

TRANSHUMAN SPACE

TOXIC MEMES™



Written by Jamais Cascio

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GURPS™

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

Believe It Or Not . . .

Though you might not have a choice. 2100 is ruled by memetics – the science of analyzing, engineering, and manipulating ideas. Memeticists know how to get into your head for power, money, and religion. Or just for the fun of it.

Toxic Memes explores cults, conspiracies, urban legends, and fads from around the world at the end of the 21st century. In a world where belief, fear, and ideology can be sculpted like clay, how does anyone know what they *really* think?

Toxic Memes is a sourcebook for the ***Transhuman Space*** setting, and includes detailed rules for the creation and propagation of memes, technologies for controlling information and managing reputations, new characters, new templates, campaign ideas, and over a hundred cults, movements, conspiracies, myths, and fringe subcultures to use as adventure seeds, background flavor, and to enhance your game's sense that the world of ***Transhuman Space*** is a very strange place indeed.



GURPS Basic Set, Compendium I, and ***Transhuman Space*** are required to use this book in a ***GURPS*** campaign. ***GURPS Space*** may also be useful. The ideas in ***Toxic Memes*** can be used with any roleplaying system.

Written by Jamais Cascio

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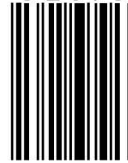
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INTRODUCTION

WARNING:
REPUTATION IS
DROPPING WITH
ALL GROUPS.



There is nothing so bizarre, so irrational, so *otherworldly* that somebody, somewhere, won't believe it. This is all the more true in 2100, after the science of *memetics* – the analysis and engineering of ideas – has reached its full fruition. Detailed knowledge of how human and artificial minds work has given cult leaders, conspiracy theorists, advertisers, and rumormongers a fresh toolkit with which to ply their trades. The results aren't always pretty.

Toxic Memes dives head first into the swamp of myths, movements, and manipulation that characterizes life in 2100. It details how memetics fits into the world of *Transhuman Space*, and the technologies and techniques that make memetics so powerful. *Toxic Memes* also provides a catalog of the weird beliefs, political agendas, post-modern urban legends, and nonhuman ravings that flourish at the end of the 21st century.

ABOUT GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of the *GURPS* system. Our address is SJ Games, Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! Resources include:

Pyramid (www.sjgames.com/pyramid/). Our online magazine includes new *GURPS* rules and articles. It also covers *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Traveller*, *World of Darkness*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and many more top games – and other Steve Jackson Games releases like *In Nomine*, *Illuminati*, *Car Wars*, *Toon*, *Ogre Miniatures*, and more. *Pyramid* subscribers also have access to playtest files online!

New supplements and adventures. *GURPS* continues to grow, and we'll be happy to let you know what's new. For a current catalog, send us a legal-sized or 9"×12" SASE – please use two stamps! – or just visit www.warehouse23.com.

Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata sheets for all *GURPS* releases, including this book, are available on our website – see below.

Gamer input. We value your comments, for new products as well as updated printings of existing titles!

Internet. Visit us on the World Wide Web at www.sjgames.com for errata, updates, Q&A, and much more. *GURPS* has its own Usenet group, too: rec.games.frp.gurps.

GURPSnet. This e-mail list hosts much of the online discussion of *GURPS*. To join, point your web browser to www.sjgames.com/mailman/listinfo/gurpsnet-l/.

The *Transhuman Space: Toxic Memes* web page is at www.sjgames.com/transhuman/toxicmemes/.

Page References

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the *GURPS Basic Set*. Page references that begin with CI indicate *GURPS Compendium I*. Other references are BD for *Transhuman Space: Broken Dreams*, FW for *Transhuman Space: Fifth Wave*, HF for *Transhuman Space: High Frontier*, ITW for *Transhuman Space: In The Well*, SSS for *Transhuman Space: Spaceships of the Solar System*, TS for *Transhuman Space*, and UP for *Transhuman Space: Under Pressure*. The abbreviation for *this* book is TM. For a full list of abbreviations, see p. CI181 or the updated web list at www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamais Cascio is a writer and designer of futurist scenarios mixing technology, politics, and business. He has consulted with filmmakers, corporations, and government agencies from around the world, and his thoughts about the future have been featured in *Time*, *Wired*, *Whole Earth*, and on National Public Radio. An enthusiastic *GURPS* player, he is also the author of *Transhuman Space: Broken Dreams*. He lives in the San Francisco area with his wife, two cats, and four Macs.

