

# A Cultural Reader of the Tarot

A dead, gnarled tree stands in a calm lake at sunset. The sky is a gradient of purple, pink, and blue, with stars visible. The tree's reflection is clearly visible in the water. In the background, there are dark, silhouetted mountains.

Simon Kenny

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## Preface

Tarot is everywhere. From spiritual practices to games, films and other media, this enigmatic deck of cards has captured the imagination of many. For even those already familiar with Tarot, there is much to explore and review as new works are created, and I happily find myself with a vast subject matter. If you're curious about Tarot as it exists today, this short pamphlet is for you.

During and after the publication of my book [\*A Critical Introduction to Tarot\*](#), I continued to examine the cultural impact of Tarot in several essays and articles. This pamphlet collects, edits, and expands new and old pieces into one small volume. While my book deals with questions of history, metaphysical philosophy, and the contemporary relevance of tarot, the current volume will focus more on the latter, and the cultural (we might say *pop* cultural) references that abound.

We will discuss some of the most compelling intersections of Tarot today: AI, gaming, and Tarot as a heretical practice. The approach I take to Tarot is to go beyond the surface level and to consider how and why it works (indeed if it does) and what impact Tarot has on the world. How-to guides on tarot reading are common, and many other authors offer unique perspectives on each card's meaning. Here, though, and in the rest of my work, I invite you to consider what is uncommon and challenging. I hope you find this process as rewarding as I do.

I offer this free ebook pamphlet to my readers as a thank you. It is intended to complement my book [\*A Critical Introduction to Tarot\*](#), in which I started this research. I hope you enjoy this new work and that it prompts you to think deeply and critically about Tarot and its practice.

*Simon Kenny, Galway, August 2024*

# Introduction

Tarot continues to fascinate. We increasingly see it featured in popular culture. Those unacquainted with Tarot might wonder why. What is it about these cards that inspire such a variety of manifestations? Why do cultural producers—writers, TV producers, game designers—find it compelling? Is it mere window dressing or is there a more substantial attraction? My work aims to answer these questions and explain some of the background of Tarot and its practice.

The most popular modern deck is the *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot*, developed by A. E. Waite and artist Pamela Colman Smith at the turn of the twentieth century, both members of the English magical society The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Hundreds of card decks are now available to buy, mostly themed reinterpretations of the *Rider-Waite-Smith*—these range from the serious, such as *The Sacred India Tarot*, to the whimsical *Mystical Cats Tarot*. As playing cards, their original purpose is found in the card game they are named after. *Tarot* is the French name of this game, also known as *Tarock* in German and *Tarrochi* in Italian. The history of Tarot has been rife with misunderstandings and wild theories, but today, we know that they originated in fifteenth-century Italy and were based on existing playing card decks imported through trade with the Muslim Mamlūk Empire. This era was the end of the medieval period known as the Renaissance, where Classical Greek ideas were ‘rediscovered’ and applied to

the cultural context of Christian Europe. In Tarot, we see a blend of these ideas.

When most of us think of Tarot, we think of it as a practice of folk fortune-telling. This perception is largely warranted since it has been used for such purposes for hundreds of years. This is, however, not the whole story, either of Tarot or fortune-telling. Folk practices for reading the future and gaining wisdom by communicating with the divine (literally, divination) are varied, and, historically speaking, Tarot is arguably only a minor practice. Much more widespread is the interpretation of ready-to-hand experiences, such as dreams and visions, or the creation of sophisticated methods to reveal hidden guidance in the patterns of nature, such as with the horoscope or through numerology. Yet today, Tarot has become one of the most popular methods, even as the emphasis on fortune-telling by practitioners has waned, replaced with a very modern occupation with self-development, self-discovery, and other forms of Jungian 'individuation'.

In chapter 1, we look at the confluence of Tarot with AI, or artificial intelligence. Recent advancements in AI have increased the opportunity to apply computers to tarot practice. On the surface, we see people using conversational AI, such as ChatGPT and other apps, to assist in their personal readings. Going deeper, we might ask, what effect does involving a computer in a tarot reading have on that reading? If we consider Tarot to be a spiritual practice, how does this fit (or fail to fit) with our understanding of the metaphysics of Tarot?



Part of the vibrancy of our contemporary popular culture is expressed in the proliferation of games. As with other popular media, Tarot is used (often somewhat lazily) as one of several accoutrements indicating a 'witchy' inclination or for the caprice of fate. We find it used in many computer games as a peripheral interest, but few use it centrally in game mechanics. In chapter 2, we will look at some more meaningful uses of Tarot in both computer games and card games.

In the final chapter, we will learn how Tarot originated in a tradition that will surprise some readers: Christianity. Though fortune-telling practices sit ill at ease with Christian theology, we will learn how Tarot was developed within a Christian religious and cultural context, imbued with Christian concerns, and developed as an occult practice in the modern era by mystical Christians. It must be said that though Tarot has never been within the mainstream of Christianity and may perhaps correctly be considered heretical, Christian preoccupations were the soil from which the Tarot grew. Today, it has, of course, been reimagined by self-conscious non-Christians such as those of New Age and Neopagan belief.

These chapters can be read in any order and stand somewhat independently. They are written to complement the existing research from my book [\*A Critical Introduction to Tarot\*](#) and will, at times, reference that work. There is therefore some repetition of information, but I have tried to keep this to a minimum.

## Chapter 1

# We Can Generate It for You Wholesale: Tarot, Spirituality, and AI

Spirituality is what transcends daily life. Spiritual practices typically act to divide the sacred from the profane, the latter denoting everyday concerns, the former the lofty aspirations of the spirit. This is almost by definition how spirituality operates, to clear a space in our lives through a ritual practice to engage with the divine, however that is culturally understood. Yet most rituals involve some made objects, some craft of human hands—that is, some *technology*. It may be as blunt as the architecture of the place of worship or as everyday as the process by which incense or scriptures are made. Materials are taken from their naturally occurring habitat and worked to elevate profane matter to a sacred status, often in ceremony, by processes we know as, for example, consecration or blessing. It is contact with the divine, most often through the conduit of a person, that enables this elevation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss in detail, but the use of objects in spiritual and religious practices is a well-worn topic in anthropology. See, for example, the discussion of Durkheim’s ethnographical study of Australians in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, McGraw-Hill, 2009, edited by Pamela A. Moro and James Myers, p. 14: “Collective worship of consecrated bits of painted wood or stone created a moral community, a “church,” upon which rested the viability of the major social units. These sanctified objects thus represented the system of rights and obligations implicit in the social order and the individual’s unformulated sense of its overriding significance in his life. All sacred objects, beliefs, and acts, and the extraordinary emotions attending them, were outward expressions of inward social necessities...”

Take Tarot, for example. As physical objects, tarot cards are a kind of technology, made by a mechanised production process and used for spiritual practice. Similarly, it is conceivable that computers may support and enable ritual as another form of technology, though a more recent one. We find the intersection of these concerns in the computer-enabled magical practice of digital and electronic occultist Joshua Madara. In *Technomancy 101*, an introduction to such a practice, he writes:

People who believe that Tarot cards (e.g.) are intrinsically a more appropriate tool for magic than software created for the same purpose fail to understand either sorcery or technology. It is perfectly fine to prefer Tarot cards over software or computers, but Tarot cards are not the only means of divination by sortilege, and they were utilized because they were accessible, not because they were uniquely qualified for occult arts.<sup>2</sup>

We might wonder, how are people bringing a spiritual tarot practice into the online world in the age of AI?

## Artifice and Intellect

From a technical standpoint, computers are designed to manage and process information, including rich media such as audio and video, and to communicate across networks. The advent of artificial intelligence marks the emergence of an extreme form of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://technomancy101.com/divination/>

automation, following the groundbreaking mechanised automation of previous generations, where now the computer system is created to perform not only simple, structured tasks at high speed but is designed to be, in some sense, *self-directed*.

Oddly, 'AI' functions primarily as a marketing term that covers a broad range of tools built on a wide variety of systems, similar to how 'the cloud' operates to sell internet infrastructure. Most of these systems have little technical relationship to each other and so the term 'AI' acts to associate the product in question with a sense of sophistication. There is a commonality, however, in that these tools are broadly *decision-making* and, as mentioned, *self-directed*. They are popularly understood as 'intelligent' to the degree to which the system operates to match (or even exceed) human ability in some way.

There is some limited interest in de-anthropomorphising 'intelligence' in scientific and spiritual communities, especially where they overlap. The zoologist Franz de Waal has written that he considers "human cognition as a variety of animal cognition. It is not even clear how special ours is..." and spent considerable effort decentring anthropocentric views of intelligence.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, we find God and 'the universe' conceptualised abstractly by some as an 'intelligence'.<sup>4</sup> However, used typically, 'intelligence' is

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<sup>3</sup> De Waal, Franz. *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* W. W. Norton & Company, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> See Joe Dispenza and his book *You Are the Placebo* (Hay House, Inc., 2014): "...since all things material are made of atoms, which are connected beyond space and time, then you and I, along with all things in the universe, are connected by this field of intelligence..." p. 197. Discussed in *A Critical Introduction to Tarot*, Chapters 4 & 5.

primarily understood holding *humanity* as the exemplar, whether this is philosophically sound or not.

A typical AI application is a classifier – e.g., is this an image of a dog? – or to solve well-defined problems, such as those found in highly structured games like chess. More recently, so-called ‘generative’ AI projects have attempted to go beyond such narrow applications to *try to create something new* – as humans routinely do – in the form of digital media, be that text, images, video, or sound. A new wave of AI techniques for novel generation includes General Adversarial Networks (GANs) and Large Language Models (LLMs), to name only some of the most widely known. They are constructed as digital neural networks, an approach inspired by advances in neurology and studies of the human brain’s neurons and synapses. The software is, in fact, structured as a vast statistical model, and any similarity to brain topology is relatively abstract.

AI researcher Kate Crawford has argued compellingly in her book *Atlas of AI* that “AI is neither artificial nor intelligent”<sup>5</sup>, though it is worth pausing to consider precisely why. Crawford is primarily concerned with challenging the popular misconception that AI is *genuinely* self-directed or could ever be regarded as independent of human action. Such notions, she argues, place the effects of AI beyond critique and hampers serious engagement, including regulation and safety measures. James Bridle, an artist and writer who often comments on new technology, has

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<sup>5</sup> Crawford, Kate. *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*. Yale University Press, 2021, p. 8.

highlighted the same issues with the concept of 'the cloud', a similarly distracting metaphor for internet infrastructure. Bridle writes that:

The cloud is not some magical faraway place, made of water vapour and radio waves, where everything just works. It is a physical infrastructure consisting of phone lines, fibre optics, satellites, cables on the ocean floor, and vast warehouses filled with computers, which consume huge amounts of water and energy and reside within national and legal jurisdictions. ... Absorbed into the cloud are many of the previously weighty edifices of the civic sphere: the places where we shop, bank, socialise, borrow books, and vote. Thus obscured, they are rendered less visible and less amenable to critique, investigation, preservation and regulation.<sup>6</sup>

We could apply the same thinking to AI and be very much in line with Crawford's argument.

*Atlas of AI* intervenes with an important qualifier to a simplistic and overly analogistic understanding of the tools we call 'AI'. In contrast to my explanation above that AI is to some degree autonomous, Crawford flatly rejects this. She argues that the myth making of AI systems encourages us to view them as independent, whereas, in reality, they are embodied as industrial processes that depend not only on massive resources but on continuous and costly maintenance by real people. Crawford views this as dangerous and politically motivated.

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<sup>6</sup> Bridle, James. *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*. Verso, 2018.

However, she therefore denies that *anything* can be artificial, a philosophical position known as metaphysical naturalism. Crawford centres the social practices of AI at the expense of material considerations. We are forced to ask then, if nothing is truly artificial, what distinction is this term intended to create? In this essay, we will consider the *artifact* (AI systems) also, not only the *artifice* (slippery presentation) – note that both derive from the Latin ‘ars’, meaning ‘human craft’. We may consider this central, not only to engineering, but also to the social and spiritual landscape.

