

D&D 5e Psionics Design Conspectus

An Examination of the Challenges and Possibilities for Designing Psionics in Fifth Edition Dungeons & Dragons

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Psionic History

Psionic powers have been part of *Dungeons & Dragons* since the initial release of the paperback staple-bound books (sometimes called “edition zero” or “original edition”). *Eldritch Wizardry* introduced psionics as a system to cover mystical powers of the mind, as well as some elements of body control, astral projection, and remote sensing. Terminology included “yogi” and “siddhis,” showing a clear line of influence from then-mystical thought regarding yoga, meditation, vibrating to higher planes of consciousness, altered states of being, and biofeedback and physical mastery stemming from spiritual enlightenment. Over the course of D&D’s many editions, psionics have remained an optional addition, appearing as an appendix in 1st edition AD&D, a sourcebook in 2nd edition, a set of hardcover expansions in 3rd edition, and an added power source in 4th edition. 5th edition already includes some nods in this direction, including psionic monsters like the mind flayer, characters with minor inherent psionic abilities like the yuan-ti and the gith, and the psychic damage type. For 5th edition *Dungeons & Dragons*, what might psionics look like?

Why Psionics?

The first question is, of course, why have psionics at all?

A common refrain is that psionic powers are “too sci-fi” for *Dungeons & Dragons*. In some iterations, certain powers are even referred to as “sciences.” Often the terminology feels very technical, with names like “psychometabolism” and “wormhole,” that evoke ideas of characters who bend space and time using their minds to alter well-understood principles of gravity or physiology—principles that aren’t typically known to characters in low-technology fantasy worlds. The very word “psionic” is a portmanteau of “psycho-electronic.”

The idea of mental powers isn’t purely a science fiction trope, though. As noted in the original appearance of psionics in *Eldritch Wizardry*, the idea of mystics who channel strange abilities through meditation, concentration, and exploration of different realms of consciousness certainly predates highly technological society. In fantasy literature, psychic phenomena show up in staples of fantasy from across the genre, not just in science fiction.

Clearly there’s a place for psionics in *Dungeons & Dragons*, for people who find this kind of fantasy interesting.

Inspirations

Since psychic powers do show up in fantasy literature, there are several sources that can be consulted to inspire the design. Fantasy and near-fantasy books of this sort include:

- *The Deryni Chronicles* by Katherine Kurtz. These were so influential upon psionics in D&D that they were directly used in *Dragon* magazine issue 78 for the creation of Deryni characters and a psionist class.
- *The Barsoom Saga* by Edgar Rice Burroughs, covering the adventures of John Carter of Mars and his family, includes significant telepathic powers. John Carter himself learns telepathy from the Martians, and later books include significant psychic wars on the dying red planet.
- *The Vlad Taltos Series* by Steven Brust (*Jherag*, *Yendi*, et. al.) includes depictions of a range of psychic phenomena that are in the setting classed as “witchcraft,” but all thematically relate to meditation, group communion, and internal concentration.
- *Dragonriders of Pern* by Anne McCaffery is of course actually science fiction, but the early books all appear to be set in a fantasy world and it’s not until later in the series that it’s revealed to be a “lost colony” sci-fi motif. This series includes telepathic communication between humans and their dragon allies.
- *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien doesn’t include psionics *per*

se, but elves do communicate in the books by pure mental messaging.

- The *Saga of Pliocene Exile* by Julian May is science fiction that casts the characters back into the pliocene age, with limited technological resources, and with strongly categorized psychic powers.
- The *Books of the New Sun* by Gene Wolfe include depictions of telepathic creatures on a fantastical Earth (actually a far future where civilization has largely collapsed and people live with aliens among the ruins of a dying world).
- The *Witch World* series by Andre Norton has a blurred line between magic and psychic powers, as telepathy and other powers are practiced by the witches and it may be that they are simply called “magic” in the setting.
- *The Horseclans* series by Robert Adams includes pastoral nomads who communicate with sabercats and horses via telepathy on a denuded future Earth where humans have reverted to subsistence living in clans.