1

OVERVIEW

COGNITIVE ECOLOGIES

VICTOR NAKANO,
--MARRIED--

EVELYN DELAIN,
--SINGLE, AVAILABLE--

GUSTAV MARCHO,
--WARNING--



Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one CAN'T believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

– Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, 1872

Memetics – the science of idea propagation and replication – is a cornerstone of the world in 2100. While this study of how belief is shaped and transmitted has mutated fields from sociology to advertising, it has most affected politics and religion. Memetics has set off a cognitive arms race by giving powerful new tools to those who manipulate thinking, and granting others greater comprehension of how such manipulation happens . . . and the power to avoid it.

Civilization at the edge of the 22nd century is a starkly Darwinian environment of ideas, all competing for the limited resource of attention. Memetics draws a close analogy between genes, the units of biological evolution, and memes, the units of cognitive and cultural evolution, allowing memeticists to study the spread of ideas just as an epidemiologist studies the spread of disease. But memetic science in 2100 goes even further, with increasingly powerful techniques for the creation of ideas that audiences will find compelling or even life changing.

In a world filled with memes, only the catchy survive. Some memes thrive by being demonstrably more effective, proving their value through sheer abundance of evidence. Other memes survive by being more interesting, amusing, seductive, or persuasive than their competitors, picked up and transmitted not because they provide obvious value but because they have been sculpted to appeal to many minds.

Before the rise of memetics, the crafting of ideas was the work of artisans, using techniques they couldn't fully explain or even understand. These "memetic alchemists" – as LOGOS, the AI who kicked off the memetics revolution, described them – often came up with slogans that swayed public opinion, but not reliably. With the development of memetics, what had been ritual soon became science. Those who wished to change minds now understood precisely how to do it.

Not all of the memes created using these new tools were, or are, for the betterment of mankind. The world of 2100 is awash in carefully designed memes intended to persuade, amuse, and inspire – yet it is also full of memes created to frighten, dominate, and mislead. Some of the memes out there are simply toxic.

In a world filled with memes, only the catchy survive.

Toxic Memes describes the weird, twisted, and sometimes baffling mental landscape of the end of the 21st century. In 2100, memetics is a well-understood, widely used discipline. A century of development has resulted in sophisticated tools for storytelling, propaganda, and advertising – tools that can be, and are, also used for more nefarious purposes. It's not enough to be skeptical – cognitive survival depends on the realization that every idea has layers, that you may not even be able to trust what you see and feel, and that no truth is unvarnished.

MEMETICS AND MEMES

The science of memetics is based upon a relatively straightforward (if originally controversial) notion: ideas behave like biological entities. They are "replicators," in the language of evolutionary biologists, able to duplicate themselves without losing the original copy. As with genes, they are subject to variation – the replication can be imperfect, leading to slight differences between versions. They are subject to "selection," where environmental pressures can lead to some ideas doing better than others. The combination of replication, variation, and selection means that ideas evolve. Just as genes are the primary units of biological evolution, ideas – memes – are the primary units of cultural evolution.

By 2100, this basic observation has itself evolved into a far-reaching science of human cognition, as well as a complex methodology for generating and manipulating ideas. No longer limited to memes-as-metaphor, scientific memetics examines precisely how ideas trigger responses in minds. Memetics sits at the crossroads of psychology, sociology, neurophysiology, and artificial-intelligence research.

THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES

For all of the massive technological transformations of the 21st century, the development with the greatest potential to alter how humanity and its children think of themselves had its roots in a century-old book about evolution.

