

**GURPS**<sup>®</sup>

Fourth Edition

# FANTASY

## PORTAL REALMS<sup>™</sup>



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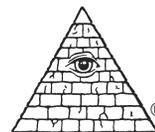
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*The bear went over the  
mountain,  
The bear went over the  
mountain,  
The bear went over the  
mountain,  
To see what he could see.  
– Traditional song*

# INTRODUCTION

Alice climbing into a mirror . . . Randolph Carter finding the silver key to the gate of dreams . . . Howard Shea transporting himself to the world of the Eddas . . .

These characters, and others like them, found their way out of the everyday world into realms of fantasy and adventure. Such journeys are the subject of *portal fantasy*.

In portal fantasy, people from our world are transported into a magical realm where things are different. They may be there permanently, or return eventually to Earth; in either

case, their experiences change them, making them more capable and also revealing supernatural forces to them.

**GURPS Fantasy: Portal Realms** is your guide to this kind of fantasy: to creating worlds, helping players create characters, and running adventures.

Similar stories have appeared in other genres. John Carter's journeys to Barsoom in *A Princess of Mars* and its sequels, Martin Padway's time travel to the late Roman Empire in *Lest Darkness Fall*, and Calvin Morrison's transportation to the Aryan-Transpacific Timeline in *Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen* are science fiction, with no hint of magic, but the settings of their heroes' adventures are otherwise a lot like portal realms. Much of the material in this supplement could be used for such a science-fictional campaign – just leave out the magical parts.

*“And may I ask,  
O Lucy Daughter of Eve,”  
said Mr. Tumnus, “how you  
have come into Narnia?”*

*“Narnia? What’s that?”  
said Lucy.*

*– C.S. Lewis,  
The Lion, the Witch  
and the Wardrobe*

## PUBLICATION HISTORY

This is the first edition of **GURPS Fantasy: Portal Realms**. The concept of a portal realm is briefly discussed in **GURPS Fantasy** – and Yrth, presented in **GURPS Banestorm**, is a type of portal realm.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABOUT GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of **GURPS** players. We can be reached by email: [info@sjgames.com](mailto:info@sjgames.com). Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Resources include:

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[twitter.com/sjgames](https://twitter.com/sjgames). Share your campaign teaser in 140 characters or fewer with #GURPSHook on Twitter. Or explore that hashtag for ideas to add to your own game! The **GURPS Fantasy: Portal Realms** web page can be found at [gurps.sjgames.com/portalrealms](http://gurps.sjgames.com/portalrealms).

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*Errata.* Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Errata pages for **GURPS** releases are available at [sjgames.com/errata/gurps](http://sjgames.com/errata/gurps).

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.

## Arrival

Arrival in the Barrens involves travel through an overt portal such as a door, a gate, or a narrow passage in a cave. Suddenly the explorers are in a different world. The experience isn't terrifying, but it has a dreamlike quality, requiring a roll vs. Dreaming or Will-6 to keep track of the path (though the first visitor of a party may find the way back and then bring the others through).

On the other side, the visitors come under observation by a member of a race of small scavengers. Once they let their guard down, the observer will sneak in and pick up or snatch

one of their possessions – perhaps something useful, possibly something merely bright and shiny. The pursuit of the thief provides another opportunity for the travelers to get lost! Once they realize they aren't getting back immediately, they need to find a place to make camp; they can attempt Survival rolls to find shelter, water, food, or fuel.

As they continue to explore, they'll come on a traveled pathway, and further along it, an inn, where they can barter some of their possessions for food and shelter, and begin to learn the local language. During their stay, they'll also discover some of the varied races that inhabit the Barrens. This is a good time to give them hints about remnants of ancient lost magic.

## SOURCE MATERIAL

The GM seeking inspiration for portal fantasy may find it in literature, film, or television. For tips on adapting these works to your campaign, see *GURPS Adaptations*.

### Books

Allston, Aaron. *Doc Sidhe*. Pastiche of Doc Savage, set in a portal realm inhabited by the fair folk.

Anderson, Poul. *Three Hearts and Three Lions*. An American caught up in a battle of World War II stumbles into the realm of Charlemagne as portrayed in French legend.

Baum, L. Frank. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. First of a series of American fairy tales. Oz is a physical place, not a dream world. It isn't actually in an alternate reality, but Baum's writing is the source of many tropes of portal fantasy.

Boyett, Steven R. *The Architect of Sleep*. A spelunker takes a wrong turn and emerges in a world of sapient raccoons. The fantasy elements are minimal; in many ways this is nearer to science fiction, despite the low-tech setting.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. Another original source for the portal realm trope, though Alice's journeys turn out to be dreams.

