

How to Play a Telepath and how to GM with a Telepath

==^===-0-===^=== Betazoids, Telepaths, and Empaths. Oh My! Tips for players and GMs (NinjaDuck) ==^===-0-===^===

Kathryn Burke:

Hi, everyone! I'd like to ask you to keep questions until the end because I updated my OS and my Discord insists on scrolling up to the middle of the chat. I don't want to miss any questions.

acewing13:

o7

Ray Of Meep:

Roger

Kathryn Burke:

I'm Kathryn Burke and I've been playing telepaths for almost a decade and I've developed a specific way to play them that I prefer.

There are many ways to play telepaths, both canon and non-canon. Even canon contradicts itself from season to season and series to series. I've come up with what I feel is a more plausible approach. My "method" was formed from watching the various TV shows and movies, and playing with a variety of telepathic characters on sims. This is what I believe makes the most sense, and still allows you to have fun.

Levels of Telepathy As with many abilities, not all telepaths have the same level of telepathy. All can communicate mentally with other telepaths, but beyond that, there is a wide range of strengths and abilities. Most telepaths can read surface thoughts without much effort. Anything deeper takes time and concentration. It is not something every telepath is capable of. Mental deep dives are frowned on by most cultures.

Empaths can feel emotions coming from others but do not have telepathic abilities. Limited Telepaths can read surface thoughts, but are incapable of delving deeper into someone's mind. Telepaths can read surface thoughts and, with training, effort and concentration, read deeper. They will not read most of what is in a person's head. Full Telepaths are both empaths and telepaths.

Most telepaths will not force themselves on others, nor will they pry on others inner thoughts. Not without a very good reason and proper authority.

Some people like to use the Telepathic Moral Laws from Babylon 5, but that is not the law in Trek. However, some of the rules can be fun to use.

Reading surface thoughts is like being in a large room full of people. You hear the noise of many people, but unless someone shouts, nothing jumps out at you without training and concentration. Training can help you block those thoughts and make them more like white noise or background noise, but they are ever-present.

I have seen players who have their telepath walk into a room and know what every person is thinking. That's not plausible and takes away from the other characters and their choices.

If someone is thinking hard, or repeating something over and over in concentration, it is the same as a mental shout and will be picked up by telepaths in the near vicinity. Think of the last time you were at a dance or large party. You basically block out the chatter, unless someone yells. Then your attention focuses on that person and what's going on. Think of mental white noise the same way.

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Range Telepaths do not have a long range for their telepathy. Empaths and telepaths cannot feel emotion or read thoughts over long distances. Thoughts and feelings don't transmit that way. Nor can you sense thoughts and feelings from another ship. It may be possible to pick up emotion over long-distance communication, if the emotions are strong, but not thoughts.

But if you do this, use it with caution. Just because Troi did it once doesn't mean it'll work on a sim. I prefer to err on the side of plausibility.

Exceptions If a lot of people on the ship have the same emotion or thoughts, then they combine to make it possible to be picked up from a distance. As in Classic Trek where Spock knew that a ship full of Vulcans had been destroyed. It was the combined minds crying out together that reached the Vulcan. If you are bonded to someone, you can feel their mind from a greater range, as from a ship orbiting the planet and the planet below. On rare occasions, someone on the other end of a comm link will be experiencing or feeling strong emotions. Those may, on occasion, be felt by an empath. In one episode of Classic Trek, Spock was able to "suggest" to another person that she should untie his hands. This took a great deal of effort. He did not do this often. And the person he "persuaded" was not of a high intelligence. Simple things like "unlock the door" and "set down the keys" can be done. "Kill the guard" cannot. These must be simple suggestions given to someone who is used to taking orders. They require great, uninterrupted, concentration and are rarely used.

Vulcans Vulcans have a different form of telepathy. They are touch telepaths.□ They do not communicate mentally unless it is with their bond mate. A mind meld is a physical link between the Vulcan and another person/entity. This requires physical touch. It allows a limited, yet deep, probe of another mind. The Vulcan will be able to get

a great deal of input in a short time, but will not know everything about that person in an instant. There is simply too much data in the mind for that sort of transferral.

However, a Vulcan can implant suggestions and can force their mind onto another person. This, too, is only used in extreme circumstances, and for most Vulcans would be anathema. There has to be a good reason and the proper authority authorizing it. Basically, it should be vital and there is no other way to get the information.

Forcing ones mind/will on another is frowned upon. It can be considered mental rape and is not authorized without special permission and under extreme circumstances. This should not be used lightly and under the CO's direction.

Vulcans are the only known touch telepaths. As their form of telepathy is more limited than a general telepaths, it is also more powerful and more carefully controlled. Vulcans go through intensive training on how to control their emotions and how to use a mind-meld. There is no canonical support for Romulans to be telepaths or touch-telepaths.

