

G U R P S

# UNDEAD

DEAD SOULS AND WALKING CORPSES

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**STEVE JACKSON GAMES**

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The *GURPS Undead* Web page is at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/undead](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/undead).

## Page References

See *GURPS Compendium I*, p. 181, for a list of abbreviations for *GURPS* titles, or for the most recent list, visit our Web site at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html). Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition, Revised*. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the *GURPS Basic Set*; e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition, Revised*. B refers to *Bestiary, Second Edition*, CI to *Compendium I, CII to Compendium II*, G to *Grimoire*, H to *Horror, Second Edition*, M to *Magic, Second Edition*, P to *Psionics*, PM to *Places of Misery*, R to *Religion*, and VO to *Voodoo*.

Vampires, zombies, ghosts . . . they haunt our folklore, our fiction and now our games. Why are we intrigued with the undead, with those who have passed beyond the veil of death and somehow returned to walk again among the living?

Faced with an absolute like death, it's in our nature to look for a way out. Our folklore suggests many ways to resolve the “unsolvable” problem of mortality, and undeath is one such solution.

Why undeath, though? Why not something less macabre, like an elixir of life or a fountain of youth? Mostly because if a miracle has a high enough price, the mundane status quo will be much easier to accept. In a roundabout way, this is the purpose of undeath: if we believe that immortality comes with a terrible price attached, we're unlikely to lament our mortality. Undeath solves the problem of death . . . by presenting something worse.

Undeath is immortality at the cost of vitality. Existence without life. Something that's as frightening as it is seductive. It is a “plot device” that we use to put death and mortality into perspective, giving it a depth shared by few other elements of myth. The time has come to plumb that depth . . .

– Sean Punch

## Using this Book

If you want to use *Undead* as a rule book, stop reading and jump right to Chapter 3. To use it as a *source* book, though, try this:

