are prepared to lose characters or the PCs have the skills and hardware to survive for at least a little while.

In a true apocalypse, the GM must think carefully about the specific *social* subtexts he wants to explore, because absent a working society, and possibly inventing their own society, survivors will face tough questions: Are individuals who are exposed treated, summarily executed, or exiled? Are zombies viewed as target practice or as unfortunate victims, to be dealt with respectfully? If there's a totalitarian enclave out there – run by a gang, charismatic leader, corporation, or government – is it better or worse to live under their boot?

Dramatic Bits (and Bites): Betrayal!

Most survival-horror stories feature at least one character sufficiently selfish, desperate, or tired of life to do something cold-blooded like run away with all the supplies, shoot the person who's too slow to reach the rescue helicopter, sell out the others to a powerful gang, or simply throw someone to the zombies in order to escape. When this is an NPC, it's straightforward: Let the PCs “read” him with Empathy, Body Language, or Detect Lies, or contest his Stealth with Per. When it comes down to the wire, roll for the action.

When a PC is being evil, things are trickier. There's an automatic trust among players, and there's no easy way for the other characters to detect a traitor when the first warning is a player using his turn in combat to spray everybody else with gunfire. Whether this is acceptable depends on the gaming group's “social contract.”

If *everybody* agrees from the outset that things will be exactly like in a zombie movie – that when the going gets tough, the weasels get going – then that's that. It'll be a cutthroat campaign, and a short one. If players do underhanded stuff only when it really would allow a PC to live longer at somebody else's expense, however, it'll also be a *memorable* experience. The GM should either forbid “virtuous” disadvantages such as Charitable, Selfless, and Sense of Duty (Companions), or have every -5 points

in such traits give -2 on all dice rolls for self-preservation at somebody else's expense.

If the idea is to survive as a team, though, it's inconsiderate to kick the other players in the teeth and run laughing. The GM can opt to tackle such situations with “That didn't happen,” but that's heavy-handed. Instead, consider declaring that there's a “karma rule” in effect: bald-faced betrayal fails for long enough to allow every other PC to notice and react *first* – the gun jams, the engine stalls, etc. If this leads to the traitor's demise, too bad. If not, he might just get away with murder. This, too, is true to many movies!

An alternative treatment is to offer everyone the option of taking Sense of Duty (Companions) [-5] over and above everything else, and enforcing this only to the extent that it means no betrayals. To sweeten the pot, allow the extra 5 points to buy abilities that aren't otherwise available. Anybody who wants to opt out may do so, but *this is common knowledge*. Team players will *know* who's acting skeyey and squirrely, and be able to take steps.

Ultimately, this is a “meta-game” issue. The group social contract is sacred, and anyone who cites genre conventions as an excuse to violate it needs to be invited out.

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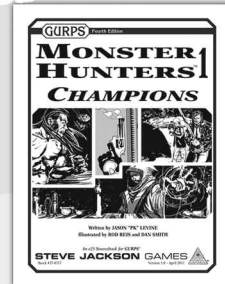
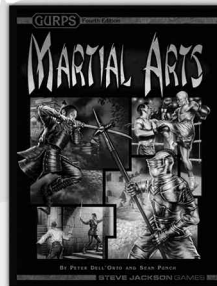
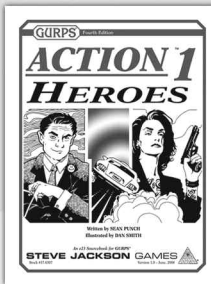
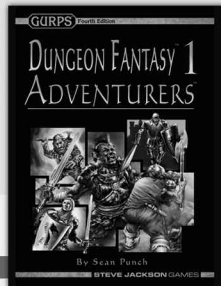
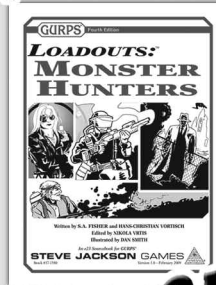
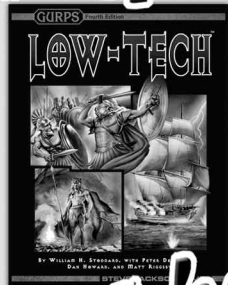
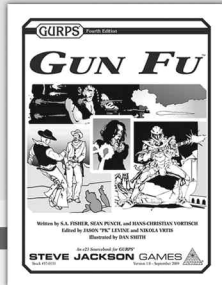
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