The Magic-System Blueprint

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Introduction

W ELCOME TO *The Magic-System Blueprint*. The Blueprint is a magic-building tool designed to quickly give you a holistic understanding of any magic system. This book will introduce you to the tool, map out several popular magic systems, and provide detailed information on all the tool's components.

This book has been a long time in the making. It's been over a decade since I first realized how little information there was on magic-building. Plenty of magic-builders, blog posts, and videos exist, but they all seem to ask the same open-ended questions and provide the same general guidelines. Magic-building was, and is, mostly treated as an art form without clear guidance or analysis.

So I explored how different people designed them, dissected why they work, developed theories, formed structures, and crafted tools to simplify the process and communicate my findings with other authors.

Ten years later, here we are, with the first robust, defined, and tested magic-building tool: *The Magic-System Blueprint*.

This tool exists to help you differentiate the fundamental aspects of various magic systems so you can crack open any system and identify the moving parts that make it work. It also provides a framework to quickly map out your own magic systems while ensuring no key elements have been missed.

Before I say anything else, I want to make something abundantly clear. If something in this book doesn't work for you, don't use it!

The Magic-System Blueprint isn't the only way to build or understand magic systems; it is simply the tool that works best for me. There is no single way to do anything. There's nothing more frustrating than trying to do a job with a tool that doesn't fit in your hand. It's all about finding what makes sense and works for you personally.

How to Use This Book

This book has five main sections.

Part one is the introduction, what you're reading right now, which covers the intent of the book and its layout, provides high-level definitions of magic and magic systems, and briefly discusses why you should use *The Magic-System Blueprint* in the first place.

Part two is the Blueprint summary, which takes a quick look at all the components of the Blueprint, what they mean, and how they work. Each piece is discussed briefly to help you get oriented with the information necessary to start using the Blueprint right away.

Part three zooms in for a closer look at each of the Blueprint components and contains the bulk of the book. Each chapter provides a deeper dive into a specific piece of the Blueprint. In these chapters, we will look at the finer details of each component, how these components can impact your story, ways you can tweak and change them, and how they connect with and influence other portions of the Blueprint.

Most chapters in this section will also look at several magic systems and what their Blueprints look like. The same four magic systems are used throughout the book: v from the *Mistborn* series, the magic from *The Lord of the Rings*, the powers of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), and the technology found in *Stargate SG-1*. I will also reference the Viral Magic System, a magic system I built, to further illustrate how to use and change the pieces of a magic system.

Part four takes a quick look at other things you will need to explore and refine to complete your magic system. *The Magic-System Blueprint* is a powerful tool. Mapping out even a single Blueprint can help you build the vast majority of your magic system, not to mention jump-start your worldbuilding. This is, however, simply a first step. The Blueprint is here to help you understand how the magic functions as a whole. That means some work needs to be done outside the Blueprint to finish your magic system.

Part five of this book contains the appendices. Appendix A is where you will find the Comprehensive Blueprint that you can copy and print off as needed. I even include a link to a PDF version of the document, if that is your preference. Appendix B contains the completed Blueprint for the Viral Magic System I created in 2018.

Again, feel free to jump around to any section that interests you most, but I wouldn't recommend that if this is your first exposure to the Blueprint.

You will learn more, and learn faster, if you print off a copy of the Blueprint and then read this book from start to finish. Once you are familiar with how it all works, this book should function as a reference guide for helping you refresh and utilize the Blueprint for your own systems.

What Is a Magic System?

The term magic system gets tossed around a lot these days, but it's hard to find a clear explanation of what it means. Understanding the definitions of both *magic* and *magic system* is the first step toward building one with intent, clarity, and skill.

Let's start with the basics and build from there.

What Is Magic?

There are dozens of ways to answer this question, but here is the definition I use for magic in works of fiction:

Magic is anything enabling actions beyond our current capability or understanding.