Clearly there are a diverse set of inspirations. The most common related motif is telepathy, which appears even in stories that otherwise have no other psychic powers. The least common is creation of objects via mental power, which for the most part is a feature of the *Saga of Pliocene Exile*. Other phenomena include danger sense, remote viewing, and telekinesis in various forms.

Ideally, a psionics system should allow players to look to these inspirations, then follow them to make their own characters with these kinds of abilities.

Psionic Design Principles

Now let's look at the *design principles* behind psionics in D&D. Psionic powers fill a role of a specific type of supernatural power distinct from magic. Psionic characters rely on a wellspring of internal power or a cosmic source of meta-consciousness that empowers them to perform paranormal feats. To make a successful psionic system, it must do the following:

- Allow creation of characters and adversaries fueled by psionic powers
- Address the fictional source of psionic power and its place in the game's worlds and settings
- Provide a distinctive niche that makes playing a psionic character feel different from other character types
- Fit 5e's design principles of being easy to understand, simple to document, and with minimal added complexity

This provides a lot of space for designing psionics in many different directions. One can take inspiration from earlier editions, or go in a radically new direction. Let's look at a few possibilities.

Version 1: Psionics as Subclasses

This version is very simple because it's the version that's already being explored through *Unearthed Arcana* articles!

In this version, psionic powers are the purview of specific subclasses. A fighter could be a psionic fighter (the psychic warrior) who uses psychic powers to augment their battlefield prowess. A sorcerer could actually be a psychic (the psionist) whose "spells" are in fact psionic abilities.

The recent *Unearthed Arcana* article of psionic fighter, wizard, and rogue subclasses fits this format:

<https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/unearthed-arcana/unearthed-arcana-fighter-rogue-and-wizard>

As does the sorcerer-psionist from the DM's Guild *Ravenloft Gazetteer: Kalidnay*:
<https://www.dmsguild.com/product/292393/Ravenloft-Gazetteer-Kalidnay>

In this iteration, there might be a few new spells available only to those who pursue these special subclasses, but psionics do not have a distinct power set. Instead, your psychic powers are detailed solely as a result of your subclass choice.

Let's break down the pros and cons of this method.

Pros:

- Easy to implement - you can add as much or as little psychic flavor as you want by the simple expedient of making one or more new subclasses

- No new classes or power systems means low overhead to complexity - there's no introduction of an entirely different character class with its own mechanics
- Lets you decide how much you want to add because you can choose which subclasses you want; maybe your campaign has psionics, but no psychic warriors or soulknives

Cons:

- No unified system to psionics that makes it feel like its own source of power—your character is still casting spells, shoving people on the battlefield, or enchanting a weapon, it's just called “psionic”; no set of powers that you tap into as psionics that are psionic and related to each other whether you are a warrior, a scholar, or a scoundrel
- Trouble with multiclassing—it's hard to make a rogue who has a smattering of psychic powers of your choice, when a psychic rogue is *de facto* a soulknife
- Inflexible—if you envision playing a psychic warrior as a shapeshifter who can harden skin and secrete poison, or a clairsentient who can predict the enemy's moves and sense incoming attacks, you're out of luck

This is a solution that is easy to add to sourcebooks because the word count is minimal—a subclass is usually just a few pages and sometimes can fit on one page. But it's not very satisfying for players who want a wide range of powers or a variety of character types. It also runs the risk of excluding many character types unless you balloon the number of subclasses significantly. This also means you run the

risk of having exclusive overlaps, such as making a psychic warrior who fights like Darth Vader (as described in the interview with Jeremy Crawford about the *Unearthed Arcana* article linked above) but can never develop body-control powers, and if you have a separate subclass for the biokinetic, they can never develop telekinetic abilities (aside from the rudimentary ones available from a feat).