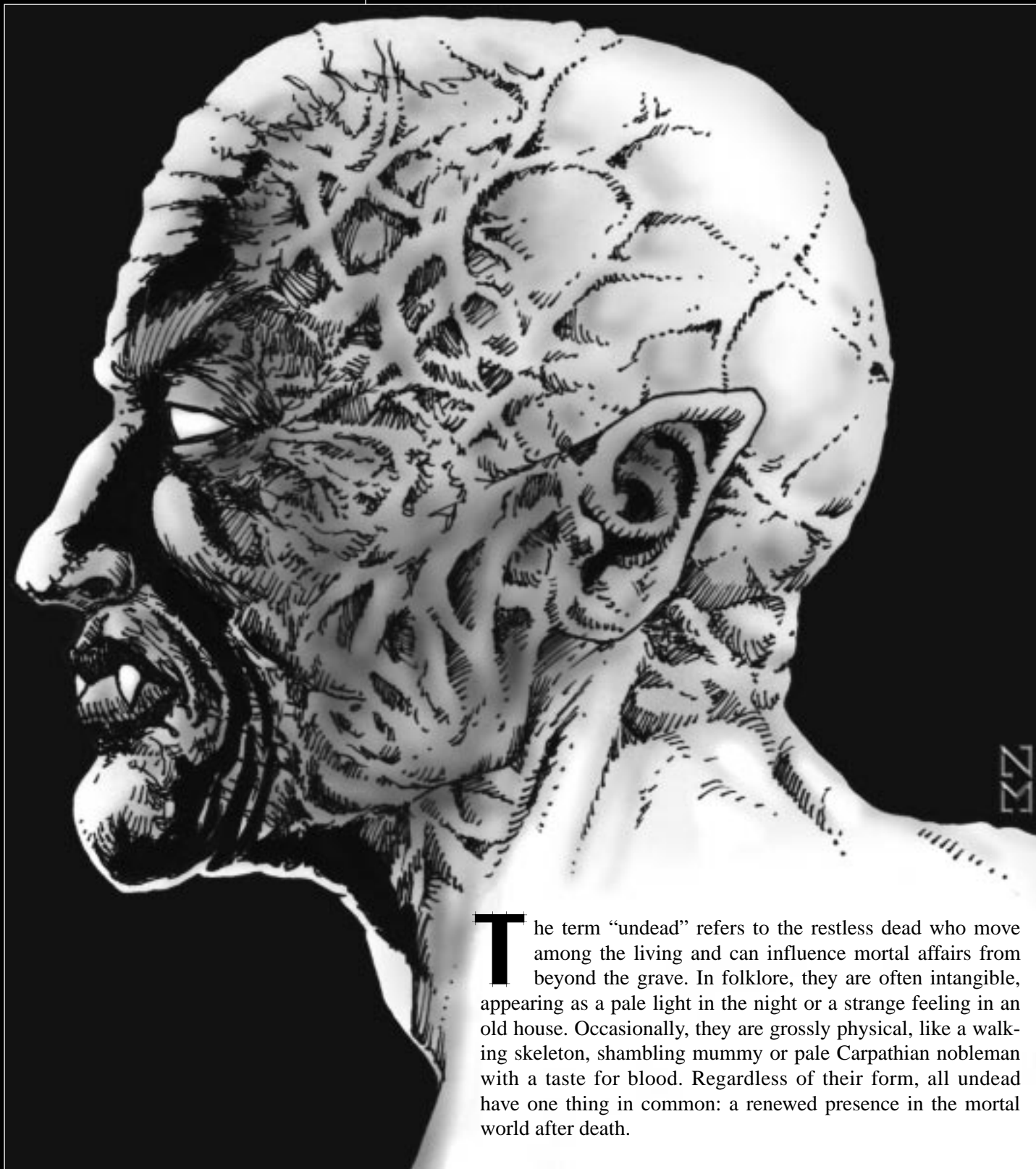
Read Chapter 1 to learn about real-life myths, funerary rites and views of the undead that you can use in your campaign. Move on to Chapter 2 for advice on categorizing your undead creations and suggestions on things like weaknesses. To write it all up in game terms, use the rules in Chapter 3 (you may want to modify one of the ready-made templates in Chapter 4 if you're pressed for time). Suggestions on how to use your creation as a character can be found in Chapter 5, and Chapter 6 will help you fit all this into your campaign.



## About the Author

Sean “Dr. Kromm” Punch is the *GURPS* Line Editor at SJ Games. Editor or revisor of over a dozen *GURPS* books, he is also the author of *GURPS Wizards* and *GURPS Undead*, coauthor of *GURPS Y2K*, and compiler of *GURPS Compendium I* and *II*, *GURPS Lite*, and *GURPS GM'S Screen*. Sean has been a fanatical gamer since 1979. His other interests include biotechnology, cinema, military science, tigers, and wine. He and his wife, Bonnie, presently live in Montreal, Quebec with four cats and one bird.





**T**he term “undead” refers to the restless dead who move among the living and can influence mortal affairs from beyond the grave. In folklore, they are often intangible, appearing as a pale light in the night or a strange feeling in an old house. Occasionally, they are grossly physical, like a walking skeleton, shambling mummy or pale Carpathian nobleman with a taste for blood. Regardless of their form, all undead have one thing in common: a renewed presence in the mortal world after death.



## DEATH GODS

Evil gods who govern the undead are a staple of fiction, but they don't have much basis in real-world religion. The most logical historical models for gods of the undead are gods who govern death and the underworld, but these deities are rarely associated with the undead in so many words, and aren't usually "evil." As explained under *Death, Earth and the Mother Goddess* (p. 10), the earliest death gods were actually goddesses, and were more likely to be associated with fertility, the harvest and the earth than with evil and the walking dead.

