



# Signs and Portents

## A Model of Magic for *GURPS*

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In *GURPS*, thaumatology is the systematic study of magic. It's used to perform magical research, including inventing new spells and identifying unknown spells. But those uses are portrayed fairly abstractly; there's not much attempt to picture what mages are actually doing that calls for Thaumatology rolls. The level of detail is rather like that of science fiction scripts that say "insert technobabble." For many fantasy games, and for certain genres of fantasy, that's fine. But what if you want a fantasy analog of hard science fiction, where the theoretical concepts embodied in magic are actually important to the story and where the players have a chance of thinking through a problem about magic?

This article offers one model of what magic is and how it works. It's partly inspired by the treatment of magic in *GURPS Cabal*, and partly an expansion of some passages in *GURPS Fantasy* that discuss the nature of magic. It's not the only way to approach magic, but it's one way of doing so. GMs who want a theoretical foundation for answering questions about magic may find it useful in several ways: for visualizing how spells are cast in more detail, for guiding players' efforts to work out new spells, or for building a world where magic works.

## The Theory of Signs

In this approach, the basis of magic is semiotics, or the theory of signs. Semiotics was developed by an American philosopher, C.S. Peirce, in the nineteenth century, though his ideas on it were partly inspired by medieval scholastic theories. In the 20th century, linguists and anthropologists picked it up and ran with it; it became a major influence on the French structuralists, for example.

In the technical language of semiotics, a sign is anything that stands for something else. Signs are divided into three subtypes: indices, which signify something that caused them, as smoke signifies fire; icons, which signify something that they look like, as a portrait signifies the person portrayed; and symbols, which signify something by social convention, as the English word "cat" or the Japanese word "neko" signifies a common household pet.

*GURPS Fantasy* uses the same three categories, but less technical names, in *The Three Laws of Magic*. It uses the word "symbol" more broadly, for signs of all kinds. It calls the three subtypes *evidence*, *likenesses*, and *words*. The rest of this article will use those names, not the technical ones, except that it will use the more general word "sign" instead of "symbol."

## The Practice of Magic

A common element in a lot of magical traditions is that the magician operates on a sign with the goal of affecting the thing it signifies. For example, a black magician might make a wax image of a human being (a likeness), name it after an intended victim (a word), with some of the victim's blood, saliva, or hair mixed into the wax (evidence) -- and then inflict injuries on it as a way of inflicting the same injuries on his victim.

In this version of thaumatology, this link between the sign and the thing it signifies is the theoretical basis for all of magic. Magic itself is a collection of methods for applying this theory. Every magical operation involves coming up with ways of acting out a desired outcome, using signs of various kinds. The more detailed the acting out, and the more the mage's mind is focused on its intended meaning, the more effect the operation has on the real world.

**GURPS Cabal** provided a detailed set of rules for this approach to magic, in its rules for the laws of sympathy (pp. 73-74). **GURPS Fantasy** adopted those same rules as the basis for correspondences (pp. 163-164) and correspondence magic (pp. 160-161).

Two of the laws of sympathy come from Sir James Frazer's classic study, *The Golden Bough*. The Law of Similarity says that things that look or act alike *are*, or, in a magical sense, are the same thing. A photograph, a good painting, or a sculpted image of a person is the person; a series of musical tones is the cry of a cuckoo; an orgy in the fields about to be plowed fertilizes the soil and makes it fruitful. This is founded on the use of likenesses or icons: the "similarity" on which magic is based exactly fits the semiotic relation between a thing or action and its likeness.

The basis for the Law of Contagion was less obvious. It states that two objects that have once come into contact remain connected. A person's blood or fingernail clippings, or his clothing or possessions, is magically linked to him and can be used to cast spells on him. But where does this link come from? Randall Garrett's Lord Darcy stories, set in a world where magic has been turned into a science, explains the connection as a matter of relevance: a garment that has been worn once, for a short time, is not significantly affected by the wearing, because it would be much the same if someone else had worn it, or even if no one had worn it at all, so it has little magical link to its wearer; but a garment that has been worn repeatedly will have been stretched and worn by the shape of its wearer's body and by his habitual motions, making it different than it would have been had it been left on its hanger. This amounts to saying that its current state has to have been causally affected by its wearer, and is a causally based sign of his having worn it. This is the kind of sign that forensicists look for, which is why **GURPS Fantasy** adopted the name "evidence" for it. The relation of contagion that links two objects amounts to one object having affected the other causally at some point; it fits the semiotic relation between evidence and the thing it evidences.