Version 2: Psionics as Spell-Like Powers

In the 3rd edition of D&D, psionics were almost identical to spells. Psions would “manifest” (cast) a power, and powers came in levels and were learned over a psion's career, in much the same way that a sorcerer would gain more and more spells with experience. The main divergence was in the use of psionic power points—instead of casting powers using slots like spells, they'd use a number of points (somewhat similar to sorcery points in 5e). They could also augment powers with points, which occasionally led to some odd edge cases like being able to *enlarge* to immense sizes. Overall, the system was designed to be point-based and separated into distinct disciplines of power, but highly similar to spellcasting. Indeed, many of the powers were simply *<spell name>, psionic!*

To make psionics feel distinct, we'd want it to differ in some notable way from the usual format of spellcasting. Looking back, in the implementations of psionics in 0e, 1e, and 2e, there are divisions of powers into two groups—“devotions” (low-impact powers) and “sciences” (flashy powerful stuff). Keeping this divide—say, as “minor powers”

and “major powers”—means a significant streamlining: every power is either minor and thus similar to a 1st-level spell, or major and thus around... let’s say a 6th-level spell. We can keep the divisions of *psionic disciplines* in a fashion similar to the schools of magic, so all telepathy-themed powers are part of the Telepathy discipline, all flashes of insight and remote viewing and object reading are part of the Clairsentience discipline, all healing and physical augmentation are part of the Psychometabolism discipline, and so on. Figuring out whether there are groupings like Metapsionics and Metacreativity can be handled later as the design becomes more detailed—this is just a rough outline. But now we have a problem: if you only have minor (1st-level-equivalent) and major (6th-level-equivalent) powers, you have some significant power gaps. You have to regrade many powers to reduce them to the functional equivalent of a 1st-level spell. And any character who gains these powers is falling way behind the power curve at character levels 3-10: they never get anything equivalent to 2nd, 3rd, 4th, or 5th-level spells. This is a significant deficit. What if we swipe the 3e ability to *augment* powers? Since you are only casting minor or major powers, you presumably only have minor and major slots. Spend more slots and you can augment a power—just like casting a spell with a higher-level spell slot. Then your character has an *augmentation limit*, which is the maximum number of slots they can spend on augmentation. A 1st-level character can’t augment powers yet, just like a 1st-level wizard doesn’t have 2nd-level spell slots to cast their spells yet. This also opens the door to another interesting wrinkle: Powers might change as you augment them. You don’t just increase

the damage of your ectoplasmic fire; you refine your control of psychokinetic forces (or what-have-you) and become able to use a minor power in newer, stronger ways. This is a great thematic addition to psionics to distinguish them from magicians: A wizard might know the *fly* spell but not know *levitate* or *feather fall*, because each spell is a distinct instance of magical knowledge and they aren’t necessarily related. But if your psionist can levitate psychokinetically, this is a personal power that can be refined and strengthened with practice. Over time it makes sense that the psionist would be able to augment this power, starting with just floating off the ground but eventually reaching a pinnacle of flying through the air like that wizard. This also means that if we decide that the psionist has a small number of powers but great flexibility in using them by spending power slots, your psionist essentially gains new uses for their powers at higher levels. You don’t have to use one of your precious power picks to improve your *levitation* into the ability to *fly*. But a character who never chose the *psionic levitation* power in the first place has to pick the power. This means that many psionic characters will feel very distinct, because each has a niche based on their power choices, and will tend to advance those powers and use them in newer, stronger ways as they gain levels.

Sample Power: Psionic Flight

Now that we have this design concept, let’s rough out a power. It’s a minor power, but it can be augmented. As it’s augmented, it gains more flexibility. Here’s our idea for the minor psychokinetic power of *psionic flight*. (Should flight be psychoportation? Exercise for a different time!)

