

CLONES The TROUBLE with CLONES

By Ed Wisniowski
Art by [Fredd Gorham](#)

Cloning is a popular theme in science-fiction roleplaying, but it can make life miserable for the GM. Metaphysical, mechanical and common-sense questions arise in an unending stream once the duplication of human beings becomes available technology in a campaign. This article addresses the major issues, and how to keep them under control.

The Easy Out

A campaign's tech level defines what type of cloning PCs can access. At low tech levels, only magical options are open - - and the inventive GM can create a host of eerie side effects or repercussions to limit availability and usefulness. The first time a PC has to fight his double for possession of their one-and-only soul will make a lasting impression on every player.

Societies with current technology - - *GURPS'* TL7 - - *may* be able to clone small mammals, but humans would be an expensive, iffy and state-of-the-art proposition. PCs can be denied access to cloning outright.

At higher tech levels, cloning becomes reliable and cheap, at least in the [GURPS](#) system. GMs should feel free to modify both factors - - Well, your clone developed with the right number of fingers and toes; problem is they're on the wrong limbs. Looks like you'll have to sell another Space Megaliner to pay for another try." - - especially if he wants to promote bionics in his campaign.

The State of Copying Uncle Art

Once cloning becomes available, its technical advancement should be determined.

Currently, medical technology can't support a fetus outside of the body, so anyone able to make clones in a TL 7 campaign may need surrogates to carry the children to term and/or raise them. For an interesting portrayal of low-tech cloning, read *The Boys from Brazil* or rent the movie adaptation.

At higher tech levels, a clone can be grown to full maturity in a clinic, but its brain will remain a clean slate at TL 8. The clone will need training and development before it enters society. The development of braintaping at TL 9 allows memories to

be transferred directly into the clone's mind, producing a nearly exact copy of its source. At TL 10, braintaping technology capable of implanting person A's identity into a clone of person B may be available.

GURPS assumes all clones undergo forced aging, measured in weeks. This need not be assumed; the aging technology may elude scientists until a later tech level than cloning's debut. Or perhaps clones can be force-aged, but the process can't be *stopped*, limiting their life span to months. If clones must grow at normal speeds, many of the advantages (and temptations) of commissioning one will be erased.

After determining how advanced cloning is in a campaign, other questions related to the technology need be answered: Does the technology require special, expensive clinics, or can any hospital afford cloning facilities? Can clones be made of clones? Are clones that identical to an adult source? (Most genres consider this a staple of cloning, but the GM can decree that childhood environmental factors help shape a person's physique and can't be duplicated. Thus clones resemble but don't mirror their source.)

Splicing Them In

Once the technical parameters become defined, society's reaction to cloning needs to be determined. This often proves the most fascinating aspect of the job.

Fundamentalist societies might ban the technology as evil or unnatural. Clones may even be beaten in the streets by mobs, as living examples of the Devil's work. Liberal cultures will struggle with human-rights issues for these new people, while questions on voting and citizenship come up immediately in a democratic society. Liberal forces would, by doctrine, be the most likely to champion clones' rights - - but conservatives would be more likely to afford clones with which to flood the polls! Regardless, *some* faction or several of them will argue clones have fewer human rights than naturally born humans, all the way down to all the personal liberties bestowed upon other laboratory products such as bathroom cleanser . . .

If clones receive voting rights, both conservative and liberal forces will court the "clone vote" (among those clones not created specifically *to* vote) as a way to improve their situations politically. Interesting concessions may result.

Dictatorial nations might use clones to remake their nations. People with desirable racial characteristics may be cloned to replace people removed in purges. Entire job categories could be filled with "identical" clones, which would seem like a good idea to some dictators, till all their soldiers rebelled simultaneously!

Some societal impact will be outside human control. A major technological advance creates a ripple effect, such as when the assembly line helped create the Luddite movement in England, the automobile helped create suburbs and the computer decimated the number of clerks needed in modern business. Artificial human beings likely will reshape things even more radically - - often in unforeseen ways.