Here are some of the major gods or spirits that ruled over death, the dead or the underworld in various historical belief systems. They can be used as the basis for more fantastic gods who *do* rule over the undead:

*Continued on next page . . .*

## *The Early Christians*

Disagreement over whether a Jew called Jesus of Nazareth was the messiah (the "Christ") or simply a prophet caused a split that resulted in the Christian religion. The Christian afterworld, Hell, was similar to the Jewish one. It was initially ruled by the angels Uriel and Ezrael, but another being inherited the job from them: Satan, "the adversary," used by God to test mortals in Jewish belief. In later writings, the angel Lucifer challenged the will of God and was cast into Hell for his crime. Lucifer, "the Devil," soon became conflated with Satan, which led to the identification of the underworld and its denizens with evil forever after in Christian belief.

Like the Jews, the early Christians believed in bodily resurrection at the end of time, although they adopted the belief of "immediate judgment" later on. There were exceptions, however. The so-called *Gospel of Nicodemus* (no longer considered canon) tells of figures temporarily risen from the dead, including the sons of the high priest Simeon. Jesus himself, being the son of God, actually returned from the dead in three days! Whether he was undead or not is left to the reader, but early Christianity clearly provided for the possibility of rising from the dead.

## Eastern Beliefs

### *India*

Hinduism – the dominant religion of India – requires the faithful to observe a spiritual code in life, called *dharma*. Death is to be followed by cremation, which releases the soul to be reincarnated in a form determined by one's degree of adherence to *dharma* (*karma*). This cycle (*samsara*) brings one ever closer to *nirvana*: the end of mortal life and the merging of one's soul with the "universal spirit," Brahma.

Traditional Hinduism had a strong element of mysticism, and took for granted that holy men who were close to nirvana could sometimes perform miraculous acts, including reanimating the dead. Hindu undead were usually far more menacing, though. Anything that interfered with *samsara* also opposed the fundamental workings of the universe, the will of the death goddess Kali, and the plans of Yama, lord of the underworld. Not surprisingly, this had dire consequences.

First, the uncremated dead could get up and start walking around as undead called *pretas*. As well, evil spirits called *bhutas* could inhabit and animate these bodies. Worst of all, the demon king Ravana and his *rakshashas* (demons) could reanimate them as rotting, leprous monsters called *pishacas* and *vetalas*. Cremation, however, prevented all of this.

### *China*

Unlike their neighbors, the Chinese buried their dead. As well, whatever their religion, most Chinese held the Taoist belief that the universe is made up of *yin* and *yang*: a pair of opposing yet complementary forces. The soul was no exception. It had two parts (p. 8): the *shen*, which entered the afterlife, and the

Not all unfinished tasks allow for closure. Many undead exist simply to carry out repetitive tasks that played a significant role in their life. These tasks can be incredibly banal. For instance, a dead soldier may walk a patrol every night, a dead clergyman may ring a church bell every morning, and a servant of 40 years may continue to sweep the same floor every day.

In almost every case, the motivations of the undead are quite clear-cut, but this isn't always apparent to observers. If enough time has passed, the scenery will have changed too radically to let the average observer figure out *anything*. Consider a priest who falls off the belfry of his church and is killed. If he starts ringing the bell right away, it's obvious what's going on. If he died 400 years ago and a parking garage now stands where the church used to be, he'll seem quite strange, tugging on an unseen rope amid the Toyotas . . .

As a general rule, undead of this type are ghosts, sometimes visible as apparitions, but just as often only detectable due to a strange sound or smell, moving objects ("apports"), a sensation (like extreme cold), or an oppressive atmosphere. They usually haunt a place familiar to them in life. Those with a task that can be completed can be laid to rest by helping them with their task; those with repetitive tasks must simply be tolerated. Like ghosts that result from untimely deaths (p. 34), some people feel these are really psychic impressions and not undead at all.

## Righting Wrongs

Sometimes, the dead cannot rest until a great wrong has been set right. This often takes the form of vengeance upon the living! In some ways, this is a special case of an unfinished task (p. 34), except that these undead are usually physical and not ghostly. The general term for an undead that returns to set things right is a "revenant" (see p. 73 and pp. R18-19).