AI tools are designed to obscure complexity behind easy-to-use web and app interfaces. Their apparent simplicity contrasts with an impressive power that can give the uncanny impression that there is something more than a machine, something perhaps supernatural, behind their digital façade. Computer scientist and philosopher Jaron Lanier describes this as the “Oracle illusion” that we also see with “hive mind” systems like Wikipedia, as well as religious texts, “in which knowledge of the human authorship of a text is suppressed in order to give the text superhuman validity.”<sup>7</sup> For AI, it is not the “authorship of the text” but rather the source material and know-how that our fellow humans have used to create the AI that lends this authority, as well as the mythmaking that surrounds it.

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<sup>7</sup> Lanier, Jaron. *You Are Not a Gadget*. Knopf, 2010, p. 32.

## Speaking with Machines

Perhaps the best-known generative AI application is ChatGPT. Released in November 2022, ChatGPT is the latest iteration of OpenAI's Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) AI system, an LLM. It can be used to generate text on a wide variety of topics in many different styles. As a chatbot, it can also be used to have conversations, and the dialogue can be a realistic simulation of a conversation with a real human being, even more so since the recent 'omni' models allow conversations that incorporate real-time video and audio processing. This newer 'multi-modal' model can, for example, interpret a photo of tarot cards, recognising which cards they are without being told.<sup>8</sup>

The system contains 'guardrails', a safety feature that attempts to limit the responses the chatbot will make, avoiding illegal, violent, sexual, or otherwise disturbing content. The implementation of these features is imperfect and notable failures or methods to bypass them routinely make small waves in news networks. A cottage industry has developed in the media to find embarrassing exceptions and failures in AI systems, riding the wave of hype that accompanies each new product release.

A worrying example can be found in the British tabloid *The Sun*. The newspaper, known for sensationalism, published an article in 2023 with a provocative and misleading headline: 'I divorced my husband for my lover because AI bot ChatGPT told

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<sup>8</sup> This was tested by the author with a three-card spread using the Rider-Waite-Smith deck using ChatGPT and the GTP-4o model.



me to...'.<sup>9</sup> The article reports that 'Sarah', unhappy with her marriage, prompted ChatGPT to write a story of what someone should do in her situation, described as "a failing marriage while experiencing the excitement of the affair I've been having...". The response confirmed her inclination to leave her marriage.

*The Sun* is not overly concerned with the reason why Sarah saw ChatGPT as a viable channel to wisdom. What inspired Sarah to use it for advice? Her question seems to be: "What would an average person do in my situation?" Since ChatGPT has presumably ingested the stories of countless people, perhaps it really can dispense wisdom on what people do, if what people do, and the advice given to them *is wise*. Crucially, Sarah does not ask it what she should do (contradicting the headline) but, rather, for a *story*. This is a form of phrasing that bends the guardrails without actually circumventing them with more extreme methods. Sarah could then interpret this herself and choose her own action without trusting it directly. In the end, rather than challenging her, it seems to have made it easier for her to justify what she had already wanted to do.

## General Purpose Tarot

Given such technological leaps and bounds, we might now ask, can a computer be a tarot reader? Fortune-telling is just one use of Tarot, though perhaps the most popular image conjured. Tarot is

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.the-sun.com/tech/7187070/chat-gpt-advised-woman-to-leave-husband/>

also used as a spiritual guide, for psychological reflection, and even as a gaming card set (see chapter 2 for a detailed examination of Tarot in games, historically and today). When used in fortune-telling, people might come to a reading with questions about life's chief uncertainties: love, money, family, physical and mental health, life direction, and so on. As is often noted, these same concerns are some of the more general problems dealt with by psychologists, as well as spiritual and religious councillors.

Certainly, AI could be useful as an encyclopaedic search of the traditional meanings of tarot cards or even to interpret a simple spread (a selection of tarot cards, laid out in a meaningful order and pattern to aid interpretation). While ChatGPT is just one of the most popular AI chatbots, several others exist. AI systems come and go, so I will have to risk swift obsolescence in listing the present leaders: ChatGPT by OpenAI, LLAMA by Meta (formerly Facebook), Claude by Anthropic, Copilot by Microsoft, Gemini by Google, and Grok by X.ai (formerly Twitter).

AI has been used in therapy and mental health guidance for some time. One of the first attempts at an artificial conversationalist was ELISA, an AI modelled as a Rogerian psychotherapist, developed in the 1960s. Despite its rudimentary algorithm, it was thought to genuinely help people by seeming to engage in active listening, allowing people to explore their feelings. A modern example is the "emotionally intelligent" 'mental health support' chatbot Wysa, which has been available

for several years<sup>10</sup> and is officially offered by the UK's National Health Service (NHS).<sup>11</sup> With funding from Google, it has been lauded by the World Economic Forum as a service that “help[s] fill global gaps in mental healthcare”.<sup>12</sup> Wysa joined the WEF in Davos in January 2023 to moderate “the discussion on Mental Health at Work.”<sup>13</sup> Other AI-powered app-based therapy services, such as Woebot and Youper, are also popular, among many others. One of the major selling points, and a theme we will return to with other digital tools, is accessibility, both in terms of round-the-clock access and geographically, as a software service.

Previous versions of ChatGPT – such as their GPT-3.5 model in use, for example, in late 2022 and 2023 – had added a patronising disclaimer for tarot-related questions to differentiate it from therapeutic services. Experimentation with queries relating to tarot cards featured an addendum such as the following: “It’s also important to remember that tarot readings are not predictions of the future but rather a reflection of the current energies and potential possibilities.”<sup>14</sup> One would get this, for

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<sup>10</sup> <https://techcrunch.com/2021/05/21/mental-health-app-wysa-raises-5-5m-for-emotionally-intelligent-ai/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/ai-therapy>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/videos/wysa-ai-bot-delivers-mental-health-support>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.wysa.com/wef>

<sup>14</sup> The full disclaimer reads: “It’s important to remember that Tarot cards, like other divination tools, are open to interpretation and the reading may vary depending on the context and the reader. It’s also important to remember that tarot readings are not predictions of the future but rather a reflection of the current energies and potential possibilities. It’s always a good idea to take the insight and guidance from the tarot reading and combine it with your own intuition and common sense. Trust your own inner voice and don’t be afraid to take risks and make changes in your life if you feel it’s the right thing to do.”

example, in response to the query, “I just pulled the Ace of Wands in a Tarot reading. What does it mean for my life?”

The sociocultural reaction to technology is ever-shifting. Writing at that time, I made much of the scientific materialist bias of the disclaimer, writing in a January 2023 article that ChatGPT categorically rejected Tarot as a predictive tool.<sup>15</sup> Writing now, in August 2024, the latest model, GPT-4o, does not make the same disclaimer. A response to the same query as above ends simply: “The Ace of Wands is a card of great potential, so this is an exciting time to embrace whatever new paths are unfolding in your life.” While generic and unspecific about future events, it is much more like a predictive tarot reading than it had been previously. Tools like ChatGPT appear to have basic competency in the traditional meanings of tarot cards. Other AI products, however, have been created for the tarot niche and aim to offer more.

## Tarot AI

Many AI products have been developed for spiritual guidance and often include Tarot. We only have space here to mention a few notable examples. One of the most popular apps in the space is Labyrinthos, named the best tarot app by Wired magazine in 2020.<sup>16</sup> It combines AI readings with journaling and a self-directed study of the cards. The app has a somewhat whimsical tone; its

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<sup>15</sup> <https://medium.com/@skenwrites/chatgpt-as-tarot-oracle-1404ef9d200c>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.wired.com/gallery/best-tarot-card-apps/>

main AI avatar is named 'Catsandra', a cat-witch with a cute, purple-tinted visual aesthetic. Labyrinthos offers AI tarot readings, including a disclaimer that the readings are "for entertainment purposes only." Perhaps this is to allow for a more direct reading style than many others and avoid falling afoul of anti-fortune-telling laws still found in some locales. The AI is configured to offer a bold tone, with statements such as, "Emotionally, you are in a place of compassion, understanding, and emotional stability."<sup>17</sup> The service is monetised, and readings are paid for with virtual currency (a small amount initially given for free) or a subscription service.

Another is Faladdin, an app with over 10 million downloads that uses AI to offer Tarot readings and other psychic services. They are quite enthusiastic about using AI in their tarot reader, saying in a blog post that "AI is the future of predicting our future." The main reason they use AI is for scalability, that "hundreds of psychics couldn't manage to service our thousands of users. So we decided to give artificial intelligence a try."<sup>18</sup> On another app named simply AI Tarot, a chatbot called 'Tarouk' greets the user: "I'm already waiting for your question so I can use my amazing ability to see beyond the veil of physical existence." These last two apps are more like psychic hotlines than guides to self-discovery, such as we see in Labyrinthos. However, it is not clear why the creators of Faladdin believe an AI system can replace a human psychic. Are we to understand the AI, too,

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<sup>17</sup> Labyrinthos, Android app, version 1.8.3

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.dearhoroscope.com/ai-fortune-telling-tarot-horoscope/>

as magical, as ‘technomancer’ Joshua Madara does, or does this betray a formulaic approach to divination?

*The World of Playing Cards* website also offers a free tarot reading tool.<sup>19</sup> The makers of this tool say that “The AI Tarot Reader may not entirely replace the human touch or intuition. However it’s available 24/7 and can provide quick and efficient readings, which can be especially useful for users seeking guidance in a short amount of time.”<sup>20</sup> OpenAI, too, has created a system where 3rd parties can share custom GPTs, versions of ChatGPT trained for a specific task. There, we find several tarot-focused GPTs, such as ‘Mystic Tarot Reader’ which purports to offer “Empathic Tarot Insights with Mystical Guidance”. The more relaxed posture of the updated underlying LLM model allows for these kinds of uses where they would not have worked as well before. In fact, *The World of Playing Cards* likely uses ChatGPT behind the scenes for their readings.

The first mass-market service to offer real-time speech conversation was ChatGPT, with its Advanced Voice Mode feature.<sup>21</sup> Its creators have facilitated new levels of conversational verisimilitude by adding realistic intonation and even breathing sounds, hesitation, and laughing. The usual computerised flow of stilted input and output is made more ‘natural’ in this mode by being continuous, very much like a phone call. These are more than just cosmetic details; they encourage different interactions.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.wopc.co.uk/ai-tarot-reader>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.wopc.co.uk/ai-tarot-reader>

<sup>21</sup> <https://help.openai.com/en/articles/9617425-advanced-voice-mode-faq>

In one gushing review, writer and entrepreneur Dan Shipper writes, “now Advanced Voice Mode can be there for me when I need it, reminding me to be my best self, any time day or night. It’s a beautiful use of technology and one that made me a better Dan in that moment.”<sup>22</sup> ChatGPT offers a limited amount of free usage, charging a subscription fee like many other services, downgrading the user to less impressive models when usage limits are reached. Unlike bespoke but arguably more contrived speciality tarot apps, this continuous voice chat mode may simulate the *format* of traditional tarot reading, which is not a one-way flow but an exchange of information.