Chant, Joy. *Red Moon and Black Mountain*. Novel from the post-Tolkien fantasy upsurge of the 1970s, in which three children take part in the battles of a magical world.

de Camp, L. Sprague and Pratt, Fletcher. *The Complete Compleat Enchanter*. Harold Shea, the hero, creates his own portals with the aid of symbolic logic – but where he goes is humorously unpredictable.

Dellamonica, A.M. *Child of a Hidden Sea*. First of a series in which a young woman from Earth travels to a magical realm of scattered islands – and discovers her heritage there.

Donaldson, Stephen R. *Lord Foul's Bane*. First of a trilogy (followed by a second trilogy and further novels) that treats a portal realm in psychological terms.

Hambly, Barbara. *The Time of the Dark*. First of a trilogy in which a young man and woman from Earth are called into a world being overwhelmed by supernatural monsters.

Lewis, C.S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Series of novels in which successive groups of British children travel to

the magical world of Narnia, witnessing events from its creation to its apocalyptic end.

McGuire, Seanan. *Every Heart a Doorway*. Children who have lived in portal realms and come back attend a boarding school designed to meet their unusual needs.

Norton, Andre. *Witch World*. An earthman fleeing false charges is granted passage to a world of magic – and becomes a key figure in resisting invasion from a third world.

O'Donohoe, Nick. *The Magic and the Healing*. A group of student veterinarians get taken on journeys to a fantasy realm where they learn to treat magical creatures.

Smith, Sherwood. *Sasharia En Garde*. A young woman from Earth, the daughter of a king in a magical world, is carried back to her father's realm, now ruled by a usurper.

Zelazny, Roger. *Nine Princes in Amber*. First of a series about a family of interworld travelers, in which the exiled Prince Corwin regains his memory and rediscovers his heritage.

### Films

*Labyrinth* (Jim Henson). A young child is kidnapped by the ruler of a magical realm, and his older sister goes on a quest to get him back.

*Spirited Away* (Hayao Miyazaki). Anime classic in which a young girl enters the spirit world and struggles to find a way home for herself and her parents.

*Wizard of Oz, The* (Victor Fleming). Best-known film version, and the source of the "Oz is a dream" interpretation.

### Television Shows

*Those Who Hunt Elves* (Kazuyoshi Katayama). Anime series about three young adults transported to a fantasy world and trying to find their way home by capturing elves who carry magical markings.

*Twelve Kingdoms, The* (Tsuneo Kobayashi). An adolescent girl from Japan is carried into a fantasy world and discovers herself to be the heir to one of its kingdoms.

*Vision of Escaflowne, The* (Kazuki Akane). Anime series in which an adolescent girl from Earth becomes involved in another world's wars, fought with spells and giant robots.

# MAGE-TO-BE

90 points

At the start of the campaign, you're unaware of your magical capabilities – life on Earth hasn't given them a chance to manifest themselves. You must buy off the Mundane Background included in Transmundane before actually learning magic (see *Learning Magic*, pp. 30-32). However, your awakening magical talent may subject you to Absent-Mindedness, Nightmares,

## RETURNEE

0 points

If it's possible to travel to a portal realm, it may be possible to come back. Returnees are likely to have abilities gained during their sojourns. These could be entirely mundane, similar to those a traveler or explorer might acquire by living in another country. If time passes differently in the portal realm (see *Brief Visits*, p. 6), it may affect skill options: an adult who entered a portal realm long ago and returned in the recent past might have skills now rare or entirely lost (see *Reawakened*, p. 16); a child who lived through years in a portal realm may have skills children rarely learn. Being a returnee could also explain how a character learned magic or cinematic martial-arts skills, or gained superhuman powers.

Time in a portal realm can be simply backstory, explaining the origins of an adventurer who now has other concerns. But some returnees acquire a mission, like Coleridge's ancient mariner, compelled to travel about teaching the necessity of love for all living creatures.

Because the possible effects are so varied, being a returnee is treated as a lens that can be applied to many different character types.

**Advantages:** Charisma 1 [5]. • 15 points chosen from among Fit [5], Higher Purpose [5], Reawakened [10], Unusual Background [Varies], Zeroed [10], or additional Charisma [5/level].

**Disadvantages:** Delusion (Minor) [-5] or Secret (Serious Embarrassment) [-5]. • -15 points chosen from among Low TL [-5/level], Nightmares [-5\*], Obsession (Return to portal realm) [-10\*], Vow [-5 to -15], Weirdness Magnet [-15], or increasing Secret to (Utter Rejection or Imprisonment or Exile) [-5 or -15].

