

GURPS<sup>®</sup>

Fourth Edition

# SUPERS<sup>™</sup>



BY WILLIAM H. STODDARD

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

# MEN LIKE GODS

The 20th century gave birth to a new genre of fiction: the super-powered adventure. Men and women with strange powers gave a visible expression to the reader's sense of wonder, as they protected ordinary mortals from a variety of threats, from street crime to world-shattering disasters. When roleplaying games were invented, supers quickly became one of their most popular genres – and one of the most challenging to do right.



**GURPS Fourth Edition** provides the game mechanics and tools for the job, and **GURPS Supers** is your guide to applying them: a comprehensive playbook to the supers genre and to capturing it in your campaign. Focused on drama and characterization, it provides:

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- A guide to character creation, including powers and other abilities, codes of conduct, dual identities, and personal relationships.
- More than 20 new wildcard skills.
- 22 templates for super characters, each customizable to higher or lower power levels.
- Rules for creating equipment, vehicles, bases, automata, and magical spells.
- A guide to creating and running supers adventures.
- Continuity creation guidelines and tools, so your supers universe can have the same depth as published worlds.
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- Guidelines for running superhuman feats and combats under existing rules or adjusting those rules to fit the genre, and new game mechanics specifically for superhuman action.

*GURPS Supers is a new work, but it draws inspiration from the previous editions of GURPS Supers. Using it to run a GURPS campaign requires the GURPS Basic Set and GURPS Supers. The material on genre conventions, character concepts and relationships, scenario creation, and supers universes can be used with any game system.*

By William H. Stoddard Edited by Andy Vetromile

Cover Art by David Dorman and John Zeleznik

Illustrations by John Hartwell, Greg Hyland, Greg Kirkpatrick, and Doug Shuler



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JACKSON  
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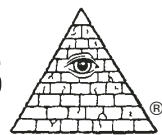
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## About GURPS

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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

The publication of *GURPS Powers* gave *GURPS* players a powerful new set of tools for describing the abilities of supers in game terms. With its help, almost any power from the comics can be defined and balanced against other abilities.

But there's more to supers than powers. Their adventures are an entire genre, with its own themes and conventions. Stories whose characters are as powerful as comic-book heroes, but don't follow those conventions, are better classified as science fiction, fantasy, or horror. And there have been many comic book heroes with no powers at all.

*GURPS Supers* is a guide to the supers *genre*. That is, it's not about powers or mechanics; it's about stories, characters, and worlds. Building on the material in *GURPS Powers*, it shows how to use that book to run a campaign that feels like stories about supers.

Not that it's devoid of mechanics. Players who love game mechanics will find some here, especially in Chapters 6 and 7. But the emphasis isn't on mechanics for their own sake; it's on making the mechanics serve the needs of the genre.

Other chapters talk about the genre in its own right, and about translating it from comic books to roleplaying sessions – without sacrificing the essence of the super adventure: the reader's sense of wonder, and the characters that embody it.

Chapter 1 of this book reviews the history of the genre and examines its key features. Chapters 2-4 look at the heroes themselves; their supporting casts; and their equipment, costumes, vehicles, and bases. Chapter 5 examines the typical plots of comic book adventures and shows how to make them work in a game. Chapters 6 and 7 provide game mechanics for superhuman action. And Chapter 8 discusses the construction of supers universes as campaign settings.

## PUBLICATION HISTORY

*GURPS Supers* has had two previous editions, both designed for use with *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*. The first edition introduced game mechanics for a wide array of superhuman abilities, many of which were grouped into "powers," though not in the same way as the current rules. Nearly all of this material has been incorporated into *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition* and *GURPS Powers*, most in substantially revised versions. So have the gadgeteering rules. In addition, the first edition provided rules for super combat and feats, advice on running a supers campaign, and a "worked example" campaign world, the setting of the International Super Teams (IST). The second edition did away with "powers" as groups of abilities and added more depth to the other content.