A revenant is the result of circumstances, not willpower or magic. It usually haunts the scene of a "crime" committed against it. Not all such "crimes" are criminal acts, however. The revenant of a murderer who was legally hanged may rise from the grave and lurk near the gallows, seeking vengeance upon the hangman and perhaps even the entire society that strung him up. As a result, elaborate measures (including decapitation, exorcism and burning) are often taken to ensure that the bodies of criminals will not rise.

Some revenants haunt individuals instead of locations, and will obsessively follow their target to the ends of the earth to wreak vengeance, usually death. Such revenants *can* be avoided by traveling far away. Of course, living in fear and being forced to leave home and loved ones to avoid death at the hands of a walking corpse may be a worse fate for many people.

A good example of a revenant from real-life folklore is the Eastern European *taxim*. The *taxim* is always male and is usually in an advanced state of decay, making it horrendously ugly and rancid. In some tales it emanates supernatural fear as well. The *taxim* seeks vengeance on those who have wronged it, and is strong enough to tear the living apart. It can only be laid to rest with holy words that amount to an exorcism.



## TOMB VIOLATIONS

Whenever a tomb is opened, entered (by someone who isn't supposed to be there), damaged or desecrated; whenever the remains of the dead are disturbed, and whenever a tomb is robbed, there's a chance that the dead will rise spontaneously. The GM can decide this on a case-by-case basis, or leave it to the dice. The basic chance of awakening the dead is a 3 on 3d, modified as follows:

<i>Tomb Disturbed (use highest):</i>	
Opened .....	0
Entered or accidentally destroyed.....	+1
Vandalized or	
deliberately destroyed .....	+2
Ritually desecrated .....	+4
<i>Remains Disturbed (use highest):</i>	
Touched or tampered with .....	+1
Removed.....	+2
Mutilated .....	+3
<i>Robbery (cumulative):</i>	
Mundane items (any number) .....	+1
Ritual items .....	+1 per item

Roll for the first violation and *each time one of these modifiers increases*. All modifiers for other kinds of violations (even unrelated ones) stand! Enough digging around in a tomb *will* eventually awaken the dead.

*Example:* A party of archaeologists open a tomb. The GM immediately rolls vs. 3. He rolls again when they enter, this time at 4. Opening a mummy case (tampering) forces another roll at 5. Later that night, tomb robbers come along and hack the mummy's hand off, requiring a new roll at 3 + 1 (entry) + 3 (mutilation) = 7. They then steal a ritual amulet, and the GM rolls again at 8. If *any* of these rolls succeed, the mummy wakes up . . .

*Form:* Tomb guardians tend to be ghosts (p. 68), mummies (p. 72) or wights (p. 84), with whatever abilities the GM has decided upon.

ments #1, #2 and #5, while horror leans toward #1, #3 and #4. Traditional beliefs are more in line with #4, with the occasional smattering of #1 and #5. *All* of the above can be used if the GM feels up to the challenge, however.

## Types

Once the GM knows where the undead come from, he has to determine what classes of undead exist in his campaign world.

### Form

The spectral undead are ubiquitous in real-world folklore. They are hard to track down and don't leave a lot of incriminating evidence behind. Their "ghost abilities" (p. 52) let them produce a wide range of supernatural phenomena without revealing their presence, and they cannot be defeated by brute force. This makes them ideal for horror and semi-realistic historical campaigns where the existence of the undead is a mystery and where the GM wants the unexplained to remain that way. The drawback is that these entities require special powers to detect and combat – powers that aren't common in the kinds of campaigns they're best suited to. Solutions include making the undead benign and making sure the PCs can get access to countermeasures.