Dawkins

A small section in a 1976 book called *The Selfish Gene* triggered the study of memetics. Its author, Richard Dawkins, was a leading late-20th/early-21st-century evolutionary biologist. In one of the book's later chapters, he described his concept of cultural evolution as part of a larger discussion of replicators. He carefully avoided claims that culture was genetic, but stated that just as biological evolution was based (in his view) on competition between genes, cultural evolution was based on competition between replicating cultural units: memes.

While the notion of biological analogies for culture wasn't new – see, for example, William S. Burroughs' observation that "language is a virus" – Dawkins' take on it was. By giving it a clear articulation, scientific credence, and a catchy name, he gave the idea life. In the decades since, the "meme" meme has proven remarkably powerful.

Memes and Memeplexes

So what exactly is a meme? It is an idea, broadly speaking. A song, a political opinion, a scientific conjecture – all can be memes. They exist and have value, in large measure due to their appeal to our minds. Even physical objects have memetic aspects: when we describe a tangible item as being "elegant," "cleverly designed," or "cool," we are discussing its memetic characteristics.

The more a meme appeals, the more likely we are to remember it and to pass it along to others. This communication of a meme can be as simple as telling it to someone or as complex as writing out elaborate design plans. Physical manifestations of memes can even serve as a medium of propagation: simply seeing the result of an innovative idea (such as a keystone arch) can implant the meme, leading to its eventual reproduction elsewhere.

analysts hold that such a large-scale software entity would leave telltale signals in communication channels that could be recognized and analyzed. Since such signals are absent, they claim that while individual emergent AIs can appear without anyone realizing it, an emergent AI that exists in the whole Web at once cannot.

PARANORMAL BELIEFS

The persistence of belief in the paranormal is a continued surprise to casual observers of society in 2100, but is completely in line with the expectations of professional anthropologists, sociologists, and memeticists. The expansion of science's ability to explain the universe has not increased its comprehensibility for most people. Even highly educated people in 2100 take matters related to well-established elements of quantum spookiness, multiple universes, and the like largely on faith. For those who believe in the supernatural, the inability to "prove" the existence of spirits in a way that scientists would accept no

more invalidates their faith than does the inability to "prove" the existence of Calabi-Yau-shaped folded dimensions in a way that a non-physicist could understand invalidates physics.

The path that technological development has taken over the last century has propped up aspects of the paranormal as well. AIs and the like do not prove the existence of the supernatural, but the language used by many developers – mind emulations as "ghosts," for example – often evokes traditional paranormal concepts. Some believers are amused by the compliment, others are insulted by the arrogance . . . And still others have come to suspect that unbeknownst to the developers, these technologies have somehow connected very old powers and previously thought inaccessible forces to man's tools.

Memetic engineers attempting to take advantage of paranormal-phenomena belief tend not to create new supernatural stories out of whole cloth, although in a few cases this has been successful. More often, the memeticists use existing paranormal stories and twist the desired memes into local manifestations or accounts. This technique has been used to push political agendas, religious precepts, and even simple practical jokes.

DO AIs HAVE SOULS?

As science has never been able to find any evidence of a "soul," its existence is entirely a matter of faith. Not all religions include belief in a soul, although most do. For many of these, the most-vexing question of the last several decades has been whether SAIs, which clearly have minds, also have souls. This question is of more than theological import . . . Fervent believers who do not accept the notion of AIs with souls are more likely to treat infomorphs as things and commit violence against them. The dominant religions around the world have radically different perspectives on AIs and souls:

Buddhism: As Buddhism was the first major belief to accept sapient artificial minds as people – in 2038, well before SAIs even existed – followers are the most likely to say "yes." Not all schools of Buddhism teach the existence of souls, but of those that do, the vast majority include SAIs and LAIs as having them.

Chinese Traditional Religions: Although many followers of Chinese Traditional practices accept shadows and ghosts as carrying the souls of the deceased, they have great reluctance to accept that constructed infomorphs might have a spirit.

Christianity: Christian traditions vary widely. Many mainstream Protestant and Mormon groups with an American background disagree with the concept of AIs having

souls, while newer interpretations, such as Christian Hyperevolutionism, believe they do. European churches are mixed, some welcoming SAI citizens as members while others are the last refuges of those who deny that SAIs should be considered people. Traditional Catholicism has struggled with this question, but as of 2100 still teaches that SAIs are human constructs, not divine creations, and thus do not have souls. Reformed Catholicism began admitting SAIs as believers in 2080 and fully embraces the notion of digital entities with souls.