All of this material was inspirational for this volume, but almost none of it was specifically incorporated into it. This is partly because the mechanical aspects have *already* been incorporated into the core *GURPS* rules, producing a more smoothly integrated system – rather than laying the same foundation, this book focuses on customizing that system to the needs of the four-color genre and a specific campaign world. And it's partly because this book does *not* provide a setting for a supers campaign, so there is no IST material here. However, Loyd

Blankenship's exploration of the political realities of a world with active superhumans, built on further by Robert M. Schroeck in *GURPS IST*, was a stimulus to the discussion of campaign settings in this book's Chapter 8.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William H. Stoddard acquired an early enthusiasm for reading and the English language, partly with the help of Silver Age comic books. This eventually led him into a career as a developmental editor, specializing in scientific and scholarly materials. He discovered roleplaying games in time to play *Superhero 2044* and *Villains and Vigilantes* when they first came out; he currently plays in two campaigns, runs three, and writes game books, including the Origins Award winning *GURPS Steampunk* and his most recent book, *GURPS Fantasy*. All this gives him more reasons for indulging in his other favorite hobby, research. The supers genre is still one of his favorites. He lives in San Diego, California, with his girlfriend of twenty-plus years, in an apartment that holds one computer, two cats, and far too many books – despite which he still visits two libraries as often as he can. Don't even ask about the garage!



## THANKS

The author is grateful to Eben Brooks, game master of the Metahuman Vector campaign, for giving him a chance to play *GURPS Supers* under his own rules (as "La Gata Encantada"), and to his fellow players, Allison Lonsdale ("Bulletproof"), Doug Poston ("Doctor Lock"), Tim Sallume ("Gravitas"), and Dave Thun ("Shrike"), for helping to make it entertaining.

# CHAPTER ONE

# LARGER THAN LIFE

*The corridors of the temple were dark, especially here below the ground. The Scarab moved cautiously, not wanting to stumble over anything. Drawing attention to himself would be a bad idea; this part of the building was off-limits to the public, even during the daytime. The devotees might be eccentric, but many of them were wealthy; the police would side with them against a masked intruder. But his questions were too urgent for him to be bound by legalities.*

*There, up ahead, was a source of light: a single fixture mounted above an alcove. Shielding his eyes, he peered into the shadowed space below and made out a door, and a still figure – a statue? no, it was moving now – a man, standing guard.*

*As it stepped out into the light, the air seemed to shimmer as if his vision had blurred. Then there were three figures, not one, all clad alike, and each holding two knives. They came down the corridor toward him; there must have been enough light for them to see him.*

*He briefly considered whether it would be better to retreat – but any room guarded by a sorcerer would surely yield important information. And if he left, he couldn't hope for another chance, after putting them on guard. He raised his staff. At least in this narrow corridor it would be hard for them to get behind him.*

*Two of them moved ahead of the third. He struck one with his staff, but felt no resistance. Were these glamours of some kind, then? But the one at his left slashed at his arm, and he felt the impact as the blade glanced off the metal bands of his armor. His counterstrike passed through that one's knife hand, instead of breaking its grip; the three figures' movements interwove in complex patterns, like a dance with changing partners.*

*The three figures spoke, in unison, in a carrying whisper. "We are Legion. You cannot defeat us."*

*He fell back into a defensive stance for a moment, to give himself time to observe. Listening carefully, he could tell that one of the three figures was breathing audibly, and he could feel the vibrations of its footfalls on the wooden floor. The other two had*

*no such physicality. Having found his true target he struck out, and as his staff slammed against its head the two creatures of goetia shimmered and faded away. He pressed forward against his dazed opponent, batting the knife from his left hand. An instant later he parried the right-hand knife, and then jabbed his foe's torso, knocking him to the floor. One final blow and the sorcerer was unconscious.*

*Now to see if he could get through the door. But he didn't have much time to investigate . . .*

Supers adventures, as a genre, came into being in 1938 with the first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics*. Every element of the story had precursors in earlier fiction, but the combination was new – and wildly successful. It was quickly imitated, as publishers rushed other titles into print. Over the following decades, supers dominated American comics, and branched out into other media: film and television, novels and short stories, and roleplaying games. Supers is one of the more popular genres for games, and the ability to handle supers smoothly is widely regarded as one of the most demanding tests of a game system's flexibility.