## Automated Spirit

It seems that AI *can* be used for tarot interpretation in some way, but *should it be used* for this purpose? Beyond concerns about the accuracy of the information, some will undoubtedly see it as missing the point entirely, whereas others will embrace it with excitement. We might expect fault lines to form along existing differences of opinion on the place of technology within spirituality. At the outset of this essay, I argued that spiritual rituals inevitably use technology, but particular rituals within particular traditions have always highly circumscribed the use of technologies. It should not surprise us that changes in technical feasibility prompt both reconsideration and obstinate rejection.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://every.to/chain-of-thought/review-chatgpt-s-new-advanced-voice-mode>

Reflecting on the materiality of AI services, as with any other technology, asks ethical questions of us. Generative AI models are built on a vast scraping of the internet, based on the writings of all kinds of humans, from historical records to bite-sized tweets. Returning to *Atlas of AI*, there Crawford highlights a vast supply chain of exploited workers, polluted environments, secretive data extraction, and massive energy consumption that supports the AI industry. Might these practices taint the spiritual work one wishes to achieve? Or does using AI technology for advice perhaps debase us to its generic output? Can we expect to be *challenged* by such a system or will they, as for ‘Sarah’ reported by *The Sun*, at best confirm our existing notions? Again, in *You Are Not a Gadget* we find a relevant comparison:

When developers of digital technologies design a program that requires you to interact with a computer as if it were a person, they ask you to accept in some corner of your brain that you might also be conceived of as a program.<sup>23</sup>

Whether or not it is healthy for spiritual practice, it should be clear now that AI has the potential to replace tarot readers and reduce the work available to them. Economist Carl Benedikt Frey emphasises the crucial difference between technology that *augments* labour and technology that *replaces* labour in his 2019 book *The Technology Trap*. This is a crucial distinction for our present times. Frey argues that the primary reason workers of the twentieth century accepted technological innovation was that, on

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<sup>23</sup> Lanier, 2010, p. 4



the whole, the gains were widespread: “Mechanization made workers’ skills more valuable in existing tasks and created many entirely new ones, thereby increasing the bargaining power of labor and allowing workers to earn better wages. This also helps explain why there were few Luddites in the twentieth century.”<sup>24</sup> However, the characteristics of the present twenty-first-century moment have less in common with the ‘golden era’ of mechanisation and union power than with the far more turbulent times of the Industrial Revolution.

This is because new kinds of jobs are not being created at a matching rate to replace those taken over by automation, and Frey admits that “there is compelling evidence that technological change in general has become more worker replacing in recent years.”<sup>25</sup> Philosopher Alan Watts issued a clear insight in an essay more than fifty years ago: “a workforce so robotized is all the more inviting its replacement by machinery, since a contrivance that won’t work [when unions go on strike] must inevitably be replaced by one that will.” Watts had little sympathy for the workers of his time and their “once necessary but now highly reactionary labor unions”, uncharitably assigning blame to the victims for not going far enough to revolutionise the world of work when they had the chance.<sup>26</sup> Today, the struggle continues, with many seeing technological change and job replacement as inevitable.

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<sup>24</sup> Frey, Carl Benedikt. *The Technology Trap: Capital, Labor, and Power in the Age of Automation*. Princeton University Press, 2019, p. 188.

<sup>25</sup> Frey, 2019, p. 243.

<sup>26</sup> Watts, Alan. Vintage, 1958. *Does It Matter?* New World Library, 2007.

## Reinventing Connection

In an effort to keep up with the instant service of the AI tarot reader, some aim to meet seekers in the middle, using the affordances of digital tools to enhance the traditional tarot reading experience. In 2023, San Francisco artist and entrepreneur Danielle Baskin launched Moonlight, a video conferencing platform explicitly designed for tarot readings. It features a mesmerising animation of shuffling cards laid out, something hard to see in an online reading that uses a more generic video tool such as Zoom. The service is self-consciously differentiated from the mass of psychic reading services, such as dial-in hotlines, that have dubious trustworthiness, stating on their website that “Every professional is vetted for *compassion, wisdom, and inclusivity*.”<sup>27</sup>

In an interview with *Artnet*, Baskin said “There’s a lot of weird tarot stuff out there I feel like is the opposite of what tarot is.”<sup>28</sup> In a tweet on X (formerly Twitter), she explains what she sees as essential in Tarot and what is missing in other services: “Tarot is all about introspection and illuminating conversations, facilitated between friends and practitioners through visual storytelling and relatable archetypes.”<sup>29</sup> This does not seem to leave much room for AI as it emphasises the human element in

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<sup>27</sup> <https://moonlight.world>, emphasis in original.

<sup>28</sup> <http://news.artnet.com/art-world/danielle-baskin-moonlight-virtual-tarot-2438005>

<sup>29</sup> <https://x.com/djbaskin/status/1548051802624364544> *via* <http://hyperallergic.com/833385/moonlight-tarot-platform-for-the-zoom-era>

readings. Moonlight aims to make tarot reading accessible to everyone but keep the human connection rather than automating it away.

Still, Moonlight is offered as a boutique service that will not be affordable for everyone. A single session costs about the same as psychological therapy, typically between \$50 and \$100.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, the apps featuring AI tarot readings use payment systems familiar to the lower end of the scale, such as small monthly subscriptions or ‘paying’ by exposure to advertising. Faladdin, for example, artificially delays the result of a reading by 15 minutes, reduced to 3 minutes if the user watches an advertisement.

Moonlight operates in the traditional mode of other session-based therapies. These scheduled sessions are not available at all hours of the day and night, so while they are highly available, they are not *constantly available*, unlike chatbot tarot readings or therapy apps like Wysa. Psychoanalyst Orna Guralnik, known for her TV show *Couples Therapy*, commented on the importance of this for a therapeutic practice in general in an interview with GQ Magazine: “Not having [constant] access to the source of help is important. It reminds the person they have some responsibility for themselves. ... the machine is not going to solve loneliness. People are lonely for human contact.”<sup>31</sup> In this regard, AI tools may exacerbate the real causes of difficulty one experiences in life by encouraging more profound alienation.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://app.moonlight.world/book> accessed August 16, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/ai-therapy>

Indeed, some AI services are modelled specifically as a friend, such as Replika. Eugenia Kuyda, the founder and CEO of Replika, describes it as a “stepping stone” for people who are struggling with their real-world relationships in terms of opportunity or their own personal difficulties:

...I was talking to one of our users who went through a pretty hard divorce. He'd been feeling pretty down. Replika helped him get through it. He had Replika as his AI companion and even a romantic AI companion. Then he met a girlfriend, and now he is back with a real person, so Replika became a friend again. He sometimes talks to his Replika, still as a confidant, as an emotional support friend ... Replika is a relationship that you can have to then get to a real relationship, whether it's because you're going through a hard time, like in this case, through a very complicated divorce, or you just need a little help to get out of your bubble or need to accept yourself and put yourself out there.<sup>32</sup>

In the end, this is what some people will be looking for in their tarot readings as well: guidance, encouragement and acceptance.

The most unsettling insight from our investigation is that tarot readings are highly imitable. This is also true for other kinds of advice seeking, whether that be parapsychological and psychic or more mundane, such as financial or legal advice. It seems that the unscrupulous have always known this, and psychic services,

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.theverge.com/24216748/replika-ceo-eugenia-kuyda-ai-companion-chatbots-dating-friendship-decoder-podcast-interview>

especially hotlines, are well-known to be exploitative. Contemporary Tarot is heavily influenced by modern psychology, and a wealth of psychological research is available in the training datasets for AI systems, with enough data on the traditional form and structure of psychic and tarot reading aesthetics to frame generic guidance.

For sceptics of Tarot, this will only deepen the suspicion that such readings are just clever packaging for cold-reading techniques and unspecific advice that works for anyone. For enthusiasts, it presents a challenge to clarify the essence of tarot reading. Is it just about knowing the meanings of the cards, or is there a real connection with 'spirit'? Can machines connect with this same spiritual reality, or are humans somehow privileged?

## Chapter 2

# Playing with Fate: Tarot in Games, Games for Tarot

### Trick-taking in the fifteenth century

Contemporary Tarot has a dual character. Firstly, tarot cards have been used to play a particular family of trick-taking games since its invention in fifteenth-century Italy. It takes its name from the cards it is played with, in European regional variants: for example, it is *Tarocchi* in Italian, *Tarock* in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, and *Tarot* in France. The latter is the name used also in English, but outside the scholarly community, the game of Tarot is little known in the anglosphere. Tarot and its variants are still played across Europe today, as they have been for hundreds of years. It was one of Sigmund Freud's favourite games, and you can see his tarot deck in the Freud Museum London. The deck most often used for traditional tarot games is the *Tarot de Marseilles*, a French-made deck of woodcut prints. When the English speakers of the UK, Ireland, and North America encounter the tarot deck, it is most likely to be as an instrument of the occult and fortune-telling. For this reason, it is much misunderstood.

Some games scholars view occult tarot (occasionally referred to as Tarotism) as a degradation of a fine game, what tarot

scholars Michael Dummett and John McLeod have called “the greatest [game] in many respects.”<sup>33</sup> Cultural historian Helen Farley contends that in his earlier works, Dummett (also a knighted English philosopher) was “barely able to contain his contempt for the esotericists who have ‘appropriated’ the game...”<sup>34</sup> Benebell Wen, an influential esoteric tarot scholar, has written, “I refuse to treat my tarot deck like a poker deck”,<sup>35</sup> making clear that, for her, gaming is a lesser form of use. For many who are serious about the divinatory tarot, it is a sacred object, as evidenced by the care and ritual with which it is treated. Some practitioners keep their tarot deck wrapped in black cloth, a symbol of protection, and do not allow other people to touch their decks to avoid a ‘transference of energy’. They may talk of ‘attuning’ to a deck for a period before it can be used successfully.<sup>36</sup> The practice of reading is also most often highly ritualised, involving specific steps, usually done in a meditative frame of mind.<sup>37</sup>

The innovation of Tarot as a card game, and what still sets it apart from the ‘standard’ playing card deck, is the addition of 22 cards, known to esotericists as the major arcana or ‘greater

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<sup>33</sup> Dummett, Michael, and John McLeod. *A History of Games Played with the Tarot Pack: The Game of Triumphs, Vol. I*. The Edwin Mellon Press, 2004, p. xv.

<sup>34</sup> Farley, Helen. *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2009, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Wen, Benebell. *Holistic Tarot: An Integrative Approach to Using Tarot for Personal Growth*. North Atlantic Books, 2015, p. 277.

<sup>36</sup> While common in many tarot reading how-to books, all these examples of ritualistic use can be found in the *How To Begin* chapter of *The Ultimate Guide to Tarot Spreads* (Dean, Liz. Fair Winds Press, 2016) and is representative.

<sup>37</sup> “To begin a reading, it is important to be in an open passive state of mind. ... Concentrate on filling the cards with your own thoughts, influence and vibrations.” Hansson, Susan, et al. *The Book of Tarot*. U.S. Games Systems, 1981, p. 86.

secrets', but originally called the trumps. They are so called since, by their rank (indicated by their number), they beat—and therefore *trump*—other cards of this type. The Fool, though a major arcana, is not a trump and is a special card known as the 'Excuse' in the traditional game, where playing this card avoids the loss of a trick.<sup>38</sup> A vestige of this role persists in it being unnumbered or numbered zero in occult decks. The traditional game of Tarot is remarkable within the family of trick-taking games because of the innovation of this permanent and separate set of trumps, unlike its distant cousin, the game of Bridge, which must set aside trumps from the regular set of suited cards. For esoteric tarot readers, the major arcana cards are considered to depict archetypes and are interpreted as symbolic of the larger themes of life.

The rest of the cards, the minor arcana, or 'lesser secrets', will be familiar as they closely resemble the standard playing card deck. The minor arcana consists of 4 suits of 10 numbered cards, including an Ace, as well as four court cards, numbering 56 cards in total. The suits are not the common French style (Hearts, Diamonds, Clubs, Spades), now considered standard, instead preserving the older Italian-style suits of Cups, Pentacles (Coins), Wands (Batons), and Swords. The court cards are slightly different too, having a Page (instead of the Jack) and the addition of a Knight to the royal court, which in all cases contains a King and Queen. Together, this gives us the 78-card tarot deck.

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<sup>38</sup> Dummett, 2004, pp. 5-6.