Reman, however, can be, according to some.

Likewise, telepaths can go through training to learn to control their thoughts, to not project them to others and to basically put up a mental shield.□ This makes it more difficult for other telepaths to read their thoughts. It also makes it harder for the telepaths to pick up anything deeper than surface thoughts.

Body language: Just like every other species, a telepath can learn to read body language and facial expressions. You don't always need to be a telepath to tell how someone feels or, at times, what they are thinking. Counselors, diplomats, and occasionally intel officers are trained to read people.

Telepaths and telepathy should be played with care. Things to avoid: Reading minds from a distance Being able to tell exactly who is on a ship that is just within sensor range Sending out one's mind/thoughts to find or locate others Knowing what everyone in the room is thinking just by walking into the room. (It would be a jumble of surface thoughts and be therefore too chaotic to really differentiate, just like conversation in a room full of people) Godmodding (using your abilities to control others, to manipulate the situation or to keep others from participating) No player has the right to tell other players how they will respond to what your character does

Yes, I have seen other people do this.

Other species may have telepathic abilities as well. Telepaths are not limited to Vulcans, Betazoids, and Reman. As with all species, these characters should be written and played plausibly. They should have both strengths and weaknesses. Like all other characters, telepaths can be fun, if used in moderation. Sometimes it is the limitations that can be more fun to play.

I've heard other players complain about telepaths because they can easily become too powerful if you're not careful.

I've heard friends complain that a player who had a telepath walked into a room and immediately know what everyone was thinking. The player didn't have the option to say no. And the player didn't get to say what the character was thinking. The telepath decided what everyone was thinking.

Another telepath told a character exactly what they were thinking--without asking first. That made the other player upset because the player of the telepath was basically writing for the other character and that is frowned on in most places. So be very careful with this.

Always ask first. Ask if it's okay. Ask what the character may be thinking, and what can be picked up on. As I said before, it'll generally be surface thoughts or public mind and strong thoughts that are basically mental shouts.

So, how does this pertain to running a sim? Players come up with character concepts and set them out in a bio, but it's up to the COs to make sure they don't abuse the privilege. Because playing a telepath is a privilege. They are characters with extra abilities and need to not go overboard.

Give telepaths a chance to use their abilities. Every now and then, you can put something in the story that prevents a telepath from using their abilities. This can be like another character going blind or deaf. It's the loss of one of their senses, or someone is using their telepathy to haunt their dreams. It was done in TNG to Troi.

Simming is not about being the strongest, most powerful character, it's about character interactions, solving the puzzle or problem in the mission. It's about cooperation, and for that, it's important to focus on plausibility over power. Ultimately, when playing a telepath, don't take the most extreme things you've seen in a Star Trek episode. Take the more reasonable one and see how you can use it as both a strength and a weakness.

With my telepaths, they tend to short circuit when their emotions are involved. Their own strong emotions will override their telepathic abilities and they won't be able to read other people until they calm down. To me, it makes them more relatable.

It also makes sense to me because when I'm emotional, I don't reason as well as I should. So why not a telepath not senses as well as they should?

Be aware of the sensibilities of the other players. Just because you can doesn't mean you should.

Don't decide you can read another character's thoughts just because you're a telepath. If they aren't actively thinking something, you won't. And you can't decide yourself what they may or may not be thinking. Work with them and let them tell you in the post or in an OOC so they can decide what little you get.

I have a CO character who is a telepath. Once, a player's character was pacing outside her ready room thinking, "please don't be in, please don't be in." When that character entered, the CO asked why she didn't want the captain to be in. She didn't pick up on why, she just got the strong mental shout.

As a CO, I've given players of telepathic characters things they could pick up on, and I've occasionally told them they could not pick up on something. I want all players to feel like they're a part of a team. I don't want any to think I'm letting another character dictate what they do or how they respond. Be proactive, not reactive. Once the players know you want plausibility over superpowers, they'll cooperate.

That goes for all characters. Every species has strengths and weaknesses. Learn to play on the weaknesses as well as the strengths to have a more well-rounded character and to have some fun.

I personally have more fun playing a flawed character. Or playing a character's weaknesses.

Because many of my characters come from an academic background, they're smart. But they aren't as social as others. They spent more time studying and so are awkward in social situations. They don't like parties.

I don't just avoid parties, but I find ways to show my character as a fish out of water. Or I'll have her find something she can do, or a small group to talk to.

Once I had a conversation with other characters in the corridor outside the party.

Ultimately, I'm not saying you have to have hard rules. Rules can be bent or twisted a bit from time to time. COs should be open-minded and willing to work with creative ideas. Be reasonable with your telepaths and their ability and you'll find that they can be a lot of fun to play—and to play with.