Supers aren't science fiction, though many have science-fictional origins and adventures. They aren't fantasy, though some cast spells, or wield magic weapons, or face magically talented foes. They aren't detectives, though most of their missions involve fighting crime. Supers adventures are set in a world where all these types of material can coexist; where an alien with strange powers, a brilliant inventor, a spellcaster, and a detective who's good at punching out his foes can team up to save the world. Most genres try to limit their wonders and marvels, tracing them all back to one fantastic premise; supers adventure usually piles them up, creating a world of open-ended possibilities. If the GM wants to run a campaign in such a world, this book shows him how.

## SOURCES AND INSPIRATIONS

Several literary elements went into the creation of the first supers. All of them were changed in the process. Characters in such campaigns can still find inspiration in the older concepts.

### MASKED AVENGERS

Earlier 20th-century fiction featured many heroes who fought crime or oppression in disguise and under pseudonyms.

Some operated in historical settings, such as the Scarlet Pimpernel (published 1905), the Scarecrow of Romney Marsh (published 1915), Zorro (published 1919), and the Lone Ranger (aired 1933); others were present-day adventurers, such as the Shadow (published 1931 after earlier radio appearances) and the Green Hornet (aired 1936). In an early example of shared continuity (see p. 7), the Green Hornet was the Lone Ranger's nephew.

a single person's mind. Many mesmerists can also learn hidden truths that people would prefer to keep concealed; let others know, or fear, that you know their secrets. Some mesmerists have the ability to prevent other people from noticing them, allowing them to walk unseen through a crowd or past an armed guard. In addition, call attention to your superior intellect, will, and insight into the human psyche.

## Metamorph

500 points

Unlike the biomorph, who shares the powers of other species while remaining human in form, you actually take on the shapes of other species. You have few or no special powers in your human form.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 11 [20]; IQ 10 [0]; HT 13 [30].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 10 [0]; Per 13 [15]; FP 13 [0]; Basic Speed 6.00 [0]; Basic Move 6 [0].

**Advantages:** Combat Reflexes [15]. Fit [5] or Rapid Healing [5]. Resistant to Metabolic Hazards (+3) [10] or improve Fit to Very Fit [15] or Rapid Healing to Very Rapid Healing [15].

**Powers:** Take the following power:

### Body Alteration (Super; Talent 2 [10])

- *Gene Scan:* Detect DNA Sequences (Analyzing, +100%; Short-Range, -1/yard, -10%; Super, -10%) [40].
- *Shape Change:* Morph (Forms up to 220 points; Flawed, -10%; Reduced Time 1, +20%; No Memorization Required, +50%; Super, -10%) [330] (*Power Dodge:* 11).

**Disadvantages:** A total of -15 points from Bad Temper [-10\*], Easy to Read [-10], Impulsiveness [-10\*], Pacifism (Cannot Harm Innocents) [-10], Stubbornness [-5], or Xenophilia [-10\*].

**Wildcard Skill:** Move! (VH) DX [24]-11.

**Ordinary Skills:** Brawling (E) DX+2 [8]-13. Naturalist (H) IQ [4]-10. Observation (A) Per+1 [4]-14.

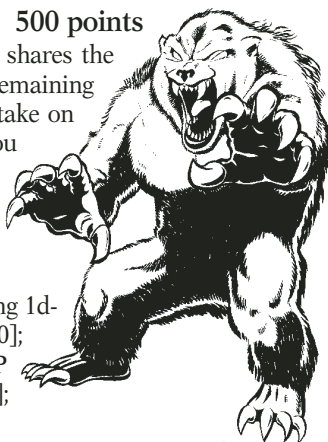
\* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

**Notes:** This is a "scientific" shapeshifter who copies the gene sequences of target forms and therefore has the ability to read them. Treat the natural weaponry of a new shape as a familiarity of Brawling (see p. B169).

Nearly all of the point-cost reduction needed to create a less-powerful metamorph can come from limiting available forms to 0 points – that is, forms no more powerful overall than the hero's natural shape.

The metamorph template doesn't adapt well to higher power levels; it's better to combine it with another that grants improved combat skills, such as *Acrobat* (see p. 41) or *Nightstalker* (see p. 49).