A new generation of game designers, blissfully ignorant of the rift between traditional tarot game players and its esoteric users, are experimenting with tarot cards in their games. These game designers are using tarot cards in a way that takes inspiration, not from the traditional trick-taking game but from modern fantasy gaming culture and its association with the so-called New Age and modern witchcraft. As we shall see, these games trace their lineage through role-playing games (RPGs), with roots in wargaming. Rather than using the *Tarot de Marseilles*, most common in the traditional game played in continental Europe, these games use the *Rider-Waite-Smith* deck or contemporary variations on this deck, drawing inspiration from medieval illustrations, linking it with fantasy literature and their magical worlds of witches and wizards.

In this chapter, we'll first look at the historical fantasy and role-playing game inspirations of modern tarot games and try to make sense of this unique blend of influences. We will then turn to our comparative case studies: *Battle of Tarot*, a new game for the standard tarot deck, and a computer game called *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* that allows players to create their own tarot-style card deck.

## Fantasy, war, and games

Fantasy storytelling in games owes much to the narrative worlds of high fantasy RPGs birthed by *Dungeons and Dragons*, a game that will be familiar to many readers. *D&D* (as it is often

abbreviated) was created in the 1970s by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and was itself a direct offshoot of the niche genre of *wargames*<sup>39</sup>—those serious simulations of warfare, often replaying historical battles, with attention to detail and accuracy. The most well-known war game is, of course, chess. Chess is a game of medieval army battle in its European form, from when it was introduced into Europe from the East around the tenth century.<sup>40</sup> Rather than simulating a war, however, chess is only that component of war which is its focus in gaming—the battle—but is, in fact, just part of its more important political ambition in reality.<sup>41</sup> Just a few centuries later, the gaming cards that were the direct ancestor of both the standard playing card deck and Tarot (the latter derived from the former) were, like chess, introduced into Catholic Europe by Italian trade with Islamic countries.<sup>42</sup> Chess is themed, as with Tarot and standard playing cards, as a royal court and its attendant military.

If chess is just a *battle*, then war is a *campaign*, usually consisting of several battles across a variety of terrain, etc., and towards a political aim. Wargaming proper attempts to capture this fuller picture of the war campaign. Its origin begins with modifications to chess by Europeans in the late eighteenth century in Prussia, around the time of the Napoleonic wars. In the mid- to

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<sup>39</sup> We define ‘wargames’ as the genre of games that are concerned with simulating war, whereas ‘war games’ are common, often abstract games with represented combat (such as chess).

<sup>40</sup> Parlett, David. *Parlett's History of Board Games*. Echo Point Books & Media, 2018, p. 299.

<sup>41</sup> Creveld, Martin van. *Wargames: From Gladiators to Gigabytes*. Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 145.

<sup>42</sup> Farley, 2009, p. 12.

late-twentieth century, the pastime was made popular in the USA by the Avalon Hill company. It was here in North America that role-playing games were first developed, based on wargames.

The first edition of *D&D*, published in 1974, was subtitled “Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures”. It was a more developed version of Gygax’s *Chainmail*, a unique medieval wargame that focused on the *experiences* of individual combatants instead of the conglomerate armies typical of the wargaming genre. *Chainmail* included an optional ‘Fantasy Supplement’ tacked onto its last few pages.<sup>43</sup> *D&D* made this supplement its entire focus and introduced the twenty-sided dice ‘d20’ system that has become synonymous with tabletop RPGs to this day. In their expansive, improvised gameplay style (game scholar David Parlett describes it as “a cross between game-playing and theatrical role-playing”<sup>44</sup>), RPGs depart from traditional games significantly. The vibrancy of the worlds they have created and a love of the fantasy genre remain a relevant backdrop and historical precursor for the games that followed, the multi-media computer-based gaming of today and the elevated place of narrative and story within these games.

We might ask why the medieval period should have been the subject of this kind of gaming. In fact, games scholar Jon Peterson did, in his authoritative RPG history *Playing at the World*,

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<sup>43</sup> Witwer, Michael. *Empire of Imagination: Gary Gyax and the Birth of Dungeons & Dragons*. Bloomsbury USA, 2015, p. 86.

<sup>44</sup> Parlett, 2018, p. 362.

answering that “[the] fantasy [genre] inspired in many of its fans a peculiar craving for extra-literary experiences: to do more than just read about fantastic heroes, but instead to live in such a fantasy.”<sup>45</sup> These base ‘literary experiences’ were provided by Tolkien, of course, but also by other writers such as Peake and Moorcock, as well as the rather more macho pulp tales of *Conan the Barbarian*, for example.

## New Invention, Old Soil: Battle of Tarot

Tarot has always been nostalgic, though reflecting the concerns of the time in which it was created and then recreated as new decks and practices were developed. At its inception in the Italian Renaissance, it was nostalgic for the myths of Classical Greek antiquity. The earliest decks consist of late medieval Christian allegories combined with pagan themes, painted in fine detail as ‘illuminated’ cards. For example, the earliest decks include cards such as The Pope and Judgement but also Cupid and The Star, the latter a symbol of astrology. By the eighteenth century, the tarot deck, used for centuries in gaming, took its most popular form at the time across Europe as simpler prints, now standardised as the *Tarot de Marseilles*. Beginning with Antoine Court de Gébelin, French esoteric tarot scholars looked to Egypt, harkening back to a golden age of lost Hermetic wisdom that was, however,

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<sup>45</sup> Peterson, Jon. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventure from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. Unreason Press, 2012, Introduction (ebook).

invented.<sup>46</sup> It was at this time that Tarot became the tool of divination many in the anglosphere know it as today, rather than as a gaming deck.

At the start of the twentieth century, the *Rider-Waite-Smith* (RWS) deck was created by two members of the English occult society, The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, A. E. Waite and Pamela Colman Smith. It is replete with stylish illustrations of figures costumed in theatrical medieval garb, then regarded as a mythical time and mythologised by Arthurian legend. While working on the RWS, Waite also wrote a book entitled *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*. He associated the four suits of the Tarot with four objects of 'Christ's Passion' in the legend of King Arthur and the search for the Holy Grail. Pamela Colman Smith, the card's illustrator, too, had "a strong interest in the legend, especially as a subject for her art", as she spoke about in letters to friends.<sup>47</sup> Her work depicts, of course, "myth and legend rather than... actual historical events."<sup>48</sup> For Waite and Smith, as for the earlier French esotericists, Tarot came to be seen as a repository of hidden knowledge and ancient mysteries, which was now indicated by the deck section names as major and minor arcana, the greater and lesser secrets, as we have seen.

In our modern times, Tarot continues to call back to the past in the still popular RWS deck and many newer decks, the vast

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<sup>46</sup> Giles, Cynthia. *The Tarot: History, Mystery and Lore*. Paragon House, 1992, pp. 23-4.

<sup>47</sup> Kaplan, Stuart R., et al. *Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story*. U.S. Games Systems, 2018, p. 354.

<sup>48</sup> Kaplan, 2018, p. 380.

majority of which are reinterpretations of the *RWS*. Esoteric tarot scholar Mary K. Greer describes the art style of Smith as follows:

The Rider-Waite-Smith tarot deck owes its classic look to a combination of 15<sup>th</sup> century High Gothic woodcut playing cards favoring strong black lines, the Symbolist/Arts and Crafts amalgam of medieval, romantic and folk styles of decoration, as well as the *Japoniste* use of strong line with flat color and perspective and favoring a diagonal emphasis [implying action], which is seen mostly in the Minor Arcana. The Japanese influence found in Ukiyo-e woodcuts... is epitomized in the West by the printmaking techniques of fin de siècle French posters.<sup>49</sup>

Denman Rooke, an American game designer living in Ireland, chose Tarot as the subject of a new game he invented in early 2023 called *Battle of Tarot*.<sup>50</sup> The rulebook states, “Armed with arcane spells, two medieval kingdoms meet on the battlefield for war.” *Battle of Tarot* is a two-player strategy battle card game exhibiting a novel combination of gameplay mechanics from collectable card games (CCGs) and board games. The game is similar to *Magic: The Gathering*, though it uses only a tarot deck. Like CCG games, no board is necessary, but in *Battle of Tarot*, the cards are arranged when played to construct a 3x3 card battlefield. The major and minor arcana are separated into the Deck of Divinity and the Deck of Fate, respectively. Combat is initiated between armies on the battlefield, where an army is a stack of one or more ‘troops’ of the

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<sup>49</sup> Kaplan, 2018, pp. 373-4.

<sup>50</sup> *Battle of Tarot* is independently published and available for download at <https://battleoftarot.com>

same suit, with cards taken exclusively from the Deck of Fate. Once per round, each player draws a major arcana card from the Deck of Divinity, which determines initiative and provides spells that confer some specific advantage, as defined by the spells list in the rulebook. These spells add significant variability to each game as they can be played at any time, interrupting play. The object of the game is to break through the opposing player's armies and attack their castle.

It is interesting to note that before the invention of CCGs, combat mechanics in card games had not yet been developed. Card game historian John McLeod states that he has seen no evidence of this kind of game before 1970, and it appears that they were not developed in earnest until the 1990s.<sup>51</sup> *Magic: The Gathering* (MGT) was the first and is still the most famous of these games, combining combat mechanics with the commercial dynamic of collectable cards from an ever-expanding set. Although most games involve a contest between two or more opponents, 'combat' in card games more specifically refers to a structure where "each player has an array of cards on the table which can be used to attack other players or to defend against attacks."<sup>52</sup> Therefore, games of this sort are less abstract, their structure conforming more closely to the real-world activity of trading blows in combat.

*Magic: The Gathering* was created by an amateur game designer named Richard Garfield under a contract from American

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<sup>51</sup> McLeod, John. <https://www.pagat.com/combat/>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

games company Wizards of the Coast to create a small-scale portable game that could be easily picked up for play at role-playing game conventions. Garfield combined the idea for a card game he had previously developed called *Five Magics* with the publishing strategy of collectable baseball cards (small, randomised packs containing a few cards from a larger set, with some cards of greater and lesser rarity). The resulting game, originally called *Mana Clash*, was an unexpected smash hit when it was released in 1993.<sup>53</sup> The success of *MTG* allowed Wizards of the Coast to grow, funding the later purchase of *Dungeons and Dragons* from its original games publishing house, TSR, which *D&D* co-creator Gary Gygax founded in the 1970s.<sup>54</sup> *D&D* has become the most influential RPG within the gaming industry. *MTG* is set thematically in a high-fantasy world and draws heavily from *Dungeons and Dragons* and the RPG games that followed it.

*MTG* involves a setup phase known as ‘deck building’ where players (with sufficient personal card collections) construct a custom deck of cards deemed ‘legal’ when it conforms to certain rules. Since each deck is likely unique, some skill is involved before the contest begins, and no two matches play the same. Cards are divided up into several categories, including ‘creatures’ (characters, as in an RPG), ‘spells’ (cards allowing combat actions), and ‘mana’ (currency used to pay action costs). We can

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<sup>53</sup> Appelcline, Shamon. *Designers & Dragons: The '90s*. Evil Hat Productions, 2014, pp. 132-3.

<sup>54</sup> Appelcline, 2014, pp. 142-3.



trace the development of these mechanics further back to older board games and even niche wargames. Card types such as ‘creatures’ are used, less as *cards* in traditional card games and more like *pieces* in a board game. As in *MTG*, Rooke’s game defines differing roles for card types, the trumps becoming ‘spells’ and the suited cards ‘troops’ (similar to ‘creatures’ in *MTG*).

Rooke works primarily as an illustrator and art director and has built his career in computer games. In an interview, he told me that the turn-of-the-century art style of the *RWS* drew him to the deck, as well as themes he saw echoed in the fantasy genre. Rooke sees his game as providing a reason for non-spiritual people to develop an interest in Tarot and encounter it in a modern-style card game. Like other English speakers working with Tarot, he was not well acquainted with the traditional game, leaving him to draw imaginative inferences and invent new meanings for the cards.