The corporeal undead are common in horror movies and fantasy. They pose a concrete threat to the living, but can usually be defeated by physical means. This makes them ideal for fantasy and "splatter" campaigns, where the undead are common knowledge and the PCs are expected to splash them all over the scenery with swords and guns. The drawbacks to this are obvious. First, the undead are only scary until the PCs realize that they can be hurt. Second, the GM has to strain his players' suspension of disbelief to keep these undead "unknown," since they leave a lot of evidence behind. Solutions include playing the undead intelligently and making sure that violent encounters occur in isolated locales with no witnesses – just like in the movies!

### Motivation

The restless dead are common in folklore. They work well in historical and horror campaigns, and raise the fewest religious questions. They are probably the only undead that work well in semi-realistic campaigns without sorcery and undead conspiracies.

The willful dead are for the most part nontraditional (except for vampires) and best reserved for fantasy campaigns. The GM should decide *exactly* what spells, rituals and ingredients it takes to become a willful undead being, then decide who knows those secrets. There is no reason to share this with the players!

The enslaved dead are almost always associated with sorcerers in folklore, making them appropriate mainly for campaigns with professional wizards. If the enslaved dead exist, it is important to address the issue of free will and the undead (see *Free Will and the Undead*, p. 119).

### Nature

The undead can be spiritual entities, or they can be magical or psionic phenomena; see *Magical Undead* and *Psionic Undead* (p. 104). This distinction can be made on the basis of individual undead beings, entire undead "species" or even the undead as a whole (GM's option). Magical undead are most common in fantasy settings; psionic undead are usually found in horror games, especially in modern-day investigative campaigns with lots of rubber-science explanations for psi, like *GURPS Black Ops*.

## DEFINING YOUR CAMPAIGN

(Continued)

### Mode

Mode defines the way the genre is approached and the kinds of events the campaign will focus on. Modes qualify genres, and are a lot like adjectives: several can be used at once, unless they negate one another, but it's a good idea to avoid using too many.

*Action:* The focus is on the physical: chases, combat, escaping from death traps, etc. The undead are usually targets, except in action conspiracy games, where the PCs and the undead take turns being targets. Action fantasy is often called "hack 'n' slash."

*Camp or Melodramatic:* The genre's clichés are exaggerated for the sake of humor: fantasy necromancers all have skull-tipped wands and laugh like maniacs, horror vampires all look like Bela Lugosi, etc.

*Cinematic:* The scene is sacred and realism takes the back seat. E.g., in cinematic horror, any graveyard that shows up will contain the undead – even if in reality someone would have noticed before now – because it makes the scene more interesting.

*Dramatic:* The story is sacred. Everything that happens has a purpose and there are no silly excesses. E.g., in dramatic sci-fi, no one laughs at the Professor's nonsensical explanation of the zombie plague, because it's an important part of the story.

*Gothic:* The focus is on an oppressive atmosphere that pits man against man, nature or the supernatural, and the undead have a heavy symbolic value. E.g., in Gothic fantasy, the vampire is an evil count who symbolizes plague and feudal oppression.

*Humorous or Silly:* Nothing is sacred or makes much sense. Skeletons will always be found in closets, mummies will joke about their mummies and vampires will bite Frenchmen and yell, "Yow! Garlic!"

*Investigative:* The PCs are undead hunters, FBI agents, etc., who actively seek out the undead. In conspiracy games, they seek to crack the conspiracy; in horror, they try to rationalize horrific acts and track down the culprits.

*Mystery:* The focus is on the cerebral: piecing together clues, playing mind games, etc. This differs from the investigative mode in that the protagonists need not be professionals; all that matters is that brains are more important than brawn.

*Over-the-Top:* Anything that fits the genre or scene is acceptable, regardless of *how* exaggerated or unrealistic it is. E.g., in over-the-top action fantasy, a martial-arts master can decapitate a vampire with a single karate chop!

Continued on next page . . .



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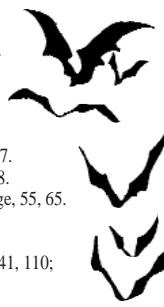


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