**Playing the Role:** Pick at least one ferocious species to include in your repertoire, but make sure to have at least one small, stealthy species too. This lets you get close to your foes before the fight starts. Study the animals on pp. B455-460 to



find useful forms and special abilities. Take an interest in new species and shapes, and treat shapeshifting casually – show that you find the idea of being trapped in a single form a little unnerving.

## Nightstalker

250 points

You're a classic masked vigilante, prowling the night and striking terror into the hearts of evildoers. Your abilities come primarily from training and equipment; any powers you have are minor. You're even more secretive than the average masked hero: The fear inspired by your unknown abilities and purposes puts your foes at a disadvantage.

**Attributes:** ST 12 [20]; DX 14 [80]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 12 [20].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-1/1d+2; BL 29 lbs.; HP 12 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 14 [10]; FP 12 [0]; Basic Speed 7.00 [10]; Basic Move 6 [-5].

**Advantages:** Combat Reflexes [15].† Fit [5]. Reputation +2 (Dangerous vigilante; Among criminals; Always known) [5]. One of the following options: Chameleon 4 (Glamour, Will-1, -25%) [15]; Danger Sense [15]; Discriminatory Hearing [15]; Discriminatory Smell [15]; Enhanced Dodge [15]; Gizmos 3 [15]; High Pain Threshold [10] + Higher Purpose [5]; Psychometry (Costs Fatigue, 1 FP/use, -5%; Hypersensory, -50%; Sensitive, +30%) [15]; Signature Gear (Weapon) [15]; or Striking ST +3 [15].

**Disadvantages:** Vow [-5] and a total of -30 points from Berserk [-10\*], Callous [-5], Code of Honor [Varies], Disciplines of Faith [Varies], Loner [-5\*], Overconfidence [-5\*], Pacifism [-5 to -15], Sense of Duty [Varies], and Workaholic [-5].

**Wildcard Skills:** One of Fist!, Guns!, Stick!, Sword!, and Throw! (VH) DX+1 [36]-14. One of Detective!, Fake!, or Psychologist! (VH) IQ [24]-12.

**Ordinary Skills:** Stealth (A) DX+1 [4]-15. One of Blowpipe (H) DX-1 [2]-13, Boxing (A) DX [2]-14, Broadsword (A) DX [2]-14, Cloak (A) DX [2]-14, Crossbow (E) DX+1 [2]-15, Garrote (E) DX+1 [2]-15, Guns (E) DX+1 [2]-15, Knife (E) DX+1 [2]-15, Liquid Projector (E) DX+1 [1]-15, Rapier (A) DX [2]-14, Shortsword (A) DX [2]-14, Smallsword (A) DX [2]-14, Thrown Weapon (Knife or Shuriken) (E) DX+1 [2]-15, or Wrestling (A) DX [2]-14. One of Area Knowledge (City) or Current Affairs (Headline News), both (E) IQ [1]-12; Architecture or Hidden Lore (Conspiracies), both (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; or Urban Survival (A) Per-1 [1]-13. One of Armoury (A) IQ-1 [1]-11, Climbing (A) DX-1 [1]-13, Driving (A) DX-1 [1]-13, Forced Entry (E) DX [1]-14, Intimidation (A) Will-1 [1]-11, Shadowing (A) IQ [1]-12, Soldier (A) IQ-1 [1]-11, or Traps (A) IQ-1 [1]-11.

**Technique:** 2 points in one of Arm Lock, Choke Hold, Disarming, Dual-Weapon Attack, Feint, Finger Lock, Kicking, Off-Hand Weapon Training, or Whirlwind Attack.

\* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

† Provides +1 to use of any wildcard skill as Fast-Draw.

**Notes:** To create a high-powered nightstalker, raise attributes, add more wildcard skills (see the Renaissance Man template for some ideas), or pick up more optional advantages. Alternatively, take an improved version of an optional advantage, such as Psychometry (Directed) [30] or Terror [30].