Flight, Psionic

Psychokinesis minor power

Manifesting Time: 1 action

Range: Self

Duration: Concentration, up to 1 minute

You rise vertically, up to 20 feet, and remain suspended there for the duration. You move only by pushing or pulling against a fixed object or surface within reach (such as a wall or a ceiling), which allows you to move as if you were climbing. You can change your altitude by up to 20 feet in either direction on your turn.

When the power ends, you float gently to the ground if still aloft.

Augmentation. One level of augmentation increases the duration to Concentration, up to 10 minutes, and allows you to affect a target other than yourself up to 500 pounds in weight that you can see up to a range of 60 feet. An unwilling creature that succeeds on a Constitution saving throw is unaffected. You can use your action to move the target, which must remain within the power's range.

Two levels of augmentation allow you or a target touched to gain a fly speed of 60 feet with a duration of Concentration, up to 10 minutes. Additional levels of augmentation above two allow you to affect one additional creature per level.

Not a bad start! This power looks a lot like the *levitate* spell, but it starts out affecting only the psionic, and only for a short time. At higher levels, the psionicist can augment the power to last longer, make it affect

another creature, or advance to full-fledged telekinetic flight.

Sample Class: The Psionicist

Now that we have an idea of how powers might work, let's rough up someone who uses these powers—the psionicist.

The psionicist is a Wisdom-based class, as it's defined by personal insight, willpower, and intuition. We'll swipe elements of the sorcerer or warlock and say that the psionicist is a slightly better fighter than a wizard—say, proficient with simple weapons and light armor. (All that yoga pays off.) The psionicist is still a full “caster” type and has d6 Hit Dice.

If we don't introduce a new skill to cover knowledge of psychic powers (Psicraft), the psionicist probably has a spread of skills similar to the sorcerer or wizard. Because they might be intuitive telepaths or have “sixth sense,” though, they might have more of a Charisma focus than wizards. Let's say: Choose two of Arcana, Deception, History, Insight, Intimidation, Investigation, Nature, Perception, Persuasion, or Religion.

Since we've already broken up powers into different disciplines, that gives us a clear delineation for psionic subclasses: the Telepath, the Kineticist, the Seer, and so on. Each can have a few special class features in much the same way that wizard subclasses do.

Now, for powers... a psionicist will know a certain number of powers, the ones you've unlocked through training or gained by happenstance. The psionicist will also have a number of *minor power slots* and *major power slots*. Since we've already established that major powers are the equivalent of 6th- and higher level spells, a psionicist won't start with those.

To match a spellcaster, the psionicist starts off knowing one minor power of the player's choice, and gains one or two based on their choice of discipline (subclass). (This does mean we've locked in to picking your subclass at 1st level, like a sorcerer.) So a telepath might gain one telepathy power of the player's choice (a power that matches discipline) and one from any discipline. Say... *id insinuation* and *cell adjustment*. Or *mental barrier* and *dimension slide*.

The psionicist starts with 2 minor power slots, just like a spellcaster starts with 2 1st-level spell slots, and this goes up with level.

One tricky bit: Since you never gain 2nd or 3rd or higher level spell equivalents, the psionicist just gains a larger pool of minor power slots. This does mean that the psionicist has flexibility in using their powers many times, or augmenting them heavily a few times.

Table: Psionic Powers Available

Level	Minor Powers Known	Minor Power Slots
1st	1	2
2nd	2	3
3rd	2	7
4th	3	8
5th	3	12

Speaking of augmentation, the augmentation limit seems quite obvious. Spellcasters learn a new spell level with every odd class level. A psionicist's augmentation limit can follow this pattern,

so you get the equivalent of 2nd level powers at 3rd level character, 3rd level powers at 5th level character, and so on.

Table: Augmentation Limit

Level	Augmentation Limit
1st	0
2nd	0
3rd	1
4th	1
5th	2

... and so on. As the psionicist gains levels, their powers can be "juiced up" more to keep up with higher-level spell effects, and to become more flexible like our previous example of *psionic flight*.