Ownership of genetic information will substantially define cloning. Today, most people own their own genetic material and no one else has any right to it. Contrary to popular conspiracy theories, the

government can only use genetic information to identify a person; people don't have to turn over genetic information except in criminal or paternity trials (though insurance companies already are working on changing things . . .). This right may remain intact, or governments may claim the right to clone their most talented citizens. In a cyberpunk setting, corps may claim the same right of their employees. If *no one* owns genetic rights, then anyone may be surprised to bump into himself on the street. Celebrities may find hundreds of copies of themselves being created to serve as prostitutes (but note that at cloning-capable tech levels, cosmetic surgery can mimic celebrities closely enough to suit many purposes such as this without cloning).

Beyond genetic ownership, who can legally order up a clone? Many societies will restrict cloning's access. Those that don't still must determine whether a clone can clone itself, if the technology permits. Many societies will find it reasonable to limit the number of clones a person can make.

One of the least plausible staples of cloning in *GURPS* is the "clone organ bank," where a blank-minded clone is maintained as a source of spare parts, or a spare body. Most liberal democratic societies would outlaw this, weighing minimal human rights more heavily than the convenience of roleplayers . . .

Containing Clones

The simplest way to keep cloning from getting out of hand - - yet retain its potential as a plot device - - is to restrict access. Perhaps PCs have to win an expensive court battle to get a license to commission a clone. Most campaigns should retain genetic-ownership rights, leading to the potential for mammoth court fights over copyright infringements and the occasional unwary person selling their right and finding the streets flooded with copies of himself! Legal restrictions work particularly well because they allow abuse by filthy rich, influential NPCs. ("The chairman of the board wants me to train all 7,200 of his clones in what?!")

Human rights are trickier. Realistically, any society that bestows citizenship rights likely will grant the full works. (Would *you* discriminate against someone just because they didn't grow up in a human womb? Besides, if the technology is available, some non-clones will gestate in clinics where a mother's health would be at risk.) Social Stigmas, on the other hand, likely will endure the best efforts of public relations. Even in enlightened societies, many will resent and/or fear clones for taking up jobs, being more talented on average and for being *unnatural*

. GMs may want to design a package of social disadvantages for every clone in his campaign. Better yet would be two packages, one for clones in liberal democracies and one for clones in more repressive societies. Any other disadvantages shared by clones - - such as Short Lifespan or Unnatural Feature - - could be included as well.

An important non-background question the GM must answer is the one that prompted clones' roleplaying popularity in the first place: can players who get their character killed take up where they left off with a clone copy? Generous GMs may allow it; others can rightfully argue that a clone no more represents the character than would a twin. Disallowing clone-hopping will curb abuse.

Ultimately, the campaign setting for cloning should leave room for conflict - - between clones and the rest of society, between different visions of where cloning should head, and between clones and their originals themselves! To do otherwise

sharply reduces cloning's potential as a dramatic device.

Plot Ideas

Someone - - preferably one of the PCs' enemies - - has gained access to the party's genetic information and cloned them with orders to hunt down and extinguish the original party!

A PC with a clone has just bought himself an expensive advantage with his hard-earned experience points. The clone demands the same advantage, and the GM graciously offers to let the character use his next umpteen points to pay for it! (This one's a lot like parenting . . .)

Donors - - the Media Kind

For an example of how players can find themselves struggling with everyday life when an exact copy is walking the streets, see the film *Multiplicity*.

Any campaign with clones can establish a trademark for them. Frank Herbert in his book *The Jesus Incident*, had all clones take the middle name Lon. Other signs you are dealing with a clone may be a lack of a belly button (though a pseudoclone's navel becomes an important plot device in Robert Heinlein's *Friday*), or a prominent tattoo making it clear this person came from the lab and not the womb.

A popular theme in B-movies and books is to allow clones to communicate telepathically with each other. This *should* cost points.

Article publication date: June 5, 1998

Copyright © 1998 by [Steve Jackson Games](#). All rights reserved. Pyramid subscribers are permitted to read this article online, or download it and print out a single hardcopy for personal use. Copying this text to any other online system or BBS, or making more than one hardcopy, is *strictly prohibited*. So please don't. And if you encounter copies of this article elsewhere on the web, please report it to webmaster@sjgames.com.



[Home](#) - [Subscribe!](#) - [Current Issue](#) - [Playtesting](#) - [Chat](#) - - - [Feedback](#)