**GURPS Cabal** brings in a third magical principle: the Law of Names, which says that knowing the name of a thing gives power over the thing. This obviously fits the semiotic relation between a word and the object or action it refers to. The complications come from the idea that some words are more perfect fits than others -- in the extreme case, that people, or spirits, have true names that give total power over them. (In Jewish legend, for example, Lilith gained her supernatural powers by learning the true name of God, which granted her immunity to God's omnipotence.) The Words of Power of **GURPS Cabal** are the ultimate realization of this principle: words that in themselves can create the things they name. (In the terms of **GURPS Powers**, each Word of Power amounts to a form of the Create advantage, directed to the specific objects and phenomena included within its decan, with some form of the Cosmic advantage, but also with the Trigger and Uncontrollable disadvantages. Bear in mind that the things the various Words create are often fairly abstract!)

Coming up with a spell involves coming up with ways of exploiting these semiotic relations. The spell needs to contain a sign of the thing it affects, and a sign of the desired effect. For a more extreme version, the spell may need to contain signs of all three kinds! In the latter case, the GM should allow the use of "placeholder" correspondences, which grant a zero modifier, but count as correspondences for the purposes of making spells work.

The following table lists correspondence modifiers, including placeholder modifiers:

Any object the subject has ever touched:	+0
An object the subject has handled enough to affect it substantially:	+1
An object the subject has made:	+2
Dead tissue from the subject's body:	+2
Living matter from the subject's body:	+3
The subject's corpse:	+3
Anything shaped like the subject (e.g., a wax doll for a man):	+0
A sketch of the subject:	+1
A natural object that shares one of the subject's attributes (e.g., a heart-shaped leaf for the heart):	+1
A formal portrait by a skilled artist:	+2
A close blood relative, or a vampire's sire or get:	+2
An identical twin or clone:	+3
Any phrase that describes the subject:	+0
An identifier such as a serial number:	+1
A nickname or "use name":	+2
A name used as a signature:	+3
A true name:	+4

## Signs as Portents

One important category of magical abilities is divination and soothsaying. Most languages treat perceiving and knowing as actions and represent them as verbs, so it's possible to assimilate them to the standard pattern of "acting on the sign to affect the thing." But the actions involved are more internal than ordinary physical actions. Ordinary perception largely involves knowing things by the signs of those things, so magical perception can rather easily be assimilated to it.

The Law of Contagion makes it possible to know things through other things that they have been in contact with, as in psychometry or psychic tracking. An extension of this is to deliberately arrange the contact to make divination possible, as in reading someone's fate from the leaves at the bottom of his teacup. In addition, this law includes knowing a person's or object's inner nature from its visible exterior, as in palmistry, physiognomy, or the diagnostic procedures of Esoteric Medicine. This sort of awareness is akin to physical sensation, in which an organism experiences an internal state of its own body, such as warmth, cold, or pain, and reacts to the environmental conditions that caused it.

The Law of Similarity gives knowledge of things through other things that resemble them, typically through the creation of pictures or images. Many systematic schemes of divination rely on pictorial models, such as the I Ching, with its hexagrams being described in terms such as "Fire over Mountain," or the Tarot, with the pictures on the faces of cards being laid out in standard patterns that create a kind of story. Even astrology can be interpreted in this way, with

the arrangement of the planets against the constellations creating a kind of diagram of a person's mind or destiny. Many of these arts add a touch of the Law of Contagion, as when a Tarot reading begins with the subject choosing one of the cards as his "significator," the image that represents him. This sort of awareness is akin to perception, in which an organism responds to patterns in its environment through senses such as vision, hearing, or sonar.