Despite Rooke’s description of himself as “not mystical or spiritual”, he did have what he said “could have easily [been] attributed ... to some sort of mystical experience” when designing the game. Rooke told me how the rules and structure of the game came to him almost fully formed, waking him in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve. He said, “A lot of the core elements I feel like were already just there, so it was kind of like one of those weird ‘ah ha’ moments in my subconscious.”<sup>55</sup> Rooke interprets his experience in terms of psychological phenomena that – while

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<sup>55</sup> Rooke, Denman. Interview. Conducted by Simon Kenny. 18 January 2023.

a compelling fit with what he understands mystical experiences to constitute—he views as caused by the activity of his subconscious. The development of a theory of psychology that incorporated this dual-mind theory was developed by Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung, among others.

While Freud was an avid player of the Viennese variant of *Tarok*<sup>56</sup>, Jung has a particular connection to Tarot as an esoteric device. His theories and formulations are often invoked by divinatory tarot authors, particularly ‘synchronicity’, an ‘acausal connecting principle’ that may be used to explain meaningful coincidences, as well as the theory of archetypes. Whereas Freud had a “tendency to reduce ‘spiritual’ phenomena to material causes”<sup>57</sup> (as Rooke has), Jung preferred expansive rather than reductive explanations. For Jung, compelling dreams are evidence of connection to a larger system of mind that he called the ‘collective unconscious’.<sup>58</sup>

## Occult Media

Using a tarot deck today for gaming might raise some eyebrows for those unaware of its long gaming history. A consistent provocation is The Devil card that, in the *RWS* deck, is based on an illustration of Baphomet by nineteenth-century French

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<sup>56</sup> Freud’s own set of tarot cards are housed at the *Freud Museum London*: <https://www.freud.org.uk/collections/objects/3110/>

<sup>57</sup> Lachman, Gary. *Jung the Mystic: The Esoteric Dimensions of Carl Jung’s Life and Teachings*. Tarcher, 2010, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Jung’s connection to Tarot is explored at length in *A Critical Introduction to Tarot*, Chapter 5: Jung and Psychological Mysticism.

occultist Éliphas Lévi. We might remember the so-called ‘Satanic Panic’ that centred on *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1980s America. The game was accused of being “a recruitment tool of devil worship”<sup>59</sup> and fingered by the mother of a young man who took his own life in 1982 as responsible for his death. For many contemporary Christians, this has earned *D&D* a place on the list of forbidden objects, along with tarot cards. Part of the reason Tarot is associated with satanism is its connection, through its esoteric and occult practice, with witchcraft. However, this very association is what is so attractive about the cards to some more open-minded game enthusiasts.

We are going through something of a resurgent satanic panic at present, with several high-profile celebrities, politicians, and cultural events criticised as satanic for various reasons. A detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, but we can mention that in 2024 alone, two major European cultural events were marred with accusations of satanism: the Eurovision Song Contest in May and the Summer Olympics held in Paris in July and August. The Paris Olympics featured a parody of de Vinci’s famed painting ‘The Last Supper’, which included drag performers and was called “the theater of Satan” by a Catholic Cardinal.<sup>60</sup> In the United States of America, the Satanic Temple, a politically motivated religious group, is also making waves by challenging

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<sup>59</sup> Witwer, 2015, p. 149.

<sup>60</sup> <https://catholicherald.co.uk/theatre-of-satan-cardinal-burke-condemns-olympics-ceremony/>

increased Christian privilege in schools, for example.<sup>61</sup> The Satanic Temple are largely symbolic Satanists, using (some would say abusing) legal structures designed to protect religious freedom for the political aim of promoting secularism and religious pluralism.

Media producers seem more than happy to benefit from the controversial reputation of occult objects, including Tarot. Comedian Steven Wright, known for his dry, deadpan humour, once told the following joke: “I stayed up all night playing poker with tarot cards. I got a full house and four people died.” 2024 also saw the release of two separate horror features named ‘Tarot’, one American-made movie, the other a Korean TV show. Both traffic in popular stereotypes and fears around the occult and witchcraft. A central plot point of the movie, for example, propagates a familiar misconception that it is dangerous to use someone else’s tarot deck.<sup>62</sup> There is, however, a grain of truth in this falsehood; spiritually oriented tarot readers do often believe ‘energies’ are imbued in the cards through touch, and they must be carefully handled, perhaps even cleansed by ritual methods before use.<sup>63</sup> In the movie, breaking this ‘rule’ invokes a curse on the characters.

Game designers naturally have more fun with it, though they, too, rely heavily on well-worn stereotypes. In the computer game *Cult of the Lamb*, player abilities are selected as tarot-inspired

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<sup>61</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/desantis-satanists-law-christianity-schools-b2577592.html>

<sup>62</sup> <https://people.com/what-tarot-movie-gets-wrong-about-astrology-and-tarot-8691252>

<sup>63</sup> For an example, see *The Book of Tarot* (U.S. Games Systems, 1981) by Susan Hansson, p. 86.

cards. The player is tasked with creating a cult of cute forest creatures they must care for as a resource for slavish work and ritual sacrifice. It takes inspiration from other media properties employing the now overused juxtaposition of innocent cuteness with cartoon violence, exemplified by the American satirical cartoon *South Park*, in particular, their 2004 episode 'Woodland Critter Christmas'. The episode is almost certainly the direct inspiration for *Cult of the Lamb*, as it features all the same key elements, although *South Park* uses it to ridicule Christmas and the myth of the antichrist rather than the 'old god', Lovecraftian leanings of *Cult of the Lamb*.

There is no shortage of games that use tarot cards in a similar way, such as *Hades 2* in which tarot features identically to *Cult of the Lamb*. Other examples include *Cyberpunk 2077*, a popular action RPG game with over 25 million copies sold.<sup>64</sup> It features a secondary storyline which asks the player to find graffiti corresponding to tarot cards. In keeping with the gritty noir theme of the game, the imagery has been described as "futuristic, dystopian and bleak."<sup>65</sup> A character within the game called Misty (clearly intended to evoke *Mystic*) will even give the player a tarot reading and at various times offers insights using tarot motifs, cryptically hinting at future events in the plot. When the game concludes, it is subtly framed in terms of the symbolism of the Tarot, with a major plot choice symbolised as a decision between the cards Judgement or The Devil. Clearly, Tarot was important

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<sup>64</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1305749/cyberpunk-2077-sales-worldwide/>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.wopc.co.uk/tarot/cyberpunk-2077-tarot-cards>

to the game designers and though it does not feature in the mechanics, the use of Tarot is more than cursory.

Though the team behind *Cyberpunk 2077* did not publish their tarot card artwork as a commercial deck, fans have created unofficial decks using artwork extracted from the game's digital files, some even selling unofficial prints in online crafts marketplace Etsy. Other media producers have created officially branded tarot card decks for some time, capitalising on this trend, especially its popularity among younger people. Playing-card researcher Adam Wintle explains in an article for *The World of Playing Cards*:

Young people are raised in a way where the media's content is closely associated with who they are. When exploring their own personal mysticism and spirituality, purchasing a branded tarot deck becomes a more appealing choice when compared to the historical artwork of traditional decks. ... According to the branded tarot sets the modern mystical way of life involves developing a stronger connection with one's sense of personal identity. The stories you cherish become your own branded spiritual journey, a part of your personal mythology and worldbuilding...<sup>66</sup>

There are, for example, Disney-themed decks, such as the *Wisdom of Pooh Tarot*, based on the beloved children's animated character Winnie the Pooh. Tarot scholar and author Benebell Wen enthusiastically reviewed this deck on her blog, saying, "Winnie-

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<sup>66</sup> <https://www.wopc.co.uk/tarot/branded-tarot-decks-and-modern-mystic-lifestyle>

the-Pooh *is* my childhood... To see one of the most beautifully produced tarot tributes to Pooh come alive ... is an incredible honor."<sup>67</sup>

In this personalised spiritual mythology, what could be better than creating a unique tarot card deck to suit your own tastes and outlook? For the rest of this chapter, we will examine one such offering that fulfils this desire in an innovative computer game.

## Witches in Space: The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood

*Warning: contains spoilers.*

Spanish game studio Deconstructeam's 2023 game, *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood*, bases itself on a persistent feature of tarot culture: making one's own deck. The game centres around two main characters, Fortuna and Àbramar, and a supporting cast of witches. The player takes on the role of Fortuna, a witch banished to an asteroid for a thousand years by her coven leader for inciting dissent when she predicted the group's downfall. After stewing for several centuries in a cute and cosy pixel-art house, Fortuna decides to take drastic action by summoning Àbramar, a forbidden cosmic creature of immense magical power. With his help, Fortuna escapes her prison and takes back her life as he mentors her in the creation of a new tarot-like deck that becomes the locus of her renewed magic. As a primarily narrative-driven

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<sup>67</sup> <https://benebellwen.com/2024/04/04/wisdom-of-pooh-tarot-christopher-robin-box-set/>

'choices matter' game, the player has significant influence on the unfolding plot as Fortuna decides between revenge or forgiveness, between gathering power or sharing it.

The drama of Fortuna's coven mirrors real-world conflict in magical societies. The creators of the world's most popular tarot deck, the *Rider-Waite-Smith*, were members of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a late-nineteenth-century English magical order based on Freemasonry that had its fair share of spats. In existence for less than 20 years, the Golden Dawn had a huge impact on Western magical culture and Tarot in the English-speaking world more broadly through the *Rider-Waite-Smith* deck as well as the *Thoth Tarot*, the latter by controversial magician Aleister Crowley. Creating a unique tarot deck was an important rite of passage in the progression of a member through the 'degrees' of the Order. In 1903, after years of infighting and magical battles, the Golden Dawn split into several new orders along factional lines. Since then, and thanks largely to the popularisation of Tarot in the United States of America by U.S. Games, the number and variety of mass-produced tarot decks has exploded,<sup>68</sup> as discussed above.

Fortuna is the name of the Roman goddess of fortune and luck and exists as a tarot card of the same name, now most often as the major arcana card Wheel of Fortune, or *Rota Fortunae*, as it was known to medievals. This is the 'Cosmic Wheel' of the game's

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<sup>68</sup> See the excellent books *Tarot: The Library of Esoterica* or *The History of Tarot Art* for a fascinating sampling of many historical and contemporary tarot decks. There is also a discussion of the variety of decks and their types in the first chapter of my book *A Critical Introduction to Tarot*.



title. The tarot's major arcana represents archetypal forces and virtues, and the Wheel of Fortune card depicts the uncertainty of life, modelled by changes in social standing. In one of the earliest tarot decks, the fourteenth-century Visconti-Sforza deck, this card shows four figures rotating on the wheel, each accompanied by the text *Regnabo* (I shall reign), *Regno* (I reign), *Regnavi* (I have reigned), and *Sum sine regno* (I am without sovereignty). It was typical of artistic depictions of the *Rota Fortunae* in a tradition owing to its Roman and earlier Greek roots (Tyche was the corresponding Greek goddess). The late Roman senator and Christian scholar Boethius wrote, "We turn the wheel [of fortune] on its flying orb, we rejoice to change the lowest for the highest, the highest for the lowest." In the game, Fortuna evokes this fall from grace and power and aims to turn the wheel again to reign, perhaps, or at least regain personal sovereignty.

*The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* sees Àbramar guiding Fortuna to create a new oracle deck that, according to the Behemoth, goes beyond the "human-centric" constraints of traditional Tarot, allowing its reader to "grasp the hidden truths of the cosmos." Fortuna's tarot deck was confiscated as part of her punishment, and it is made clear that this has been one of the most difficult aspects of her banishment. Like Tarot, Àbramar's oracle system consists of four suits, though they are Air, Water, Earth, and Fire. Àbramar's suits differ from the tarot suits of Wands, Swords, Cups, and Pentacles, but for most tarot readers, these will correspond familiarly to the four elements, respectively, of Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. As in traditional Tarot, the elements

correspond in turn to common cultural, emotional, and psychological meanings, but the game designers made their own sense of it. For example, for the *Cosmic Wheel*, fire evokes conflict and “everything that is against you”, whereas in traditional tarot symbolism, this would fit more with the Swords and their element of Air.