Are there any questions?

acewing13:

thinking of how to word it. XD

Kathryn Burke:

Okay.

MIne is NOT the only way to play telepaths. It may not even be the best, but it's the one I like and works for me.

Ray Of Meep:

How do you prevent abuse? The problem I see with telepathy is that it can remove the "fog of war"; if abused, it can trivialize problems by being a quick way to gain information. Suppose another player's character has emotional problems that they don't want to share with other people, and the player expects some real, intimate interaction for other PC's to learn of it. But then a telepath comes in and obtains the information without any real character development that happens. I guess it's like solving a rubik's cube by taking it apart and putting it together.

Kathryn Burke:

Good question. First, in the post you have to politely inform the other character that they need to change their tag and you don't want them finding out that information just yet.

That can generally solve the problem. Most people will work with you. If not, go to the CO and have a talk about it.

Let the CO know how you feel and see what you can work out.

It's up to the CO to step in and resolve the problem if the player won't work with you. But generally, just asking politely is enough.

That's why I said that you need to ask the player before you can "out" them for anything. You can't just go into the players bio and pick out something to "know" unless you ask and get permission first.

Being polite about it always helps. Usually, they don't know that you don't want it found out.

And when they don't want to work with you, then the CO has to help resolve the issue.

Once I had to go into a post/sscen and edit it as the CO after I'd talked to both parties and the one who was taking liberties wouldn't make the change. So I did. I did warn the player first, and I did try to explain why it wasn't the right thing to do. That was only once, though. Usually just explaining is enough.

It also helps if your rules state that you can't write for another character. This falls under that category.

Ray Of Meep:

Hmm. So suppose the telepath is in the ideal situation to read someone else's mind. Even if both of the players consent to not read the mind at that point, there is another casualty: logical consistency. How do you cope with that? That for the sake of dramatic irony, you have to break the world's rules? I guess why I'm trying to say is by having telepathy you lose some narrative tools, mainly the withholding of information that can induce drama. How does telepathy make a story more interesting? What narrative tools does it introduce?

Kathryn Burke:

Good question. For the first one, if it's not a surface thought, then the telepath will not likely pick it up.

Or maybe he/she does and chooses not to say anything. Just because something is picked up doesn't mean it has to be commented on.

Or, for the second, maybe it's not a strong thought, maybe it's just a feeling. The telepath wonders if he/she really picked it up or not. So there's a question, an uncertainty that becomes a certainty later.

A telepath isn't going to pick up everything, so there's no plausibility problem if they miss something.

Now, if it's a really strong thought, they'll pick it up and choose not to divulge it. They can keep secrets, too.

Gregory:

The not picking up anything specific is usually a good idea.. They know someone is having *some* sort of problems, but doesn't know anything beyond that, so will have to use other means if they want to know more.

Kathryn Burke:

Just remember that the rules do not say that a telepath picks up everything. They can't. There are lots of thoughts that we keep private.

Yes. Something vague and they don't know who it's coming from. So, the secret is still safe.

And having to use other means to find out more is a good idea.

Gregory:

Well, I was on a roleplaying discussion group years ago, and once saw an example of how to use that (it was for a fantasy setting specifically, but could be used in a sci-fi setting too). It was to have the telepath doing something like walking through a crowd (at a market, etc.) while someone else was there who was having a bad day & who'd had some conflict with another person they work with. This second person could, in frustration, think, "Oh, if I ever get my hands on him, I'm gonna kill him!" Of course, the person wasn't *really* going to kill said individual, but the thought was strong enough that the telepath picked up the "I'm gonna kill him!" part and thought that they'd overheard an actual plot to kill someone, but didn't know any other details beyond that. The rest of the plot was then centered on the telepath and the other PCs in their group searching for the alleged "murderer" and trying to do so in time to prevent what they *thought* was a murder.

Kathryn Burke:

It'll keep them from finding out stuff the players don't want known.

That's a really good example.

Ray Of Meep:

So it seems like by these rules, telepathy is more advanced empathy. A telepath is more certain that a person has X emotion.

Yes and no. It's like what you're thinking of at that moment is a surface thought. But your deeper thoughts and feelings are still hidden. Or if you're angry/emotional, that thought is louder. So they are connected.

Gregory:

And thoughts/emotions can sometimes be taken out of context, because the telepath isn't picking up everything.

Ray Of Meep:

Okay, so the solution here then is a telepath can suss out deep information, but it's fractured, incomplete.

Kathryn Burke:

That can keep the telepath from becoming a Mary Sue.

Gregory:

Yep.

Kathryn Burke:

Yes. they're not going to get everything in a few seconds.

Kathryn Burke:

It helps other characters keep secrets and still gives the telepath a way to play the character.

Our time is up. Thank you for attending, and for the conversation. I appreciate the comments and questions.