The psionicist still needs class features, but the basic bones are now there, and this can also provide guidance for making other subclasses. The psychic warrior can be a fighter subclass that has access to a smaller number of powers (similar to the eldritch knight), while the divine mind is a paladin subclass that trades its spellcasting feature for psionics instead.

One other thing is missing. The psionicist needs an equivalent to cantrips—something usable at will, over and over again, that scales with level. Borrowing a term from 3e, let's call these *knacks*. We can make a short list of common powers so that each discipline has about four or five knacks for you to choose from, things like *mind thrust* for psychic damage or *skate* to briefly increase your movement speed. As with spellcasters, a typical psionicist should only

start with a few of these, primarily from their discipline of choice.

Let's look at the pros and cons of this approach.

Pros:

- Feels somewhat distinctive—similar to spellcasting, but with enough different choices about augmenting and picking powers to play differently
- Provides a great deal of character design flexibility; psionics come in many flavors, and other classes can latch on by having a limited suite of powers, so you can make almost any type of psychic character you can imagine
- Easy to add new powers if you want them, because each power is one small piece of content
- Unified system means that once you know how a power works for a class, you know how it works for everyone, and it feels like psionics come from a particular wellspring of abilities that are the same whether you are a fighter, a rogue, or a psionist—your class just influences what powers you use and how many you have, and how you blend them with other skills

Cons:

- Very heavyweight design by 5e standards; whole new classes, thousands of words of powers, lots of terms for players and DMs to learn
- Sticky for multiclassing because it won't stack well with other non-psionic classes
- Requires decision about whether psionics and magic affect each other or not, which can cause headaches

for DMs adjudicating defenses and counterplay of many powers

- No “bite size chunk” version; you need the whole system or none of it works

This kind of solution would be appropriate for its own sourcebook, like the ones sold on the DM's Guild. It's a lot to pick up and integrate into a D&D campaign. For players who like psionics, it's a huge chunk of material offering a wealth of options, but for casual, on-the-fence players, it may seem like a barrier to entry. Unless it's explicitly tied into part of a setting, like **Dark Sun** or **Eberron**, it seems like a lot of work that will only be meaningful to a few players in any given game group. That's a recipe for a book that doesn't sell well. From a design standpoint, the system is interesting, but from a sales standpoint, it's worrisome for a company like WotC that needs to move a lot of product to justify printing a sourcebook. (That's probably why there are so many versions like this on the DM's Guild!)

Version 3: Centralized Subsystem

The *Unearthed Arcana* series also introduced the mystic class, a psionic class that bore a strong resemblance to the 3e binder (from *Tome of Magic*). That implementation is very “fiddly” in that it harkens back to using power points (psi points), which can be spent in many ways in a large pool. It has some similarities to variant 2, above, in that you can spend extra points to augment powers, with some limitations. The mystic also appears to be a hybrid character close to the warlock in

terms of its combat ability (light armor, d8 hit dice).

What if we took the idea of psionic disciplines as power groupings, and we decoupled them from being features of one specific class? We could still have a mystic (or psionist or whatever you want to call it) but we can also have a separate “box” that is the power group for the *discipline of telepathy*, which then gives you several abilities. Then your class might let you branch out into other disciplines, or improve an existing discipline. In such a schema, your mystic/psionist would be the primary class to access these disciplines, and would get several of them and improve them markedly, but you could make other classes that had access to a restricted list, or to only the basic versions of a discipline. Let’s see what one of those disciplines might look like. It’s essentially a bucket of class features along a common theme, but you can improve it to a “greater” or “superior” level when you reach a higher character level, thereby unlocking extra powers.

Telepathy Discipline

You learn to expand your mind to connect with the thoughts of others, to defend yourself against mental intrusion, and to shape dreams, memories, and nightmares.