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

### Customization Notes

Higher Purpose should reflect a personal mission based on experience in the portal realm. Unusual Background is appropriate if a returnee has abilities that are otherwise unavailable; it's worth 5 points if it grants a child access to adult skills that would normally be off limits (see *Social Stigma*, p. 17) or 10 points if it's equivalent to Reawakened (p. 16). Higher-value Unusual Backgrounds for supers and similar characters should usually be bought separately from this lens, along with the associated exotic or supernatural traits.

Weirdness Magnet, or Xenophilia, which you can buy off once you start casting spells or performing rituals.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 10 [0].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Magery 0 [5] and Transmundane [20]. • 30 points chosen from among IQ +1 [20], Eidetic Memory [5] or Photographic Memory [10], Language Talent [10], Magery 1+ [10/level], Single-Minded [5], Visualization [10], or Wild Talent 1 [20].

**Disadvantages:** -15 points chosen from among Absent-Mindedness [-15], Clueless [-10], Code of Honor (Professional) [-5], Nightmares [-5\*], Oblivious [-5], Overconfidence [-5\*], Pacifism (Reluctant Killer) [-5], Post-Combat Shakes [-5\*], Weirdness Magnet [-15], Workaholic [-5], or Xenophilia [-10\*].

**Primary and Secondary Skills:** Research (A) IQ+1 [4]-13.

• One of Anthropology, Archaeology, Computer Programming, Mathematics (Pure), Philosophy (any), or Theology (any), all (H) IQ [4]-12.

**Background Skills:** One of Sleight of Hand (H) DX-1 [2]-9; Occultism or Poetry, both (A) IQ [2]-12; Fortune-Telling (A) IQ+1 [2]-13†; Artist (any), Cryptography, or Religious Ritual (any), all (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Dreaming or Meditation, both (H) Will-1 [2]-11; or Esoteric Medicine (H) Per-1 [2]-11.

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

† Includes +1 from Charisma (in Transmundane).

### Customization Notes

This template assumes the use of standard (mana-based) **GURPS Magic**, for which Magery 0 is usually a prerequisite. It also works for other varieties of magic that require or greatly benefit from Magery (Ritual Path magic, some other forms of flexible magic, many versions of Path/Book magic). If spells can be cast without Magery (e.g., in a high-mana setting), the mandatory Magery 0 can be replaced with another 5 points of optional advantages.

In a "magic as powers" setting (p. 32, and see also **GURPS Thaumatology**), remove both Magery 0 and further levels of Magery from the template, and add another 5 points of optional advantages. These advantages can include a suitable power Talent, such as Chinese Elemental Talent (**GURPS Thaumatology: Chinese Elemental Powers**) or Sorcery Talent (**GURPS Thaumatology: Sorcery**).

In a high-powered campaign, a mage-to-be may have more expensive advantages: Gadgeteer (perhaps specialized to spells or rituals), multiple levels of Magery, one or more versions of Path/Book Adept, or Ritual Adept (for Ritual Path magic). To allow purchase of such impressive traits, raise the template cost by 50 points. Such a character could act as a magical equivalent of a savior (p. 21).

## OUTCAST

100 points

You left Earth because you *had* to: powerful enemies were closing in on you, and flight to an unknown world was less daunting than what they intended if they caught you.

The GM can roleplay this as much or as little as desired – but mechanically, it can be represented by treating the language of visitors from Earth as, for instance, English (Accented) or Japanese (Accented), with the consequent minor skill modifiers.

If the portal realm has a different language, it may have magical teaching devices that let the newcomers learn it. This is a way to speed up the story; the GM can simply decree that it's happened and award earmarked character points to pay for it. The transition from Earth to the portal realm might even imprint the new language on the visitors' minds, as in the journeys of Harold Shea in *The Compleat Enchanter*.

Lacking any of these shortcuts, travelers will find themselves learning a new language by immersion. This is equivalent to four hours a day of training (p. B25), or one character point in the new language per 50 days, plus whatever extra time is spent in study. See *GURPS Social Engineering: Back to School* for detailed rules. In the meantime, the visitors will

be making Gesture rolls, perhaps at the IQ-4 default. In most campaigns, a session or two of Gesture rolls is enough to make the point. It's perfectly fair to fast-forward a campaign a few weeks, to the stage where everyone has Broken comprehension of the new language.

## CULTURES

Travelers will *also* have to deal with cultural differences. Living in a different culture grants four hours a day toward a new Cultural Familiarity by immersion, at the same time as learning the new language – by the time the new arrivals have Broken speech, they'll be familiar with the culture and no longer have penalties there. But in those first 50 days, Cultural Familiarity modifiers will apply! In a really exotic fantasy world, Cultural Familiarity might cost *two* points and take twice as long to buy off, even if the inhabitants are human.