Hinduism: Despite a richly nuanced theology, the vast majority of Hindus are firm in their belief that SAIs are things that act like people, not people with souls to be reincarnated. In India, the notion that a human can be reincarnated as an SAI has been linked to nanosocialists in an attempt to discredit them.

Islam: In the Islamic Caliphate, SAIs who accept Islam can be citizens, and the notion that the machines have souls is broadly accepted. There is some debate as to whether SAIs have human souls or the souls of djinn, supernatural spirits with bodies of fire – or energy, which information-based entities arguably possess. Outside the Caliphate, the concept is controversial, and is entirely rejected in Iran and Pakistan.

Memetics isn't just a way of understanding the progress and propagation of ideas, it's a hands-on tool for engineering belief, ideology, and desire. The capacity of a memeticist to shape thoughts is limited in a variety of ways, however – most notably by the presence of other memeticists able to identify nascent memes and engineer their own memetic campaigns to stop or reshape them. The development of memetic science may have made the life of the propagandist or psychological operative easier in some ways, but now more people than ever have the skills to spot and counter memetic manipulation.

APPLIED MEMETICS

Memetics can seem powerful, but to make a memetic campaign work requires effort, time, and patience. The Darwinian cauldron of modern society has numerous risks for the careless or hasty memeticist. Since memes are rarely engineered without an underlying purpose, a memetic campaign's failure can undermine larger goals. A professional memeticist unwilling to take the time to get the job done right is an unemployed memeticist; an opportunistic memeticist with the same thoughtlessness may well be a dead one.

On its own, the Memetics skill is of little use for interacting with others. In concert with a variety of other influence- and creativity-oriented skills, however, it provides an edge in crafting an argument or presentation to which others will respond positively (see p. 134 and p. TS137). That said, the main use of Memetics is not buttressing passing arguments, but changing beliefs.

Memetics does not *require* that the target be a group. It is technically possible to direct a memetic campaign against an individual, if that individual can be communicated with but is otherwise isolated. But since the methods used to manipulate a target audience's emotional and mental landscape are relatively subtle, a memetic operation aimed at a single individual will, under more realistic circumstances, also affect others around him.

MEME ANALYSIS

Memetic training is commonly used to analyze cultural artifacts to determine the memes they carry. This is handy for everyday business and entertainment, but also has more complex uses. A memeticist can, with the proper analysis and resources, determine whether memes were intentionally placed and their relationship to other memes.

On a successful Memetics roll, a memeticist can examine any cultural artifact – text, visual presentations, music, art, and so on – and determine what memes are present in it, as well as the degree to which those memes were deliberately placed. If the memeticist succeeds by 4 or more, he is able to gather some information about the “ancestry” of the memes – what memes are

related, to what degree the memes were deliberately designed, and so on. On a critical success, the memeticist may identify characteristics of an engineered meme's *creator*; such as his cultural background, his training, or possibly even his identity – if the subject is well known in the world of memetics.

Memetic analysis is not instant; it takes time depending on the complexity of the meme (see p. 128). Analyzing a Simple meme takes at least 15 minutes, analyzing a Medium one takes a minimum of an hour, and analyzing a Complex one takes a day or more. Each added interval provides a +1 modifier to the Memetics roll for the analysis, with a maximum of +5. (For example, spending three days analyzing a new religion for its memetic structure gives a +2 to the memeticist's roll.)

MEME DESIGN AND USE

“You appear to be starting a religion. Would you like help with that?”

– *MemeAgent assistant,*
ParadigmMaker 2.1 software

The most potent use for Memetics is to create memes and memeplexes for target audiences. The memeticist must already be very familiar with the profile and past behavior of the target group before he can design suitable memes. (Preparatory rolls against Area Knowledge, Memetics, Pop Culture, Psychology, and/or Research are very appropriate.) The greater the memeticist's understanding of his audience, the better the crafted meme or memeplex will “fit” that target, and the harder it will be for the meme to be resisted.

