

Inception: More about Totems

Hi, I will be presenting about totems in Inception and explain them in detail.

1. Motivation

These are the 3 reasons why I chose to talk about totems. They were **shown repeatedly in the movie**, but I wanted more explanation about them. I also personally thought totems might be **related to each protagonist's characteristics**, and the last reason is that totems support the **narrative structure and the theme**. Now I will talk about these topics in further detail.

2. Definition

A **totem** is an object used to test if one is in someone's dream. In the movie, it is shown as various forms such as a top, bishop, and dice. We already know well how it works. The totem will not work as intended if the user is in someone's dream. But in the movie, it wasn't explained **why it works that way**.

3. Mechanism

To quote Arthur,

I can't let you touch it. That would defeat the purpose.

He mentions that he is the only person that knows the weight and balance of the die. We can also infer that this die, if it works properly, will always show only one specific side. **But why doesn't it work the same way in other person's dream?** After all, it's the same die, so it will have the same weight and balance.

In the movie, Cobb mentions that he needs an architect for the mission. Using these information, here is my answer. For an architect, it is impossible to replicate something exactly without knowing its substructure. This is why a totem would lose its purpose if it's touched by others. **If the substructure is exposed, it can be exactly replicated, so it will function the same way as it was originally intended in reality.** Now one cannot distinguish dream and reality.

One thing peculiar is that totems in the movie are **ordinary objects that were constructed not to work in the usual way**. This is a **necessary condition** for totems, since others **would have to guess incorrectly on how they work**. Otherwise, if it worked normally, it would also work normal in dreams.

To quote Ariadne, this really is

An elegant solution for keeping track of reality.

I mean, I think it's pretty simple, but just that it wasn't explained.

Now let's take a look at each totem, and how it may relate to each protagonist's characteristics.

4. Arthur's Die

Normally, a die would uniformly show each sides with equal probability. So that would be how this die would work in other's dreams. But Arthur designed his totem so that the die would always show one side. Since we use dice when we take chances in games, we can infer that Arthur takes chances to achieve what he wants. His going on the mission with Cobb is a moment where he takes chances. Moreover in the scene with no gravity, Arthur takes chances and ties everyone up and throws them into the elevator, to get the kick.

5. Ariadne's Bishop

This is a chess piece, designed by Ariadne in the movie. In dreams, it would be a normal chess piece, but in reality, Ariadne will be able to feel the original weight distribution of the bishop. In chess, bishop is a very powerful piece. This reflects her strategic nature, and it implies that she will play an important role in the mission. In the mission, she actually shoots the projection of Mal in limbo. I think this is important enough, considering that they were in serious lack of time.

Another thing I want to talk about is the fact that however a bishop moves, it stays on the same color as it started. And Cobb's line

She'll be back... Reality's not gonna be enough for her now,

This may imply that she was somewhat restricted and she will want to break out of her restrictions. When she was instructed to create a maze that is hard to solve, she was told to do better than that at first, but she thought outside the box and overcomes it.

6. Cobb's Spinning Top

This totem, spins forever in dreams. In reality, it stops spinning due to friction. One thing to note about this totem is that this top wasn't originally his totem. This was originally Mal's totem, but Cobb uses it as his totem. We can infer from this that he really misses Mal.

However at this point, you must feel something strange. Unlike all other totems introduced in the film, this one is very peculiar. **All other totems behave abnormally in reality and normally in dreams, but this top, is the only totem that has the opposite characteristics.** So what if some other architect created a dream where this top worked **normal**? Cobb wouldn't be able to tell the difference. It's simply too vulnerable.

So what is his real totem? This top wasn't even originally his.

7. Wedding Ring?

Well there are some people who think that Cobb's wedding ring was his real totem. Their supporting arguments are that in every scene in which Cobb was dreaming, he was wearing this ring, and in reality the ring was gone. Some extend this argument and claim that since he wasn't wearing the ring when he got off the plane, Cobb went back to his children in reality. But my counter argument is that this wedding ring is not a physical object, so it cannot be a totem. It's merely a reflection of him missing Mal.

But in the perspective of narrative structure, it's a device for the audience. It does help us distinguish between dream and reality in the movie. Maybe we can say that it was at least a totem for the audience.

8. Theme

With Cobb's real totem left unanswered, I think it doesn't matter. However the ending is interpreted, I think it is a happy ending. He got what he wanted. He returned to his children. Now to Cobb, it doesn't matter whether he is in reality or a dream. Everything is happening inside of his head. That doesn't necessarily mean that it isn't real. Since he is happy, the totem does not matter to him anymore. He is happy now, in his subjective reality. I think being happy is the most important.

Thank you!