

# In Search of Psi

**A**t the tender age of 13, I embarked on a serious mission to tap the psychic waveband. While other kids were playing team sports or ogling girls, I was fabricating divining rods and a Hieronymus Machine.

My guide into the queasy world of quasi-science was John W. Campbell, Jr., the irascible editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine. He sounded like one part engineer, one part wide-eyed visionary, and two parts drill sergeant. His enemy was unthinking orthodoxy. His precept was that you could crack any problem with the scientific method, so long as you didn't pay too much attention to "experts" warning you that what you wanted to do couldn't be done.

In 1956, Campbell published an informal position paper, asking his readers if they were ready for a serious exploration of "psi," by which he meant the entire subject of psychic phenomena. If psi existed, it should yield to a mix of logical deduction and Yankee ingenuity, just like anything else. So how about it? He wrote as if he were addressing a platoon of fresh-faced recruits. Were we man enough (surely, none of his readers was female) to tackle some really life-changing, head-bending ideas, no matter where they might lead us?

In his June 1956 issue, Campbell reported that his readers shared his zeal. They were gung-ho, ready to lock-and-load and follow him over the top into combat with prejudiced naysayers who dismissed psychic research as frivolous or wacky. So be it! He started publishing a series of revelatory articles that I read with utter fascination.

## DIVINING RODS

I especially liked a feature about "divining rods" because they were so simple. All you needed were two pieces of rod and two lengths of tube. You bent each piece of rod at a right angle and hung it in a length of tube. You held the tubes, one in each hand, so that the rods pointed away from your body, like a pair of handguns. If you rotated your wrists slightly,

the rods would swing from side to side.

Supposedly they would detect cables, conduits, water pipes, sewer pipes, aquifers, or anything else that ran in a straight line underground. You held the divining rods and started walking. As you approached the linear underground object, the divining rods started to turn. When you were directly above the object, the rods aligned themselves with it.

The rods were said to be standard equipment among hard-hat maintenance workers across Heartland America. The magazine published a picture of the Distribution Supervisor from a water company in Flint, Mich., holding a pair of the rods — or at least, so the caption claimed.

Campbell theorized that the human brain might have unknown powers to sense underground objects. The brain simply needed a means to express itself, perhaps via unconscious muscular movements of the type that old-fashioned water diviners had applied with a yew twig. The rods probably worked the same way.

I chopped a wire coat hanger into two pieces, hung each of them in a spool of thread that I filched from my mother's sewing kit, and stretched a piece of string across my bedroom floor. I closed my eyes and stepped forward. One pace, two, three. I opened my eyes, and sure enough, I was standing directly on the string, and the rods had turned (or, I had turned the rods) to align themselves with it.

I was thrilled, but of course I realized this was not a fair test, since I had known where the string was located, and I had known the result that I was hop-

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*Author's note: Since the inventor's patent was filed under the name "Hieronymus," I have used this spelling, even though Campbell, who was in contact with the inventor, spelled his name as "Hieronymous."*

**A boy and his Hieronymus Machine.** By Charles Platt



In October 1958 this seemingly undistinguished science fiction magazine contained a revelatory story on “divining rods.” (Original cover by Kelly Freas.)

**The brain simply needed a means to express itself, perhaps via unconscious muscular movements of the type that old-fashioned water diviners had applied with a yew twig.**



**DIVINING RODS:** Bend two pieces of wire, insert them in two lengths of tube, hold one length of tube in each hand, and you're ready to go searching for any underground pipe, cable, or conduit.

ing to achieve. I asked my father if he knew of any underground objects buried outside the house, but he said he didn't. So I rode my bicycle to the home of a friend whose father was an electronics engineer in the Air Force.

My friend and I took turns holding the rods while we walked to and fro across his backyard. The rods swung in our hands, and we started drawing a map of underground objects. The objects formed an X-shaped pattern, linking opposite corners of the yard. But what, exactly, were we mapping?

We turned to my friend's father, who had been watching us with interest. "Is there *something* under your lawn?" I asked.

He nodded very seriously, although he seemed to be having trouble repressing a smile. "There are two drains," he said. "They run from corner to corner."

My eyes widened. "In an X-shaped pattern!"  
"Absolutely right," he said.