You gain the following benefits:

- *Telepathy*: You can communicate mentally with any intelligent creature that speaks a language within 30 feet.
- *Thought Shield*: You have resistance against psychic damage and advantage on Wisdom saving throws.
- *Mind Thrust*: As an action, you can fire a lance of mental energy at a

single living creature within 60’.

The target takes 1d10 psychic damage, or half as much with a successful Wisdom saving throw. (This ability scales up like cantrips, but I’m not going to type that up in finalized form right now.)

- *Mental Barrier*: As a reaction, you can reroll an Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma saving throw that you just failed.
- *Empathy*: You are proficient in the Insight skill, and you add twice your proficiency bonus to checks with that skill.

Greater Telepathy

You gain the following additional powers:

- *Intellect Fortress*: As a reaction, you can grant a +5 bonus to all Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma saving throws to allies you can sense within 15 feet until the start of your next turn.
- *Send Thoughts*: Your *telepathy* range increases to 300 feet.
- *Psychic Crush*: As an action, you can target a living creature within 60 feet with a massive overload of mental information. The target takes 10d6 psychic damage. On a successful Wisdom saving throw, this damage is halved. Once you’ve used this feature, you can’t use it again until you finish a long rest.
- *Telepathic Projection*: As an action, you can cause a living creature that you can sense within 60’ to gain the frightened condition with respect to one object or creature also within range. A successful Wisdom saving throw negates this effect. As an action on its turn, the creature may make a new saving throw. You may only affect one creature at a time in this

fashion.

Superior Telepathy

You gain the following additional powers:

- *Mindlink*: Your *telepathy* range is unlimited with respect to any creature you have previously contacted telepathically.
- *Psionic Invisibility*: As an action, you may gain the effects of *greater invisibility*, as the spell. This requires concentration. Once you've used this ability, you can't use it again until you complete a short or long rest.
- *Mindwipe*: As an action, you may manifest *modify memory*, as the spell. This requires concentration. Once you've used this ability, you can't use it again until you complete a short or long rest.
- *Psionic Blast*: As an action, you can release a cone of devastating psionic power. This is a 60 foot long cone originating from you and affecting all living creatures within its area. All affected creatures suffer 10d6 psychic damage, or half damage with a successful Wisdom saving throw. Once you've used this feature, you can't use it again until you complete a long rest.
- You can now use your *psychic crush* feature twice, instead of once, before needing a rest to recover it.
- *Mind Bar*: You are immune to the Charmed and Frightened conditions, and your thoughts can't be read unless you allow it.

Presumably there would be similar disciplines for psychokinesis and other powers. Some classes might modify these, so a psionicist would be a better telepath

(even at the basic level) than a psychic warrior or a lurk.

Pros:

- A unified system where any character who gains a set of psychic powers gains the same powers as other characters with the same ability; all telepaths are a known quantity, for instance, whether they are mystics, fighters, monks, or whatnot
- Easy to balance by making breakpoints at which you gain a package upgrade, so you can make certain that powers only "turn on" at certain levels
- Tight theming: A telepath is set to use a very specific set of telepathic powers

Cons:

- Limited: Every telepath uses the exact same abilities (barring building in something of the nature of "choose two powers from the following list...")
- Indistinct: Some of the powers are like spells, some are not. Which way does it go?
- Choice issues: If you can only pick one whole bucket, you might have significant un-fun weaknesses, like a telepath who has *no* power to affect mindless/undead targets

This design is one that you could viably put into a sourcebook without a *huge* impact on the wordcount, and it's expandable because you can give subclasses access to the packages or make new packages, but it runs the risk of characters who all feel "samey" (when you've made one telepath, you've made them all).

Last Words

So there we have it, three ways that you might look at psionics in fifth edition D&D. Each has its weaknesses and its strengths. All of them have a long way to go to become a finished, developed version of a

psionic power system. Of course, until Wizards of the Coast releases a finalized version, we won't know which way they'll fall.

Until then, we'll just have to use our best intuition and wait until the day when a new psionic dawn arrives!