# CHAPTER FOUR

# SETS AND PROPS

*Outside the jeweler's, Paco sat in the parked car with the engine running. He carefully didn't look toward the store, but his window was cracked to let him listen for footsteps. Then he heard a shrill whistle, followed by a noise like a large firecracker. He opened his door and stepped out, one hand inside his jacket pocket – and saw the red glow from his front tire through the cloud of smoke it was starting to give off. Another whistle came from his left, and a sudden flash caught his eyes at the rear wheel.*

*The jeweler's door opened, and his partners came running out, carrying Uzis and heavy sacks. Seeing him they paused, but before they could question him there was another whistling noise, and a burst of dazzling, multicolored light in their midst.*

*On the rooftop, the Sparkler fired her rocket-launched grapnel at the storefront opposite her. Before the three men's sight recovered, she swung down to slam into Paco, knocking him over. As she landed, she hurled a smoke bomb through the open car door. The noise of its detonation distracted the two men still standing, and she kicked the Uzi out of the first one's hand.*

*The other one fired a burst at random, coming nowhere near her. Both his partners heard the noise and hugged the pavement. The Sparkler vaulted onto the roof of the now-useless car and ignited a fire-lance like a huge Roman candle. She struck at his gun hand with the flame, and he involuntarily dropped*

*the Uzi. Paco groped for his .357 Magnum, but before he could see to shoot at her through the smoke she jumped down, landing on his arm and knocking the pistol from his grasp.*

*"Okay, hermanos," she said, "let's you stay down till the cops get here." A stream of flame above their heads emphasized her words.*

Possessions are as big a part of the genre as relationships. Equipment, costumes, vehicles, bases, and other objects are important resources for superpowered adventurers. This chapter provides rules for equipping supers.

It also functions as a catalog of useful gear. It includes a few mundane items that can simply be purchased for cash, but that's not the main focus; the list on pp. B264-289 provides a wide range of such items. Things that appear here either turn up a lot in the genre or are especially useful as countermeasures to various sorts of superpowers. Many more items listed are meant to be acquired as Signature Gear; they usually have a cash price, but this is used to determine the point cost – it may not be possible to buy them with money! Finally, some are designed as gadgets to illustrate how the gadget rules work in the supers genre. With GM approval, these items can be used by PCs at the indicated point cost.

## DRAMATIC FUNCTIONS OF PLACES AND OBJECTS

Game books devoted to technology and equipment, such as *GURPS High-Tech* and *GURPS Ultra-Tech*, usually classify them by the type of technological functions they perform: weapons, armor, transport, communications, and so on. That's useful for most purposes, including character design, and much of this chapter uses those categories. But equipment can be classified in another way entirely: by its intended dramatic function in the story. Weapons of different types, for example, can play different dramatic roles.

### TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Supers often carry mundane equipment like anyone else in the setting might have. In particular, those who have amazingly high skills naturally have the gear to use those skills, whether it's a fencing saber or a laptop computer. Tools of this

sort can be bought with starting wealth, or through the *Trading Points for Money* option (p. B26). It's plausible that such incredibly skilled heroes have superior equipment, bought at a higher price; see *Equipment Modifiers* (p. B345). The specialized rules for high-quality weapons supersede the standard equipment guidelines.

The standard rules don't specify a price for "best equipment possible at your TL," and state that it's not usually for sale (p. B345). Stuff of this quality goes beyond the limits of ordinary tools of the trade; treat them as trademark items (see p. 74).

Supers may want to style their equipment to fit their secret identities or visual theme.

Another option is to take gear with Equipment Bond (see p. 31).

*Example:* Stalina flies toward the battlefield, aiming for the side of a German tank. She takes 15 seconds to reach air move 300, just short of the speed of sound. With 33 HP, she inflicts  $(33 \times 300) / 100 = 99d$  of damage, scaling to 10d for an average 35 hits. This gets through the tank's side DR of 10 and inflicts 25 hits, reducing the tank to less than 0 HP. The tank's engine is automatically reduced to half effectiveness, and it must roll vs. HT to keep functioning. The tank's scaled ST is 20, so Stalina's 35 hits knock it back one yard. In addition, the interior of the tank's body is pelted with fragments of its armor, inflicting a total of 5d of cutting damage on its three occupants, if any of them are hit.

Unfortunately, the tank has far more hit points than Stalina; it inflicts  $(200 \times 300) / 100 = 600d$  of damage on her, scaled to 60d, averaging 210 hits! Her DR subtracts 10 of these, and her Damage Reduction reduces the rest to 2 hits, which she can survive; but it's still a major wound. She can't afford to do that to more than one tank.