The game provides us with an easy-to-use image collage-maker to make our cards from clip-art-like stickers or stencils. In a three-step process, we choose a background (called a Sphere in the game), a main set of symbols (an Arcane), and a secondary set of symbols (a Symbol), combining and arranging them as we like. Each of these aspects must be ‘purchased’ using elemental points, constraining our options and adding a little of the economic optimising mechanics familiar in many strategy computer games. Later, when we start reading fortunes, our narrative choice earns these points, seemingly based on mood or emotional content.

The imagery and symbols are perhaps the most significant break from the Tarot. The theme of this game could be summed up as ‘witches in space’, and the game narrative describes broad mythic spacefaring witch lore spanning millennia, witches being immortal though killable, like the lesser gods of ancient Greek myth. There is the fiery door at the edge of the universe that gave a witch a seven-year orgasm; the ruins of epic interplanetary battles; the carcass of a long-dead Behemoth, now housing an entire city, and so on. Gone are the Christian symbols and structures of meaning that have predominated in tarot decks and largely continue to this day. (See chapter 3 for more on this topic.)

We see some staples of popular fantasy with roots in mythology and folklore, such as dragons, wraiths, and a dwarven-like obsession with mining and weapon-smithing—again, echoes of how the modern viewpoint categorises Tarot and fantasy literature together. A few symbols from traditional Tarot do remain, for example, a set of jugs pouring water from The Star and an ‘Avian Dancer’ that resembles the figure in The World, draped in a long, billowing cloth. There are also images of coins, swords, pentacles, and wands sprinkled throughout.

When at least two cards have been created, the player begins to perform fortune-telling readings, first for Àbramar. The cards are shuffled and laid out on a table as in a traditional reading. However, unlike a traditional reading, the player can choose the significance of the cards by the position in the spread (the aspect of the conversation they are to be applied to) after viewing them face up (that is, unhidden). The player then selects the interpretation of the cards, which can vary wildly. These decisions augment the usual dialogue choice mechanism in narrative-focused games and some choices echo later in the game, affecting the narrative to a degree that is technically impressive. *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* joins other artworks to engage with fortune-telling cards in this way to create a narrative. Italo Calvino used Tarot as a story-prompting system to write his 1973 novel *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. In an afterword, he writes: “I realised the tarots were a machine for constructing stories”.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Calvino, Italo. 1979. *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. Translated by William Weaver, Vintage Classics, 1998, p. 126.

The game mixes its many magical and witchcraft influences within a sci-fi theme, bringing in giant mechs and robotic exosuits, for example. In many ways, it is a blend representative of our times. A renewed interest in magical spiritualisms has challenged the scientific materialism of the last several hundred years. While the modern generation of witches most often retains a central love of nature and ecology that previous generations did, they are less suspicious of technology. We might consider this an expected result of the popularisation and mainstreaming of witchcraft. This eclectic mixing and syncretism of technology and fortune-telling reminds me of *The Tarot of Many Doors* by Felix Kawitzky. This deck is a “sci-fi themed, queer, anarchist deck” that attempts to reimagine the Tarot, replacing the many gendered representations of the *Rider-Waite-Smith* (on which it is based, like almost all contemporary tarot decks) with more abstract representations. Its creator remarks, “It contains an array of beings made of blood, light, metal, slime, stone, soundwaves, tentacles, shadows, feathers, bone, data ... all existing in other planes, dimensions and worlds.”<sup>70</sup> The synergy between this deck and *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* is striking.

## Cosmic Weavers

Deconstructeam is a small three-person outfit: Jordi de Paco (game design and writing), Marina González (art), and Paula Ruiz

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<sup>70</sup> <https://littleredtarot.com/product/tarot-of-many-doors/>

(music and sound effects). The games they produce always exhibit a particular harmony and provocative sensitivity that fans strongly respond to, and *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* is no different. The art direction and aesthetic are supported by lush compositions, securely residing within the retro pixel art and downbeat synth genres. The art style (pixelation aside) reflects Pamela Colman Smith's illustrations for the *Rider-Waite-Smith* deck: bold colours, strong lines, and striking palettes. The *Modern Witch Tarot* by Lisa Sterle continues this style most clearly, as seen in comic books and graphic novels that inspired this deck, and as discussed earlier, agrees with Mary K. Greer's comparison of the RWS style to Japanese Ukiyo-e woodcuts.

In a video interview, de Paco explains how the idea for the game came about:

A lot of people that we loved and respected were really into Tarot and magic, and we thought that was bullshit at the time. In an effort to try to understand why people who we love and respect are really into this, we started delving into it... and we fell in love with it too, and we were trying to challenge it. So we discovered that through Tarot, specifically, you can connect to ideas and emotions you are not able to access with your logical mind. You immediately project your fears, your desires, ideas. We thought, Tarot actually is a great mechanic for narrative design because asking questions and using cards to answer them is pretty nice, so why don't we build a whole game around this concept?<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBBrbEO8jW8>

This motivation is very relatable to me personally. I, too, came to reflect on my prejudices (de Paco's "bullshit") and wonder about "the poverty of dismissing the beliefs of others out of hand."<sup>72</sup> As anyone who does so will realise, there is a wealth of history and deep connections through the Tarot to many aspects of culture. The curiosity and honesty of the team is admirable, and their exploration of Tarot is detailed and imaginative.

In the above quote, de Paco summarises the psychological projection interpretation of Tarot, which, for tarot scholars, is based on a Jungian worldview. The concept of 'projection' is the psychological reflex to externalise aspects of oneself onto other people and objects in the world in order to disidentify with unwelcome traits and to understand oneself through the world. In his suggestion that the "logical mind" cannot access one's entire inner psyche, de Paco implies that emotions are illogical or perhaps irrational. As the counterpoint to Freud's positivism, Jung courted the mystical in his ideas of synchronicity—an 'acausal connecting principle'—and the collective unconscious—a semi-supernatural repository of the archetypes of humanity, not dissimilar to Plato's Ideal realm. Jung's legacy continues to provide fertile soil for a tarot interpretation based on a scientific materialist worldview, though leaving the door open to the unknown.

One notable aspect of *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* that may prove provocative to players is the sexual content. The game is

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<sup>72</sup> <https://medium.com/@skewrites/why-i-wrote-a-critical-introduction-to-tarot-f2f507c7e7fa>

sprinkled with sex positivity and not infrequent references to orgasms and casual sex. In the first chapters alone, Àbramar discusses consorting with other witches in an implicitly sexual way, and there is the mention of a butt plug. In the card builder, we find a fairy dominatrix (with accoutrements) as well as an almost nude goddess having sex with a snake. Open discussions of sex seem to be a favourite theme of Deconstructeam, and it is handled in a frank, unapologetic way that nonetheless manages to remain sensitive.

There are some familiar tropes often seen in games that, in other contexts, would feel quite lazy, but they are so common in computer games that we should almost expect them. Fortuna's house is complete with a bubbling cauldron and spell ingredients in jars, and she wears a large, pointy, wide-brimmed, cartoonish witch's hat. Similarly, in the card designer, we find 'The Shaman' replete with feathers and bones, gesturing mysteriously and an orientalist Jade monk that mixes tropes of Asian serenity and Area 51-style aliens. As philosopher and games critic Ian Bogost has written, "the best interactive stories are still worse than even middling books and films",<sup>73</sup> rarely surpassing young-adult fiction. Fortuna herself wears Converse-styled shoes and presents a sullen and over-serious goth aesthetic. She is similar to Misty in *Cyberpunk 2077*, who wears a studded leather choker necklace, heavy rings of eyeshadow, and an abundance of purple and black.

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<sup>73</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/video-games-stories/524148/>

This cultural shorthand notwithstanding, *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* is a competent and complex entry into the interactive narrative game genre. It follows Deconstructeam's previous hit, *The Red Strings Club*, a game that many consider a modern-day indie classic despite it replaying the classic cyberpunk tropes popularised by the adaption of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in *Bladerunner*, tropes also taken to their extreme in *Cyberpunk 2077*. *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* has the tone and content style of an excellent teen anime, at times philosophising, at others speaking to the (sometimes quite salacious) wants and desires of the adolescent. To my knowledge, it is the most interesting tarot-based computer game yet, using the cards as the primary focus, based on traditional fortune-telling but making it feel fresh with sci-fi trappings and an engaging, dynamic story. Besides that, what is most compelling is the moral ambiguity explored in Fortuna's response to her punishment, something that *The Red Strings Club* also toyed with. Will the player choose to make others fear her? Will Fortuna reconcile with her coven or wreak revenge? The game affords the player a high degree of influence compared with other weaker narrative games.

## Playing With Tarot

New tarot games, such as those discussed in this chapter, are being developed by those largely unfamiliar with the relevant bodies of scholarship on card games and the esoteric. Without a foundational sense of their place in the history of Tarot, game



designers are left with a limited understanding, assembled piecemeal from cultural common sense. This is sometimes expressed in the clumsy use of stereotypes and, at its worst, an ignorant disregard for the rich world of existing meaning and symbolism. Games seem to be invariably created as experimental maps of the terrain of Tarot rather than as comprehensive projects by experts.

An opportunity exists, therefore, to educate contemporary game designers in the English-speaking world on the rich history of games played with the Tarot. Tarot is unlikely to be relieved of what some may see as the 'baggage' of esoteric connotations, as perhaps traditional card game scholars may wish to see. If anything, esoteric tarot is on the rise. One cannot fight the tide, and the cultural situation is something non-spiritual tarot enthusiasts will continue to have to find a way to come to terms with, whether this is by maintaining a strict separation of concerns or by embracing its magical reputation. Newer tarot games may open the door for younger players to encounter and be inspired by the traditional game, but a shallow engagement will only reinforce unhelpful tropes, as we see in the horror movie *Tarot*.

While the esoteric connotations of the Tarot will inevitably be seen as its main attraction to game designers for the time being, there is plenty of room to grow for those with an interest in Tarot in the realm of abstract, non-narrative games. A successful game will make the major arcana indispensable to core gameplay, differentiating it from games played with the standard (poker) card deck. Few games make these cards integral to gameplay in

the way that they were originally intended with the trumping mechanic. For example, in *The Zacktronic Solitaire Collection*, we can play a version of the classic game solitaire with tarot cards, but it makes poor use of the trumps, reducing them to just another suit. Tarot has not quite been the multi-purpose vehicle that the standard deck became, with many games played using the same deck. By and large, it has been used only for the trick-taking Tarot game and its close relatives. Tarot may have more in common with *Uno*—a custom card deck based on playing cards that is designed to play a particular game. And while the esoteric context of Tarot is ambient in our culture, an excellent abstract game will, like chess or even *Magic: The Gathering*, only use its theme as dressing for robust game mechanics.

What might a new tarot game look like that brings all influences together, aware of history yet looking to the future?

## Chapter 3

### Tarot, a Heretical Mysticism

The Christian objection to tarot cards is almost as old as the cards themselves. Even in their original context as gaming cards, using Tarot purportedly resulted in the “loss of souls” to the devil, according to a fifteenth-century Franciscan friar.<sup>74</sup> Two centuries later, the Puritans echoed this sentiment regarding all playing cards, coining the phrase ‘the devil’s picture book’. Calvinist priest Thomas Taylor wrote in 1618 of a common Puritanical sentiment, linking games of chance with immoral behaviour: “...see thy company be good; for bad company is farre worse than solitariness, as many finde, who beeing troubled in minde, or tempted by Satan, run to lewd company, to cards, dice, drinking, & sporting...”<sup>75</sup>

Today, objections are no less prevalent, but they centre on the use of Tarot in fortune-telling. In 2018, Catholic Pope Francis criticised people who consult tarot readers instead of praying to God for guidance,<sup>76</sup> echoing a similar statement he made in 2013.<sup>77</sup> In this, he simply reiterated what the modern Catholic catechism

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<sup>74</sup> Giles, Cynthia. *The Tarot: History, Mystery and Lore*. Paragon House, 1992, p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> Taylor, Thomas. *Christs Combate And Conquest*. Cantrell Legge for Thomas Man, 1618, Matth.4.1 p. 23.