## PSIONIC DETECTION DEVICE

Well, after that, John W. Campbell was more than just a guru to me. He acquired godlike status. In a previous issue he had published a piece about a "psionic detection device." This had seemed an overly ambitious project at the time, but I was willing to work a little harder, now, as a foot soldier in the resistance movement against blinkered orthodoxy.

The psionic device had been invented by a lone experimenter named Thomas G. Hieronymus who claimed that it could detect "eloptic radiation," emitted by every object in the universe. (He received U.S. patent number 2,482,773, and although he is no longer alive, his legacy lives online at sites such as [rexresearch.com/hieronym/1hieron.htm](http://rexresearch.com/hieronym/1hieron.htm).)

The Hieronymus Machine featured a tuning dial coupled to a prism that would refract the eloptic radiation, feeding it through an amplifier to an output coil. To use the device, you placed your hand on a "sensor plate" above the coil and rotated the tuning dial. When the machine resonated with matter in front of the prism, the sensor plate would feel sticky to the touch (although some people described it as hot, or cold, or oily).

Campbell built his own version of the machine and announced, with utter certainty, that it worked. Six months later he came up with a creative modification. If he was correct that psychic phenomena were inherent in the brain and merely needed an output device to express themselves, the choice of raw materials in a Hieronymus Machine was no more important than the type of metal you used to make a divining rod.

Why not reduce the electronic components to a symbolic level? If you merely printed them on paper, they should still work (if they worked at all), in the same way that other psychic phenomena worked symbolically. For instance, some people claimed you could kill pests in a field by dripping a chemical on a photograph of the field, while others believed you could induce pain in a person by sticking a pin in a doll. Supposedly the symbol enabled expression of a latent mental power.

Campbell duly published a circuit diagram, advised his readers to add a symbolic prism and sensor plate, and told them to let him know what happened.

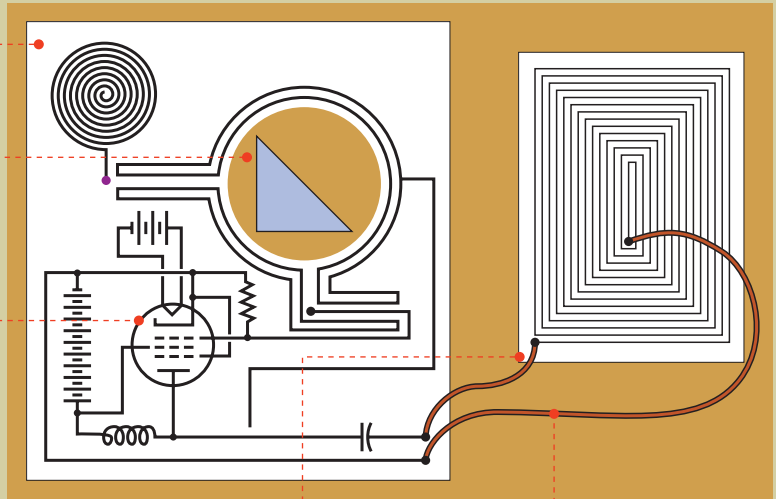
The more I thought about it, the more I wanted a Hieronymus Machine. I craved it with the same intensity that I craved Lucilla Stanley, a golden-haired, freckle-faced goddess who sat opposite me

## SYMBOLIC HIERONYMUS MACHINE

Draw the circuit on a piece of card.

Cut out a circular hole in which a triangle of clear plastic can rotate on the end of a shaft attached to a dial.

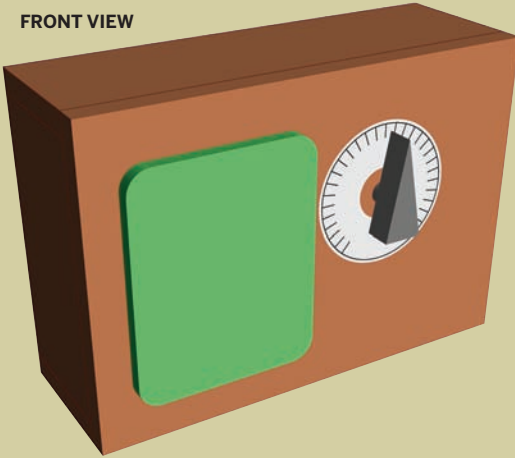
Symbolic vacuum tube amplifies the psionic signal, powered by a high-tension symbolic battery. A transistorized version might have a shorter warm-up time.