## Cosmic Scale Damage

What about supers who inflict damage on a really *huge* scale? What would it take for a super to literally destroy a planet; in particular, to destroy the Earth?

The Earth as a whole is inanimate, and has no complex internal mechanical parts; it can be taken as homogenous. It masses approximately 6,500 quintillion tons ("weighs" isn't quite the right word). Taking the cube root, and multiplying by 8, gives 1.88 billion HP; on a planetary scale, rounding that off to two billion is close enough.

The Earth's crust is roughly 10 miles thick, on the average. Rock has a minimum 8 DR per inch; that makes the Earth's DR about 5,000,000. Anything that can inflict a major wound on the planet, let alone smash it, won't even notice that amount of DR!

A major wound to the planet takes about 286,000,000d; we can round that up to 300 million dice. To inflict that much damage with one blow, a super needs ST three billion. If he's getting it from Super-Effort, he needs to buy ST 55 with the Super-Effort modifier, at a cost of 2,200 points.

Of course, he probably wants to be able to survive an equal amount of damage. A Damage Reduction factor of one billion looks about right; that costs another 1,350 points. Building him on 4,000 points leaves another 450 points for incidentals such as Flight and Doesn't Breathe.

If anything, this is alarmingly cheap – not necessarily beyond the point range for a really high-end supers campaign. GM considering such a campaign should make sure to set upper limits on ST, damage, DR, and Damage Reduction well below this level. If a hero *needs* to shatter a planet, he can resort to one-use powers (see p. 112).

A better option is the human missile attack (see 124). Stalina can accelerate to air move 60, taking only three seconds, and treat the impact on the tank as collision with an immovable object. The tank is hard, so Stalina inflicts damage based on *twice* her HP, or  $60 \times (2 \times 33) / 100$ , which gives 40d, scaled to 4d. If she targets the tank's vital areas, her 4 points of penetrating damage are multiplied  $\times 3$ , inflicting a major wound on the tank. Stalina's average roll of 14 points falls short of the 30 points needed for overpenetration; she ends up inside the tank, rather than flying through it. Fragmentation damage to the crew totals 1d-1, if they are hit.

Because the tank is breakable, Stalina cannot take more damage than its DR plus twice its HP (see p. B431): in D-scale, 50 hits. This exceeds her rolled damage of 14. Her DR reduces this to 4, and her Damage Reduction cuts this down to 1. Repeatedly slamming into tanks leaves her bruised, but not seriously hurt.

## HUGE TARGETS

What if a hero wants to attack a really large vehicle, such as a battleship, or a fixed structure, such as a skyscraper?

The most important difference between such objects and smaller targets is that huge targets are treated as immovable objects for the purposes of collision damage (p. B431). If the bigger object has at least 12 $\times$  the smaller object's HP, treat it as immovable for this purpose.

A big solid object follows the standard rules for hard or soft objects. But a vehicle or building normally has an open interior. If so, the damage a moving mass can inflict or take from colliding with it is limited to its DR. If a hero can fly through the walls of a skyscraper, he's free to fly around inside its walls attacking softer targets. If he's flying really fast, then at the GM's discretion, he may fly out the opposite outer wall; treat this as a second collision.

## THE FRAGILE WORLD

One of the hallmarks of four-color heroics is that the battles do huge amounts of property damage, while causing almost no deaths. *A Matter of Life and Death* (see p. 117) discusses how to minimize deaths and lessen injuries. It's also possible to enhance property damage by applying the same rules to inanimate objects, but in reverse.

As a limited measure, give objects Easy to Kill, in the same measure human beings get Hard to Kill: -2 to HT for a mildly cinematic campaign, up to -6 for an all-out four-color campaign with massive property destruction. Don't give Easy to Kill to Signature Gear, objects with gadget limitations, or sentient inanimate objects; leave their HT rolls unmodified.

It's also possible to treat inanimate objects in general as Brittle, Combustible, or both. Vehicles with engines can be treated as Flammable. Or the GM can simply decree that any object that suffers enough damage to require a HT roll fails *automatically*.

For extreme property damage, treat objects as cannon fodder (see p. B417): If any penetrating damage gets through DR, they stop working, or are even destroyed. Don't bother keeping track of HP!

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