

The Power of the Mind

Tactics and Design Tips for Psychic Abilities.

By Robey Jenkins

Background on psychic powers in the Inquisitor environment; *Tactica Psykana*; designing new psychic powers; some examples.

Psychic powers sit at the very heart of the background of the Warhammer 40,000 universe and the Imperium of Man. They inspire fear and awe in equal measure, are Mankind's greatest weapon and most terrible threat. Without them the Imperium would collapse, but with them it threatens to tear itself apart.

According to legend, even the Emperor struggled with how to properly employ psykers. He knew better than any the threat that uncontrolled psychic power represented to the nascent human empire, but without the psychic choir of the Astronomican his mighty starships could manage only short, dangerous hops through the Warp. And it was only by the use of the mental powers of the Astropaths that he could communicate with his commanders or coordinate events across the galaxy. It is said, in some privileged circles, that even his greatest creations, the Primarchs themselves, were mighty psykers second only to the Emperor in power.

With such conflicts of priority, it should be no surprise that psychic powers are something of a grey area in the Inquisition. Many Inquisitors spend their lives in the hunt for dangerous witches and warlocks: rogue psykers who have reneged their duty to turn themselves in to the authorities and face their fate as pious citizens. The role of Witch Hunter needs a steel will for, often, the psyker has no malign intent and suffers from nothing more than fear and ignorance. But no risks can be taken with this dire threat and such creatures must be destroyed for the good of humanity. Nevertheless, many are the Inquisitors who have crossed over the line, driven by an unquenchable desire to purify

and justify. Such men and women can become such passionate anti-psykers that every class of psyker is anathema: Sanctioned Psykers, Astropaths, Navigators, Grey Knights... All become targets for annihilation, regardless of the risks. Inquisitors on this path who do not succumb to the powers of their enemies must eventually succumb to madness and heresy as they turn, inexorably, upon the greatest psyker of all: the Emperor himself.

On the other hand, many Inquisitors themselves possess psychic powers. And others see the human closeness to the Warp as a vital tool to protect the Imperium. And when the God-Emperor is a psyker, and the continuation of humanity's empire relies upon psykers, it is easy to cross a different line. Beyond that, the pursuit of ultimate psychic power becomes an end in itself as the Inquisitor reaches deeply into the heart of the Warp. Such power can be awe-inspiring. It can confer death and life; transform the body and illuminate the mind. It can destroy one's enemies. It can make the whole of reality one's plaything. Yet, when one reaches too deeply into the Warp, one can never be certain what might reach back...

SO, WHERE HAVE ALL THE PSYKERS GONE?

In a game that positively glories in morally ambivalent situations and the clash of ideologies, a character's knowledge of and attitude towards psychic powers is of utmost importance in understanding his or her relationship with other characters. But despite this, one rarely finds psychic powers actually taking a prominent part in an Inquisitor game. Given the possibilities offered by the use of psychic and anti-psychic abilities, one would expect to see players playing a complex game of psychic and anti-psychic chess to gain the upper hand in the mental battle simultaneously with their struggle in the physical battle. And yet they don't.

I've asked around and players tell me that psychic powers are too risky, too complicated and either the advantage offered is too great to make for good game-play or too small to be worth the trouble. And yet I routinely see characters with low stats and odd abilities or performing insanely dangerous acts because "it just might work". So it occurs to me that something else is going on to stop players using psychic abilities much in their games. And I suspect that this is that psychic powers lack the "personality" of the Special Abilities.

Veteran players will always tell you that designing the personality of their characters – that is, deciding why they act in the way that they do – is one of the most stimulating parts of the game, and Abilities play a large part in determining this aspect of a character. More often than not, a character's personality is reflected in his or her physical appearance and, again, Abilities play a large part in conveying a sense of someone's appearance. Abilities like *Blademaster* and *Furious Assault* summon up certain types of character. Add the two together and it's impossible not to have a certain image in one's mind of what the character will be like. Take any two abilities and see what image it conjures: *Gunfighter* and *Fast Draw*, *Heroic* and *True Grit*. Some Abilities don't give much on their own, but clever combinations will tell a story all on their own: *Acrobatic*, *Scale Terrain*.