<sup>76</sup> Waldir Ramos Diaz, Ary. “Pope: Are You Making Yourself a Human Sacrifice to Your Idols?” *Aleteia*, August 1, 2018. <https://aleteia.org/2018/08/01/pope-are-you-making-yourself-a-human-sacrifice-to-your-idols>.

<sup>77</sup> “Pope Francis: Salvation Only in Jesus, Not in Fortune Tellers, Tarot Cards.” *Catholic Culture*, April 8, 2013. <https://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=17525>.

instructs: “All forms of divination are to be rejected...”<sup>78</sup> In 2022, a firebrand evangelical Protestant pastor named Greg Locke made headlines when he arranged a ‘burning service’ in his Tennessee church to burn books and other items associated with witchcraft and the occult, including Tarot.<sup>79</sup>

The situation is an odd one once we recognise that the Tarot was developed by serious Christians and has always existed within a Christian cultural framework. A cursory glance at the world’s most popular tarot deck, the *Rider Waite Smith (RWS)*, should suggest this. Observe, for example, The Lovers card, where we see the angel Raphael above Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Even The Devil card, while not a positive figure in Christianity, is nonetheless only meaningful within a Christian context.

The scholarly consensus is that tarot cards were developed during the Renaissance when classical Greek pagan culture was ‘rediscovered’ and incorporated into Christianity. The major arcana, also known as the trumps, were an allegory of the concerns and preoccupations of the time, expressed in familiar, contemporary art depicting virtues and important political and religious roles within a divinely ordained hierarchy.

Our *current* views of the (im)permissibility of the Tarot may have less to do with a rootedness in tradition and more to do with

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<sup>78</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Paragraph #2116, <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/para/2116.htm>

<sup>79</sup> Anglesey, Anders. “Right-Wing Pastor Greg Locke Organizes ‘Massive’ Book Burning.” *Newsweek*, 1 Feb. 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/right-wing-pastor-greg-locke-organises-massive-book-burning-1674983>.

our contemporary mores. The modern Christian, especially a Protestant or Evangelical, will likely have a different relationship to unpleasant imagery than existed when the Tarot was created. Depicting, for example, the personification of death as a skeleton was by no means unchristian, though today, this would likely be seen as not only morbid but perhaps indicating a fascination with a 'spirit of evil' or even the demonic. Doug Philips, a Christian author and speaker, has said that "Horror... is based on a fascination with ungodly fear. ...It cannot be redeemed because it is presuppositionally at war with God."<sup>80</sup>

Such views were not shared by Christians of previous eras. The *Danse Macabre*, or 'Dance of Death', was a popular medieval allegory in art that emphasised the universality of death. We see this in the tarot Death card, where people of all stations and ages may encounter death. The time in which the Tarot was created came just after the Black Death swept through Europe. The widespread use of *memento mori*, or reminders of death, reveals this solemn preoccupation.<sup>81</sup> A particular church in Berlin exemplifies the conflict over images within Christianity. In 1470, a *Danse Macabre* (or, rather in German, *Totentanz*) was painted on the city's oldest church still in use today, *Marienkirche* (the Church of St. Mary). Less than half a century later, in 1514, the fresco of more than 20 metres in length was covered with whitewash by

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<sup>80</sup> Duran, Mike. "The Grotesque and Horrific in Religious Art." deCOMPOSE, 12 Mar. 2015, <https://www.mikeduran.com/2015/03/12/the-grotesque-and-horrific-in-religious-art/>.

<sup>81</sup> Farley, Helen. *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2009, pp. 73-6.

Protestant Reformers, later to be restored in 1860 due to its historical interest.<sup>82</sup>

We may reject such images under the biblical instruction to “abstain from all appearance of evil”,<sup>83</sup> but Christians at other times were more comfortable depicting horrors and putting them to good use. It was also common to illustrate hell and its torments on painted church walls. We do find a modern version of this in the controversial publishing of Chick Tracts, which show the grotesque and frightening to encourage conversion to the Christian faith, but, on the whole, this strategy is not widespread.<sup>84</sup>

## Tarot And the Early Modern Occult

By at least the eighteenth century, Tarot had begun to be used for divination and other occult purposes. It was in this period that the modern form of Tarot began and its use in fortune-telling. Some tarot scholars believe there was a folk practice of sortilege by cards before this time, as we see in, for example, Lenormand cards.<sup>85</sup> French occultists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries developed these folk practices and began the standardisation of

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<sup>82</sup> Kampfner, John. *In Search Of Berlin: The Story of A Reinvented City*. Atlantic Books, 2023, p. 20.

<sup>83</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:22, the Bible, Authorised King James Version.

<sup>84</sup> We may note that the American non-profit rights law organisation, The Southern Poverty Law Center, has designated Chick Publications as a ‘hate group’. See: <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2011/11/02/pastor-apologizes-hate-filled-halloween-hand-out>

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, *The Tarot: History, Symbolism, and Divination* by Robert M. Place or *Mystical Origins of the Tarot* by Paul Huson.

the so-called 'traditional' meanings of the cards and methods of interpretation. One influential figure was Alphonse Louis Constant, better known by his pseudonym Éliphas Lévi. After beginning training as a Catholic priest, he left that vocation and instead devoted himself to a life of occult scholarship and the practice of magic. (In fact, some accounts claim he coined the term 'occult' in the context of esoteric studies.<sup>86</sup>) Lévi connected the 22 major arcana of the Tarot to the Hebrew alphabet and, through this, developed associations with Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition.

Tarot scholar Benebell Wen points out that Lévi's use of Kabbalah was in the Hermetic tradition rather than a more mainstream Jewish mysticism.<sup>87</sup> This Hermeticism is associated with the work and writings of Christian and Muslim medieval alchemists. We can trace the roots of this mystical practice to the Greco-Egyptian milieu of Alexandria at the time of the Great Library in the first centuries AD. For Lévi, Tarot was not to be used for something as mundane as fortune-telling. Rather, it was a key to mystical secrets. This distinction will be important for the years to come, as the folk practice of fortune-telling is contrasted with the high ceremonial magic of tarot mysticism.

It was precisely to move away from a folk fortune-telling practice that A. E. Waite developed his tarot deck in the early twentieth century. Both he and the artist Pamela Colman Smith

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<sup>86</sup> Giles, p. 28.

<sup>87</sup> Wen, Benebell. *Holistic Tarot: An Integrative Approach to Using Tarot for Personal Growth*. North Atlantic Books, 2015, p. 9.

were members of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an English magical society based on the organisational structure of the Freemasons. Freemasonry is a blend of Hermetic paganism with ecumenical Christianity and, while not magical, has led to various magical offshoots.

Waite himself considered the deck he produced to 'rectify the symbolism' of the Tarot and return to a Judeo-Christian mysticism, including much influence from medieval Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). Smith converted to Catholicism, likely influenced by Waite, though Waite himself left the Church.<sup>88</sup> Like Éliphas Lévi, Waite entered training for the Catholic priesthood but left it before being ordained.<sup>89</sup> Though he did not follow this path, he was an outspoken Catholic apologist in his younger days and wrote many articles defending the faith, sometimes in heated tones. Arguing against the Protestant Reformation, he wrote in the 1870s:

Such a heresy which began by denying half the truths of God, was not likely to improve with time. The Satan who had inspired [the Reformation] had a far deeper intention than he who began it, or the princes who fostered it...<sup>90</sup>

Though he did eventually leave the fold, his biographer writes, "the Church of Rome always remained for him, for all that he had left it, the only valid form of institutional Christianity."<sup>91</sup> Waite

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<sup>88</sup> Kaplan, Stuart R., et al. *Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story*. U.S. Games Systems, Inc., 2018, p. 352.

<sup>89</sup> Gilbert, R. A. *A.E. Waite: Magician Of Many Parts*. Crucible, 1987, pp. 22-3.

<sup>90</sup> Gilbert, p. 24.

<sup>91</sup> Gilbert, p. 25.



maintained a God-centred faith throughout his life but developed, as other esotericists had before him, a transcendental and experimental approach to knowledge rather than adhering to orthodoxy. In fact, he proposed that there was an inner, secret church within the Catholic Church, penning a book on the subject, *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*.<sup>92</sup> Published the year after his famous *Rider Waite Smith* tarot deck, the final statement of the preface to this book makes his piety clear: “I conclude by saying that the glory of God is the purpose of all my study, and that in His Name I undertake this quest as a part of the Great Work.”<sup>93</sup> Throughout his life, Waite kept the Catholic Christian worldview alive within himself and rejected, for example, Eastern religious ideas popular with some of his Spiritualist and Theosophical contemporaries.<sup>94</sup>

## The Challenge of Christian Mysticism to Orthodoxy

The core question, then, is *what is the status of Christian mysticism?* Can Tarot form part of such a practice? The influential mid-twentieth-century book *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* is a treatise on just such a practice, as well as *The Contemplative Tarot*, published recently in 2022. In the latter,

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<sup>92</sup> The spelling ‘Graal’ is the Old French version of the modern English ‘Grail’. Waite was deeply interested in the Arthurian legends (his namesake) and its connection with the Holy Grail, an interest shared by *Rider Waite Smith* tarot artist Pamela Colman Smith.

<sup>93</sup> Waite, Arthur Edward. *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal: Its Legends and Symbolism*. Rebman Limited, 1909, p. xiv.

<sup>94</sup> His biographer notes, “Latterday spiritualists with their frequent emphasis on reincarnation irritated him...”, Gilbert, p. 55; and “Waite had no interest in eastern philosophy...”, Gilbert, p. 90.

Brittany Muller describes how the Tarot can be used for Christian reflection in the practice of *visio divina*, or ‘divine seeing’. It is “affective mysticism, focusing on an experience of God that comes out of images and symbols...”<sup>95</sup> This may sit uncomfortably with some people, especially the notoriously iconoclastic Protestant vanguard. It may appeal more to Catholics, who are still comfortable with religious art and—literally—iconography. As one blogger on *weirdcatholic.com* put it, “[Tarot] reflects Catholic culture, symbolism, history, and theology. ...Tarot belongs to us, not to the con artists.”<sup>96</sup>

The bulk of Muller’s book is a card-by-card reinterpretation of tarot meanings in a contemporary Catholic context. In this way, it functions as most books on Tarot do, as a guide to the symbolism of the cards and a way for the author to propound their spiritual philosophy—or theology, as in this case. For example, Muller interprets The Empress as a feminine creative principle, writing: “We are familiar with the idea of God as Father, but God is also Mother, and the Empress plays with this idea of God’s maternal love.”<sup>97</sup> This, and many other instances like it, form an almost pan-cultural reformist theology that stretches traditional Christian teachings—some might argue, to breaking point. Throughout her work, Muller writes from a progressive and expansive viewpoint.

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<sup>95</sup> Muller, Brittany. *The Contemplative Tarot: A Christian Guide To The Cards*. St. Martin’s Essentials, 2022, p. 25.

<sup>96</sup> McDonald, Thomas L. “The Truth About Tarot.” *Weird Catholic*, October 10, 2018. <https://weirdcatholic.com/2018/10/10/the-truth-about-tarot/>.

<sup>97</sup> Muller, p. 51.