An IQ 10 traveler using Gesture at the default of IQ-4, and with a Cultural Familiarity penalty of -3, has an effective skill of 3 – just barely enough to attempt to communicate at all! The outcome will be either a rare critical success (roll of 3 or 4) or a failure, often a critical failure. The GM may want to disregard Cultural Familiarity penalties, or allow generous bonuses for straightforward ideas such as “I'm thirsty” or “We come in peace.”

Cultural Familiarity grants the ability to use a variety of skills with no penalty. Many of these – including all Influence skills – have to do with face-to-face social interaction. Most people who lack Cultural Familiarity will have better luck relying on straight reaction rolls, which aren't subject to Cultural Familiarity modifiers. Bear in mind that people of the portal realm probably won't be familiar with Earth cultures, either, and will have the same skill penalties! In particular, their Teaching skill will be at -3, which among other things reduces the number of people they can teach at once (as discussed on pp. 17-18 of *GURPS Social Engineering: Back to School*). If Cultural Familiarity is gained in parallel with Broken speech in a new language, skill penalties for its lack will rarely come into play – but if the new arrivals are conveniently granted knowledge of a local language, they'll come up a lot.

One of the skills affected by Cultural Familiarity is Connoisseur. Among its other uses, Connoisseur is used to judge what style of art, music, or literature will appeal to an audience. After a failed roll (or if no roll is attempted), a successful roll to create or perform a work of art requires a reaction roll; an unfavorable reaction indicates the work was technically skilled but didn't speak to the audience. This can be important to newcomers who try to become bards, craftsmen, dancers, or storytellers.

A function of the Anthropology skill is figuring out the behavior and customs of people in newly encountered cultures. Roll vs. Anthropology to avoid penalties for lack of Cultural Familiarity. Each success waives the penalty for the *next* skill roll. Critical success grants fuller insight: the next time the player has an unspent character point, it can be used to buy Cultural Familiarity immediately. Critical failure indicates serious misunderstanding: the next culture-dependent skill roll is an automatic failure! If it's an Influence roll, this means automatically losing the Quick Contest.

## LICIT AND ILLICIT MAGIC

Any society where magic is commonly practiced is likely to have laws about it. Some forms of magic might be freely permitted to everyone; others, only to licensed wizards. Yet others may be illegal for everyone. These distinctions can be defined in terms of Control Ratings and Legality Classes (pp. B506-507).

Control Ratings are generally similar to those for non-magical societies, ranging from anarchy (CR0) to total control (CR6). However, a society may have a higher – or, rarely, lower – CR for magic than for other activities.

Legality Classes often have the same rationale as for technological equipment, but special considerations may apply. If magic can inflict injury in a way difficult to trace, it might be allowed only to licensed practitioners, or banned entirely. And if there are supernatural beings, magic that threatens them, offends them, or usurps their prerogatives may be restricted or proscribed. For example, medieval law viewed knowing the future as a manifestation of divine omniscience and forbade divination spells that attempted to grant foreknowledge. Typical categories might be as follows:

**LC0** – Spells with large-area destructive effects; spells that kill or cripple secretly; spells that threaten or challenge the gods; spells that call on supernatural enemies of the gods.

**LC1** – Spells that inflict *any* harm secretly; spells of disguise or deception; spells that offend the gods.

**LC2** – Mind-control spells (if they actually take away free will); divination that reveals secrets; spells that openly inflict severe injury or life-threatening afflictions.

**LC3** – Spells that openly inflict lesser injury or incapacitating afflictions; spells that influence the emotions; spells that grant blessings *if* they risk side effects (e.g., weather-control spells).

**LC4** – Healing and protective spells; divination that doesn't reveal secrets.

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*Through the blue-tiled walls of the market  
stalls*

*There's a hidden door she leads you to.*

*– Al Stewart, “The Year of the Cat”*

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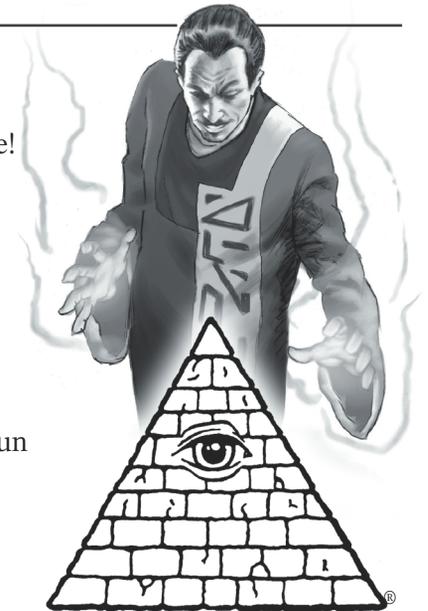
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