Psychic Abilities don't have quite the same effect for several reasons. First, because they're "all in the mind" and so don't have a physical appearance on the model, but also because their effect is often not seen when it's wanted, due to the Risky nature of using Psychic Abilities. A character with Quickload gets to halve his loading actions every time he needs to. But a character wanting to perform a Psi Track runs the risk of not being able to even attempt the action if he fails his Risky action roll, and even if he doesn't fail the roll, he still has to test against Willpower to get to use the ability. Result? Players spend the actions on something more certain, like hot lead.

TACTICA PSYKANA

The first message of this article is that psychic powers in Inquisitor are worth the trouble of learning how to use them effectively. I don't intend to tell you all my hard-won secrets, but here are some points for players and GMs to consider:

Pick your moment carefully. If bullets are flying, it's too late to be thinking about psychic powers, which really form a part of what I think of as "the long game". As such, a player should already have in mind when a certain power is going to be used and, for persistent powers, that time is invariably in the first two or three turns, when characters have mostly not yet spotted each other and probably won't be shooting. Of course, sometimes it's hard to justify the use of certain powers before one is even aware of a threat. But powers like Detection or Embolden are perfect for this period of cautious paranoia. There doesn't have to be a specific threat for an Inquisitor to be cautiously paranoid: it's part of the job description!

Maximize your strengths. As Aiming is to shooting, Concentration is to psychic powers. So if you don't have a character with a Wp in the upper 90s, it's always worth planning at least one action of Concentration before any power. This is another respect in which planning out the psychic game is important. If you're planning to use a psychic ability in the next turn, declare an action concentrating as a last action this turn. You may not get as far as that Concentration action, but if you do then you're already one step ahead in the next turn.

Minimize your weaknesses. The greatest threat on the battlefield to the psyker is other psykers, so you need to be aware of who and where they are and whether they will be "directly affected" by certain abilities. Some abilities have grey areas and it will be down to the GM as to whether a person is "directly" affected. Steer clear of these unless you know your GM's opinions (never be afraid to ask in advance) and focus on cut-and-dried situations. A psychic bolt can comfortably wipe out non-psykers, leaving nearby psykers helpless to nullify the power. And if the use of psychic abilities is vital to your mission plan then you may need to focus on eliminating these threats to your success by concentrating firepower or your close combat experts on dispatching your opponent's psykers.

Never underestimate the power of the Warp! Those characters without psychic powers can become vulnerable to the assaults of psykers who play the tactical game. But non-psychic Inquisitors have their own defences! Hexagrammic wards are one defence, of course, and a very effective one at that. However, they won't protect an Inquisitor from indirect use of psychic powers that enhance your opponent's abilities, track your allies or fiendishly corrupt your equipment. So take a leaf from the Witch Hunter's book and consider the employment (or conscription) of a Penitent Psyker. Even if you restrict him from using his own powers, there are many ways a cunning Inquisitor can use such a character to protect him from the power of enemy witches, but I'll leave you to work those out for yourself...

Make use of the battle rhythm. This is a tactically significant point that is often overlooked. If the action has ground to a halt and you're in the "firefight" stage of the game (most games have one), then your psyker has a fresh chance to use his powers to respond to unforeseen circumstances. Using Telepathy to exchange information on enemy positions, or Psi Track to check whether

your opponents are performing a flanking action is both dramatic and proper.

Keep a sense of the narrative flow. If, despite my sage advice, it still all goes horribly wrong and you end up with your psyker turning into a drooling vegetable after a devastating Nullify or tragic Risky Actions roll, remember that this, too, is a part of the story. The psychic battle is at least as exciting as the physical one and, given that the strategic planning starts with the design of characters and composition of the retinue, can be even moreso.