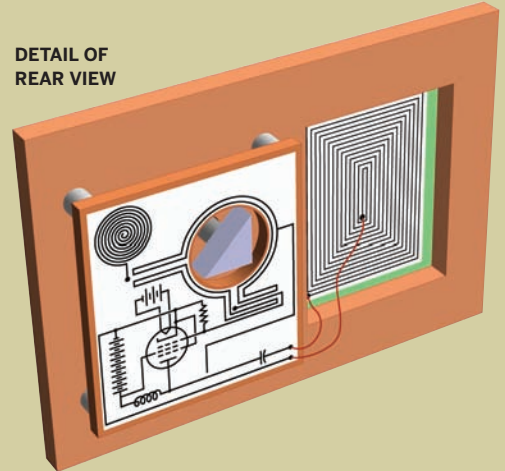
Draw the symbolic output coil on another piece of card, which you will glue under the sensor plate.

Attach the amplifier circuit to the coil with some pieces of thread glued at both ends.

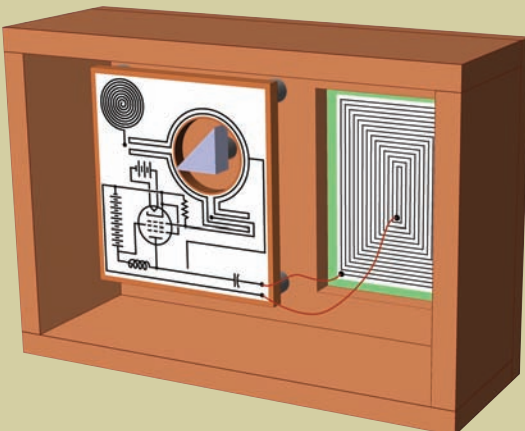
FRONT VIEW



DETAIL OF REAR VIEW



REAR VIEW



These renderings suggest a simple construction project using plywood, a control knob on a shaft, and a plastic prism on the other end of the shaft, rotating in a hole cut out of a circuit board. No need for tiresome electrical wiring; just paste a printed copy of the circuit onto the board, and a printed coil under a "sensor plate" such as the lid of a lunch box. Connect the coil to the circuit by gluing the ends of sewing thread or string, and you're ready to search for eloptic radiation on the psionic waveband.



in my French class in school, inducing adoration that made me powerless to speak. Realistically, I had to admit that the Hieronymus Machine would be more easily attainable than Lucilla, so I banished her from my mind while I made a laborious hand-drawn copy of Campbell's schematic circuit diagram (this was before the invention of Xerox machines). I used a triangle of Lucite as the prism, attached it to a wheel and a rod from my Erector Set, and contrived a sensor plate from the lid of my lunch box. Now I was properly equipped to boldly go into the unknown territory of psi!

During the next week I reduced my popularity among kids at my school to a new low as I pestered them to put their hands on the sensor plate while I twiddled the tuning dial — keeping its position hidden from them, naturally. Did the plate feel sticky? Or hot, maybe? Or different in any way at all?

I received a lot of positive responses. Definitely, the characteristics of the plate seemed to change.

The only problem was that these alleged changes did not coincide with any position of the dial. Positive results were scattered randomly across the entire 270 degrees of rotation. I was forced to face the fact that the only power I had detected here was the power of autosuggestion.

There was one last candidate for my test. His name was Leonard Fisk. Leonard was a gawky kid with a bad haircut and exceptionally large ears. He was not especially good academically, and not popular in team sports either. He was a bit — odd. I hesitated to add him to my list of experimental subjects because I wasn't sure he would cooperate.

I was wrong about that. He turned out to be very enthusiastic, and to my amazement, he detected a change in the sensor plate when the tuning dial was in the same position every time, within a margin of plus or minus 10 degrees.