The Law of Names can be applied in two related ways. In the first place, it allows knowing things through the properties of their names, as in numerology, which assigns numerical values to the letters of a name, adds them up, and gives a meaning to the resulting numerical score. But in the second place, it allows sortilege, or divination by throwing lots, in which the diviner assigns a meaning to each possible outcome of an event such as the fall of a die, and then performs an action that randomly selects one outcome. (Viewed as a magical procedure, playing **GURPS** would involve repeated magically divining the fates of characters through dice rolls!) The level of human awareness that goes with names is conceptual thought, aided by language, in which the production of a word or symbol triggers memory of the thing it names or refers to.

## Signs and Realms

**GURPS Cabal** offers an elaborate magical cosmology, in which Earth and the entire physical universe are only the lowest of four metaphysical realms (see pp. 43-54). It's possible to describe these realms in terms of the theory of signs, and by doing so to gain a clearer image of how things work in each of them.

Assiah, the material plane, is the realm of causal signs, or evidence. That is, its internal functioning is governed by the laws of cause and effect, as studied by the natural sciences. Distance in Assiah, for example, is a function of how far apart two things are in terms of causal pathway -- with the speed of light being the universal limit on causal relationships. Beings in Assiah are made up of matter, whose basic attribute is the ability to be affected by causal agencies, and energy, whose basic attribute is the ability to do work, or to be a causal agency. Their awareness of the world is based on physical stimuli that affect their sense organs causally. The only exceptions to the rule of cause and effect in Assiah are interference effects from the higher planes.

Yetzirah, the astral plane, is a different kind of place entirely. Its internal functioning is governed not by cause and effect, but by representational signs, or likenesses. Distance in Yetzirah is based on how far apart two things are in appearance; for example, two places that both contain roses will be close together, and it's easy to travel from one to the other. This gives Yetzirah a dreamlike logic.

Some parts of Yetzirah are "close" to Assiah: that is, they contain objects and places that look very much like the material world. Others are distorted, surreal, or outright fantastic. Practically any art style that humanity has come up with, from ancient Chinese landscape paintings to Byzantine mosaics to Salvador Dali's surrealistic distortions, can be found in some realm within Yetzirah. The most distant reaches of Yetzirah approach pure abstract geometry, and are "close" to the higher realm of Briah.

Beings in Yetzirah are not made out of matter, though they may resemble material objects or creatures. Rather, they're made out of images and patterns. As a result, the biology of Yetzirah is different from that of Assiah. Some biologists have speculated about "morphic fields" that exist within organisms and control the shape and growth of their bodies; the creatures of Yetzirah *are* morphic fields, existing independent of material bodies. (So far as the morphic fields theory is

true in Assiah at all, it's because Yetzirah impinges on Assiah in some measure.) Awareness in Yetzirah is direct perception of patterns without the need for a physical stimulus, or, literally, ESP: extra-sensory perception.

Beyond Yetzirah is Briah, the iconic realm, or the realm of forms. This actually is a secondary attribute of Briah: not how Briah is in itself, but how it is seen from Yetzirah. The far reaches of Yetzirah, devoted to abstract forms (ranging from Euclidean right angles and parallel lines to fractal geometries), are the realms where it overlaps with and resembles Briah. What Briah is in itself is the realm of words, and of related entities such as the symbols of abstract mathematics. Ask any mathematician: diagrams *represent* geometric objects and relationships, but those relationships actually are matters of abstract logic than transcends images.

Entities in Briah are therefore pure abstractions, such as the aethyrs of the 36 decans. Relations between them are grammatical or logical. The distance between them is conceptual distance, a matter of their sharing or not sharing logical attributes. Their space is thus structured like a matrix in many dimensions, with each cell of the matrix representing a specific combination of logical possibilities. Travel through Briah is not a continuous process of movement, through either physical space or the imagistic space of dreams; it's more like moves on a game board. Awareness in Briah involves an intuitive grasp of a concept in its pure form, independent of any perceived or imagined object that the concept refers to. Action involves defining entities, postulating their occurrence, or proving things about them.

Finally, beyond Briah is Atziluth, the realm of the godhead. No category of signs corresponds to this realm. Rather, it's a domain of unity, where the sign and the thing signified are not merely linked, but identical. As in Hindu thought, attaining this level involves setting aside every form of dualism. Magical effects in Atziluth are produced, not by casting spells, but by a simple exertion of will, requiring a Will roll. Similarly, knowledge is attained, not by rituals of divination, but by direct intuitive awareness, requiring an IQ roll.

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