Test the waters of the Aethyr. I've left this point until last because it does generate a lot of discussion and disagreement. However, if one is afraid of failing that critical Risky action roll, a pause for breath as a first Action can help mitigate the problem. Some have said that this constitutes "seeing into the future". I prefer to think of it as the psyker reaching into the Warp to see whether the flow of the aethyr is suitable for his planned use. Of course, the possibility always exists that doing this – especially for slower characters – will leave the psyker with insufficient Actions to use his power: but that's the way the plague zombie crumbles.

DESIGNING NEW PSYCHIC POWERS

Having shown you how to make the best of the existing range of psychic powers, I could just stop here. But there's more!

The wonderful thing about Inquisitor players is their willingness to build personality into their characters even at the expense of effectiveness. We've already touched upon how psychic powers as they exist fail to offer much in the way of depth to the character who wields them, but there's more than one way to burn a heretic. It's easy to design new psychic powers for your characters and many people have tried. But the hardest thing is to design powers that give your characters the personality you crave without confusing your opponents with lashings of House Rules. However, there are three basic areas within the existing core rules that can be mined for a rich seam of individualized psychic powers:

1. Character statistics.
2. Equipment.
3. Special Abilities.

The best examples of this that already exist in the canon of psychic powers are the much neglected Hammerhand and Warp Strength Biomancy powers. Hammerhand makes the wielder's hand count as an improvised weapon and doubles his strength; Warp Strength adds to the wielder's strength the amount by which the psychic test was passed. So we can see the use of both character stats and equipment in these powers - and there's no denying that these powers both have a certain amount of characterful appeal. Other combinations can have as much or even more added value.

Here are some I've used myself:

Warrior Telekine – (Telekinesis) Difficulty 15

A Warrior Telekine can use his or her telekinesis to leap higher, hit harder and manipulate weapons more easily, as well as using telekinesis to wield small weapons like knives, rocks and sticks alongside the weapons at hand.

This power is persistent and lasts for 1 turn for every 10% or part that the test was passed by, or until the Telekine takes damage after subtractions for armour.

The Telekine's WS is increased by the amount the test was passed by and he gains the Acrobatic Special Ability.

Warrior Telekine combines an enhancement to a stat with the gaining of a Special Ability. I hope that it summons to your mind, as it does to mine, a monkish figure – apparently harmless, perhaps even buffoonish – who nevertheless can become, after a moment's concentration, a whirling machine of death. Perhaps, to you, it says something else. But at the very least, I'm sure it says something.

Phantom Weapons – (Telekinesis) Difficulty 15

A powerful Telekine can use his or her powers to propel small objects at high velocity or, with extreme control, can turn air molecules into near-invisible but deadly-sharp blades.

This power is persistent and lasts for 1 turn for every 10% or part that the test was passed by, or until the psyker takes damage after subtractions for armour.

The psyker counts as being armed with either a pair of revolvers (which count as being silenced) or a pair of knives. If the psyker chooses knives, he also counts as having the ability Blademaster. These weapons cannot be dropped and do not preclude the psyker from holding and using other weapons.

This is a favourite of mine and uses equipment as its source. I love the idea of the apparently unarmed agent who can “shoot” people with her fingers. The manipulation of molecules and particles with the mind is sometimes called “microtelekinesis” and this ability to form blades from the very air around a character is a perfect ability for the infiltrating assassin. No weapons detector will catch this deadly agent on her way to an assignment!

Using *melée* weapons in this fashion is pretty easy. Ranged weapons become more complicated when one considers the mechanical issues of things like shots fired, reloading and using Risky weapons like plasma pistols. But apply a bit of imagination and common sense and it should be possible to get around this problem.