A memetic campaign against a target population is handled as a Contest of Skills (see p. B87 or p. TS208), with the Memetics skill and a variety of modifiers used by the memeticist, and the target audience's using its average Will (again, with modifiers) to determine its resistance roll. If the memeticist attempts to propagate more than one meme in a single campaign, each memetic “attack” is rolled separately.

The Memetics roll is modified by the time taken for meme construction, by the complexity and number of memes, the number of “vectors” used to deliver the memes, the engineered infectiousness and durability of the memes, and the software used. (See *Memetic Campaign Concepts*, p. 118.) The memetic resistance roll is modified by the “fit” of the memes to the population, the existence and quality of other memes competing for the population's attention, and the existence of an “active defense” – attempts to counter the engineered memes specifically. Finally, all this work costs money. The memetic campaign's cost depends upon the size of the target population and the number and types of media used to promote the memes (see *Vectors*, p. 118).

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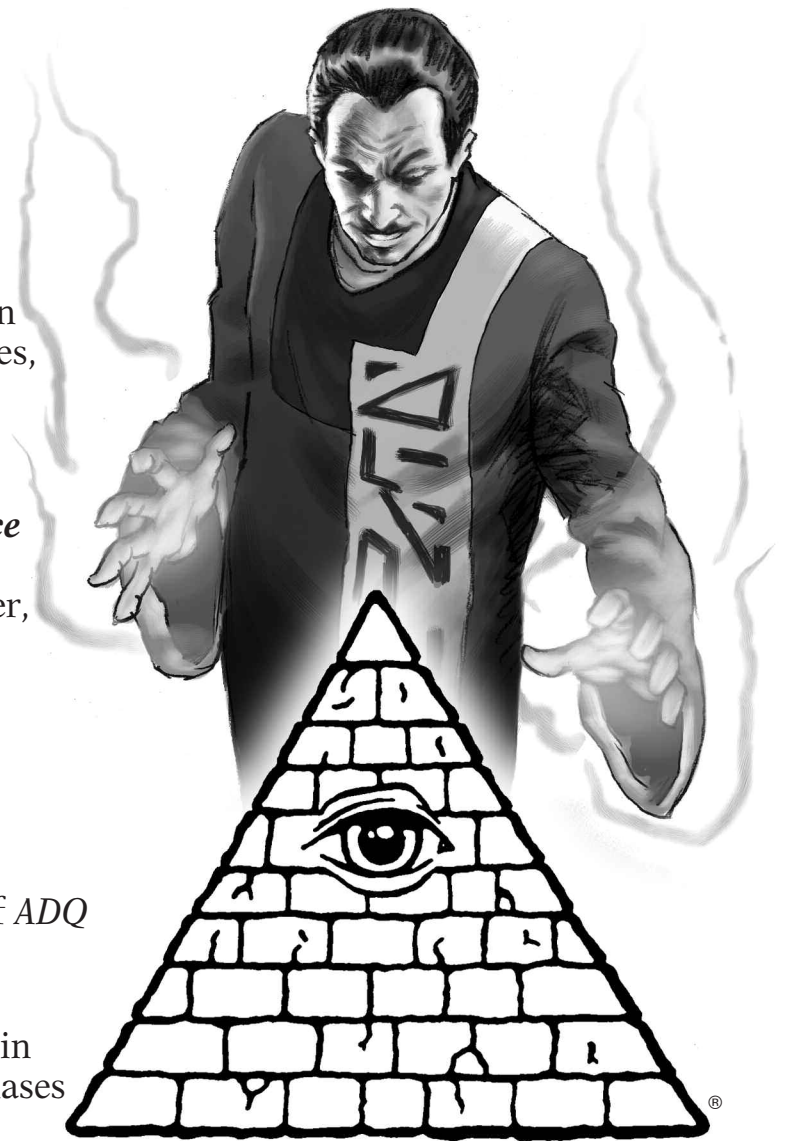
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