If this seems a tad vague and all-encompassing, that's because it's supposed to be. Many argue that magic must possess some element of mystery or the unexplained, but I disagree. I believe that magic includes everything from hurling fireballs and lightning bolts to force shields and faster-than-light travel. With this definition, the technology and the magic in a work of fiction are treated the same.

This isn't a new concept. Throughout his prolific writing career, science-fiction author Arthur C. Clarke developed principles about science that have become known as Clarke's three laws. The third law is the most widely referenced and the one we are interested in here.

Clarke's Third Law: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

The point is, from the right perspective, even the most thought-out, accurate, and realistic technology can be seen as magic. This holds equally true for all kinds of tech, fictional or otherwise.

Fascinatingly enough, this principle can easily be applied in reverse. In fact, there's a line from an online comic called *Girl Genius* that I like to call Agatha's Law, named after the protagonist Agatha Heterodyne.

Agatha's Law: "Any sufficiently analyzed magic is indistinguishable from science."

Magic is the small lie, the alteration, or the piece of imagination accepted, at least in part, by the creator of the magic system and its consumers. Magic, like the very heart of fiction itself, relies on our ability to suspend disbelief and enjoy the result. At their core, alien technology and wizardly magic are, effectively, the same. All that changes is the system around them.

What Is a Magic System?

If magic is anything enabling actions beyond our current capability or understanding, then a magic system can be defined as follows: a magic system is the set of facts and principles that frame the magic and make it understandable to the audience and user.

In other words, any single effect or ability can be magical, and everything managing and explaining it is the system. Using that definition, it is all but impossible to have magic without also having a magic system. Even just displaying an act of magic tells the viewer something about how it works and what it does. It may be a simple or undefined magic system, but it is still a magic system.

With these two definitions in mind, it should be clear that magic and magic systems can be almost anything.

Terrifying monsters that bleed acid? Magic.

Faster-than-light drives that teleport a ship through another dimension? Magic.

Nightmarish men that hunt and kill you in your sleep? Magic.

As you can see, magic can and does appear routinely in science fiction, horror, romance stories, and character dramas. A magic system can be anything you want wherever you need it to be. Don't limit yourself or your readers to just the realms of fantasy.

Of course, I love fantasy stories, so you won't get any complaints from me.

But Why Use the Blueprint?

When it comes down to it, building a magic system and deftly weaving it into a story is hard. It's a process that's easy to start but difficult to master.

It's kind of like constructing a building. Almost anyone can jab a couple of sticks in the ground, throw some cloth over the top, and call it a shelter. Making a building that will fully serve its purpose for decades is something else altogether. The foundation needs to be solid, and the walls need to properly support the weight placed on them, not to mention the planning that goes into plumbing and wiring.

In short, we need to be intentional with our design.

When we build with intent, we can tweak the system to enhance the rest of the story and deliver the precise experience we're looking for.

This doesn't mean having a plan right from the beginning. Some people (weirdos like me) can approach it that way. Others need time to brainstorm, mess around with a few simple concepts and structures. Maybe they even write a full draft of the story first. But at some point, the pieces need to be organized, molded, and placed with deliberation.

This all seems well and good, but what if we want to build something far more wondrous, undefined, or mysterious like in *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings*? Will *The Magic-System Blueprint* really help with something like that?

Yes. In fact, those kinds of systems take more skill to implement and master than rigorously explained ones.

To build a structure with missing walls, disguised pillars, and secret floors, we need to know exactly what we're doing. If we don't, the odds are good that we'll end up with a pile of rubble instead of the structure we were hoping for.

The Magic-System Blueprint is a tool to help you craft the foundation of information you need to start building with intent. Initially, the Blueprint will provide support as you make your first several attempts at magic-building. Once you grasp the basics, it is still of tremendous use to you. And as your skill increases, the Blueprint will help accelerate the magic-building process and keep you from forgetting important pieces.

I use *The Magic-System Blueprint* because it is the most powerful and flexible tool I have for building magic systems. And it can be for you as well.