Of course, it is possible to stretch such an idea past breaking point. Designing an ability that will allow you to summon a plasma gun with all of the benefits and none of the drawbacks will win you no friends. More significantly, it rejects the central premise of this article, which is to encourage you to use psychic abilities in a way that supports and enhances your character in a meaningful fashion. However, whilst we're on the subject of plasma weapons:

Warp-plasma Blast – (Biomancy/Pyromancy) Difficulty 30

At the very summits of psychic discipline, the lines between aptitudes begin to blur, but it is those who practice the arts of pyromancy and biomancy who are most often able to tap into the Warp in such a way as to summon the power of warp-plasma.

A Warp-plasma blast is a psychic bolt with the same stats as a plasma pistol, except that it counts as single/semi (X), where X is 1 for every full 10% that the psychic test is passed by (so if the test is passed by 23, the shot is single/semi(2)).

Warp-plasma is dangerous stuff. If the Risky action roll for using a psychic power is failed, roll another D6. On a 1-2 resolve a single hit against the character's dominant arm (or a random arm if Ambidextrous) just as if a plasma pistol had exploded. Psychic feedback is suffered as normal.

This ability harks back to those early arcade beat-'em-ups and anime cartoons, with super-martial-artists firing mystic energy bolts at their opponents.

It's not just weapons, of course, that a psychic ability can replicate. We already have the Psychic Ward and Psychic Shield abilities that replicate energy fields. But other forms of armour can also be made into psychic abilities, as well as almost any other piece of equipment you could choose to name:

Aegis – A disc of psychic energy, wielded in one hand... in other words, it's a shield. Make it more or less powerful by varying the amount of armour it conveys and by adding special shield types, such as Mirror shield or Storm shield.

Psychic Onslaught – The power of the Warp floods the psykers body, bringing power... but at what cost? The psyker counts as being affected by the combat stim, 'Slaughter.

Summon Drone – The Warp is full of strange and temporary intelligences that can be moulded by the powerful mind to do its bidding for a short while. The character counts as being accompanied by a servo-skull of some sort.

The possibilities, I'm sure you'll agree, are endless.

Remember, though, that these abilities are intended to add to the personality of your characters, in the same way as abilities and equipment do. A character who can summon psychic weapons is unlikely to also be armed to the teeth: why would he bother to carry weapons when his mind is so finely-honed? Likewise, these recommendations are about enhancing your games, not for producing all-conquering superpowers. The abilities described above are all ones that I've come up with myself and they suit my characters, my games and my gaming group. They might suit yours, too, and, if so, then please be my guest. But at least as tempting as the power of the Warp in the mind of a psyker is the lure of the super-character in the mind of the player.

PERCHANCE TO DREAM...

This is the end of the article.

It won't suit everyone, but perhaps that is for the best: after all, the Inquisition does not consist of a single mind-set or creed, so why should the community of those who play the Inquisitor game? But if you think that all I have done is to create an invitation to the fell Powers of the Warp to saturate our beloved Imperium with unbeatable psychic super-humans then perhaps you know what it is to be a Witch Hunter.

So I commend you for your faith and urge you: go forth and meet the Witch on his own ground. Defeat him not only in his body, but in his mind and in his soul and, when you are done with him, burn him into ash, grind the ash beneath your righteous heel and then... think no more of him, for there will always be another Witch to burn.

But if you are, in truth, a psyker in the Emperor's name, do not brag of your power or advertise your status: go quietly and be humble in your power; bring your wrath to bear only with the utmost care, lest you fall prey to the Powers of the Warp. And beware the Witch Hunter for, no matter your purity, your mere existence is sin in his eyes.

Everything you have been told is a lie. Trust no one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robey Jenkins is a regular contributor to Fanatic Online's Inquisitor articles. He is also a moderator at Exterminatus.net, runs the York Garrison Wargaming Club, will be giving demonstrations of Inquisitor at Games Day 2006 and is looking for a new job (hint, hint).