I wondered what the difference was between him and all the other people (including myself) who had tried unsuccessfully to get results from the Hieronymus Machine. Maybe it had something to do with his oversized ears. I imagined them functioning like psychic antennas. It seemed unlikely, yet who was to say how these things worked or didn't work?

I went home and wrote a letter to John W. Campbell, Jr. describing my results, although I decided not to mention my theory about Leonard's ears. A few weeks later I was thrilled to receive a reply from Campbell, telling me that he had forwarded my

mail to someone named Smith, who was working to collate results from serious experimenters such as myself, scattered across the entire globe.

After another two weeks I received a letter from Smith. Unlike the fancy publisher's stationery that Campbell had used, this letter was a ragged, plain piece of paper on which text had been badly typed with numerous handwritten corrections. Smith wanted me to conduct a whole series of new experiments. The trials should be double-blind and independently witnessed. I had to record the age, gender, body weight, and other details of my experimental subjects. They must all perform the tests in the same place, ideally at the same time of day, and in the same room temperature.

I didn't like the sound of this at all. I had been able to persuade the kids at school to stop for a couple of minutes on their way to lunch, but getting them to sit still in a "controlled environment" was never going to work, especially since my school's heating system was notoriously unreliable.

## THE PROCESSES OF SCIENCE

Campbell had excited me with the idea that a few gifted amateurs in basement workshops could validate ideas that conventional scientists had been too prejudiced to take seriously. He made it seem as if psychic research could be a slam-dunk, a quick fix. But now Smith wanted meticulous data collection under controlled conditions, requiring weeks of repetitive work. There was no excitement in this scenario. It sounded really boring — like real science.

I have to admit that I lost interest in the Hieronymus Machine. John W. Campbell, Jr. issued more wake-up calls in his magazine, more rants insisting that "We Must Study Psi!" but he no longer captivated my attention. In June 1960 he ran a big feature on the Dean Drive, a system of rotating weights that was supposed to lift itself by taking advantage of an undiscovered nonlinear correction to Newtonian laws of motion. Forget about NASA's costly boondoggle, trying to use dangerous liquid-fueled rockets to put men on the Moon by the end of the decade. We could bolt a Dean Drive to a submarine that would serve as an ad-hoc airtight space vehicle, and move men to Mars within a year — if the Dean Drive worked the way it should.

Somehow I didn't quite buy it. I had learned a painful lesson about the processes of science. In the real world, science is not quick, not simple, and seldom



By January 1959, Campbell was still insisting, in an editorial, that “We Must Study Psi!” (psychic phenomena). But his table thumping was attracting fewer takers. (Original cover by Kelly Freas.)



In June 1960, Campbell proposed bolting a Dean Drive to a submarine to create an instant airtight spaceship, ready to put men on Mars within a year (assuming the Dean Drive actually worked). By this time he was changing the name of the magazine from *Astounding Science Fiction* to *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*, in a bid for respectability that was never entirely successful. (Original cover by John Schoenherr.)

exciting. I was now 16, the same age at which Einstein had suddenly wondered if he would be able to see himself in a mirror if he and the mirror were traveling at the speed of light. From this moment of intense conceptual excitement came the theory of relativity; but the details, of course, consumed the rest of his life, and he never did come up with a unified field theory. As Thomas Edison supposedly said, genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.

I never went into science, or even pseudoscience. Instead I became a science writer, which enabled me to enjoy all the excitement of discoveries vicariously, without the hard work of making them. In retrospect, I think John W. Campbell, Jr. was not so different. He was another scientist-wannabe looking for a shortcut around the monotonous, challenging terrain of real-life research.

This does not mean that he was necessarily

wrong about everything. Discoveries may come from unexpected sources. Divining rods still may work (for some people, at least), and even Thomas G. Hieronymus could have been onto something.

In fact, maybe his machine still merits a couple hours of construction time. Your friends may be sufficiently intrigued to tolerate a few sessions at the sensor plate before they wander off to do something more important, such as browse YouTube or check email. Depending on your attention span, you may even gather some usable data.

I only ask one favor. If you find someone, as I did, who yields positive, repeatable results — please be sure to note the size of his ears.

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Charles Platt is a frequent contributor to MAKE, has been a senior writer for *Wired*, and has written science-fiction novels, including *The Silicon Man*.



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