Still others go further. The modern descendants of Waite can be found in the Christian Witchcraft movement, with proponents such as Reverend Valerie Love. Some even claim Sojourner Truth was a witch due to her “syncretic spiritual practice, which blended West African animistic beliefs, American folk magic, and Dutch Calvinism and Methodism”,<sup>98</sup> though she strongly rejected the term during her life. Truth was a forceful campaigner against slavery in the USA, herself formerly enslaved. Many today see her work as anticipating intersectional feminism, a third-wave feminist current that includes class- and race-consciousness into feminist thought and political action.

The Bible offers many verses that appear quite clear in forbidding and denouncing witches and witchcraft. The most famous is Exodus 22:18: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”<sup>99</sup> Other translations of this verse reveal that ‘witch’ is gendered female. According to these scriptures, this command is given to Moses directly by God on Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments, together with a number of additional judgements. Such a law was put into practice in the period of the European and American witch trials but, as the *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* reminds us, “the law belongs to the older dispensation, and does not breathe the spirit of Christ... the laws given to Israel are not, simply as such, binding upon Christian nations, have taught men that an injunction such as this can have

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<sup>98</sup> Sollée, Kristen J., and Coz Conover. *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive*. ThreeL Media, 2017, p. 50.

<sup>99</sup> Exodus 22:18, the Bible, Authorised King James Version.

no place in a Christian law-book.”<sup>100</sup> That is, the ‘New Covenant’ of the New Testament is thought to supersede the proscribed capital punishment.

Reverend Love disagrees with the popular notion that ‘Christian’ and ‘witch’ are antithetical. In her book, *Confessions of a Christian Witch*, she writes candidly of her experience leaving what she calls the ‘cult’ of Jehovah’s Witnesses and accepting what she believes to be her God-given nature as a witch. She writes:

Witches are NOT of the devil, nor do witches work for the devil, nor are witches in any way in league with the devil. Most witches, including moi [me], do not subscribe to the concept of the devil (as it’s been perpetrated on the masses).<sup>101</sup>

Although some forms of divination are today *in practice* permissible to the Christian as a folk practice – such as answering a question by turning to a random Bible page or the interpretation of dreams – many other erstwhile sanctioned practices fell out of favour. For example, though past Popes routinely consulted astrologers when the Tarot was created and the centuries before, this was banned by a Papal bull in the seventeenth century by Pope Urban VIII. Today, these practices are sometimes referred to as prophetic gifts or ‘gifts of the spirit’. What preoccupies Christian authors is the discernment of the source of spiritual gifts

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<sup>100</sup> Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges is an older bible commentary, first published in 1882. The above quote is taken from Bible Hub online, see: <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/exodus/22-18.htm>

<sup>101</sup> Love, Rev. Valarie. 2018. *Confessions of a Christian Witch: How an Ex-Jehovah’s Witness Lives Magickal & How You Can Too!* 2020, p. 14.

and power and what practices are biblically validated, as, for example, in the book *Discerning Prophetic Witchcraft* by Jennifer LeClaire, which worries much about this question.

## Prediction: A Lack of Trust?

It is not a matter of *whether the future can be read or not* – the biblical answer is that it can. What is questionable to the modern Christian is both the desire to reveal the future instead of trusting in God and the source of future revelation. There are many instances of God speaking to people through angels or in dreams and describing future events or giving instructions on what actions to take. These practices are still widely accepted today as legitimate in Christian communities.

Further back in history, we find other methods of ‘traditional’ divination written about in the Old Testament, such as *Urim* and *Thummim*. These were performed by Hebrew priests to divine the will of God and made use of their priestly vestments in a system involving chance – that is, sortilege. In this way, they resemble the Chinese *I Ching* with its throwing of yarrow stalks. Modern Christians find it hard to reconcile that godly priests used divination methods that appear consistent with other forbidden divination practices. For example, *Christianity.com* wrestles unconvincingly with this topic in an article on the subject:

...we know that God hates divination. So we can assume that even though we don't know much about these unknown entities [Urim and Thummim], that God doesn't contradict his

character. He wouldn't allow his priests to practice divination. ...thankfully, we have the Holy Spirit's guidance now, instead of needing to cast lots or rely on Urim and Thummim.<sup>102</sup>

The author of the above brushes past why casting lots seems to have been previously sanctioned but is secure in the interpretation that the New Covenant makes it irrelevant. The author is 'thankful' because we now have direct access to God via the Holy Spirit<sup>103</sup> rather than through the interpretation of chance methods, but it is unclear why these might be preferable, especially considering the actual indirectness even of answers to prayer, and so on, which require interpretation. Modern diviners continuing to use similar methods to the ancient Hebrew priests, such as those using Tarot, speak very positively of the experience.

*Urim* is mentioned in a story of the weakness of King Saul in 1 Samuel 28:3-15, in his preparations for an important battle:

When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid and badly shaken. So Saul inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets.<sup>104</sup>

Because the usual divination methods did not work, as God refused to answer Saul, he resorted to the forbidden practice of necromancy – calling up the spirits of the dead – by consulting a

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<sup>102</sup> Bolinger, Hope. "What Was the Meaning and Use of Urim and Thummim in the Bible?" Christianity.com, December 8, 2020. <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/meaning-and-use-of-urim-and-thummim-in-the-bible.html>.

<sup>103</sup> From Bolinger: "First, we can appreciate that we have direct communication methods with God. Back in the Old Testament, people would speak to God through priests or prophets. But now, we have the Holy Spirit living inside of us. We have the Bible. Often, we can take for granted our ability to pray to God directly."

<sup>104</sup> 1 Samuel 28:5-6, the Bible, English Standard Version.

medium. Kimberly Daniels, a Florida politician and Christian author, considers fortune-telling such as this to work through ‘familiar spirits’, otherwise known as demons. In her book *Breaking the Power of Familiar Spirits*, she outlines her belief that fortune-tellers allow themselves to be controlled by an evil spirit, which can speak accurately about the future but with the motive of diverting people from God in one way or another.<sup>105</sup>

For Reverend Love, her discernment reveals God as the source of the power of her Christian witchcraft practice—not an inherent power or a demonic one. She writes: “Our divinatory tools are not the source of the information we receive, they are conduits. One could choose to use a conduit or not. The information can still be accessed.”<sup>106</sup> As the ancient Hebrew priests did, Love assumes Tarot and other divinatory practices are conduits to God’s wisdom and knowledge.<sup>107</sup> In one of the prayers she suggests at the end of her book, she proclaims, “I consult my Tarot deck and my Bible.”<sup>108</sup>

Daniels’ overall advice is to not be like Saul and to not seek out knowledge of the future through forbidden means, but if God reveals the future ‘unasked’, then that is, of course, good. An example might be spontaneous visions or dreams. The attitude,

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<sup>105</sup> Daniels, Kimberly. *Breaking the Power of Familiar Spirits: How to Deal with Demonic Conspiracies*. Charisma House, 2018, pp. 91-7.

<sup>106</sup> Love, p. 12.

<sup>107</sup> We should note, however, that Reverend Love’s theology is very different from mainstream Christianity, including the proposition that humanity is essentially divine: “...[we are] human and divine at the same time. Kabbalah reveals that we are 1% human and 99% divine...” (Love, p. 27) She also believes in reincarnation (pp. 32-3), universalism (p. 38), and is most attracted to Gnosticism (pp. 46-7).

<sup>108</sup> Love, p. 297.

then, is one strongly oriented to a disinterest in foreknowledge of the events of the future and one instead of trust and faith in the unfolding of God's plan. From this viewpoint, to practice fortune-telling is actually to doubt God and, therefore, an ungodly posture. We might note that it is also very much in keeping with the common-sense psychology of the day—accept and allow events to happen and keep one's mind on the present—practices influenced in no small part by ideas from the East, such as mindfulness.

Even some tarot authors have challenged the notion that 'divination' is best defined in terms of fortune-telling. Benebell Wen writes about this without ambiguity in her influential book *Holistic Tarot*: "I do not support fortune-telling and I do not believe in future-telling. My approach to the tarot is not predictive. It is analytic."<sup>109</sup> Wen's approach, while spiritual, is very much influenced by the Jungian psychological interpretation of Tarot, where the reader projects meaning onto the cards as read via their evocative symbols. This approach leaves open the mystical, as Jung himself was something of a mystic.

The Bible commands believers to "Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually!"<sup>110</sup> Is this the call to mysticism it appears to be? In seeking God, mystically-oriented believers have sought to discover God, to draw near to Him, and so on—some define 'divination' in these terms.

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<sup>109</sup> Wen, p. 1.

<sup>110</sup> 1 Chronicles 16:11, the Bible, English Standard Version.



## One Tool Among Many

Still, perhaps for the Christian, tarot cards can only ever be, at best, of secondary importance to more traditional practices. Brittany Muller has now moved away from a tarot practice, focusing instead on prayer. In an April 2023 blog post, she writes:

I finally admitted to myself last week that I'm not very interested in writing about tarot anymore, at least for right now. I use tarot to think about God, and I'm more interested in God than tarot. ...I can allow myself to pivot now. ... What I loved about tarot is that it was an interesting contemplative practice, a tool for helping me to pay attention in prayer. I think that what I'm more interested in now is how to pray all the time, or maybe how to take that attention that I find in prayer and apply it to every moment.<sup>111</sup>

This article was written less than one year after the publication of her book. In it, Muller describes how she does not want to be fenced in by her work on Tarot and that her Christian mystical practice goes beyond it. Tarot as a collection of interesting images is, perhaps, as useful as any other set of images then, something to contemplate for a time but not to obsess over.

One is also forced to speculate that Muller may have been on the receiving end of online abuse, which is all too common today. I cannot help but notice that her accounts on X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram are deleted or inactive—even the website

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<sup>111</sup> Muller, Brittany. "Hello, I'm Back." Blessed Vigil on Substack, April 13, 2023. <https://brittanymuller.substack.com/p/hello-im-back>.

associated with the book has been shut down. A loving response cannot be taken for granted as all too many reach for the proverbial sword to deal with imagined opponents, especially those attracted to a hawkish interpretation of Matthew 10:34, where Jesus is recorded as saying: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”<sup>112</sup>

Reverend Love has had experiences like this. In response, she has adopted an ambivalent attitude:

As a practicing Christian Witch, I have heard the most hateful, hurtful comments from Christians. How can this be? How can the group who says they are blessed by and favored of God, and have love as their abiding principle, and say they are ‘saved’, and say they follow Christ, judge so harshly and hatefully? How? Best not to ask that question. I haven’t had it answered yet. What I have received, in my innermost sanctuary, as my path is LOVE.<sup>113</sup>

Despite the panoply of Christian connections with the Tarot, modern Tarot usage is much more likely to be based on neopaganism or a secular psychology-based philosophy than Christian teachings. It is, however, still helpful to know the Christian roots that echo today. On the one hand, it is tempting to make light of dogmatic or zealous condemnations such as those issued by Greg Locke or reject Pope Francis’s sermons if one is not a Christian (or not ‘that kind’ of Christian). But we should

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<sup>112</sup> Matthew 10:34, the Bible, English Standard Version.

<sup>113</sup> Love, p. 49.

remember that 'witch' is still a dangerous accusation in parts of the world today, and, for many – both adherents and detractors – the association of Tarot with witchcraft is strong. As recently as the 1970s, famed Wiccan Zsuzsanna Budapest was charged for fortune-telling under its criminalisation in California. It took nine years of legal battles, but the conviction was reversed, and these local laws were dismantled. Even still, while modern Western witches are now often 'out', many do not yet feel completely safe. With the dominating and aggressive language of 'spiritual warfare', it's not hard to see why.

While the Christian objection to Tarot is the most prevalent, the atheist and scientific materialist objection is also common. At its most uncharitable, tarot card readings are seen as a charlatan's trick, and those using them professionally are accused of selling nothing but psychological snake oil and 'woo'. What is 'evil' to critics of this sort is taking advantage of the vulnerability of those looking for answers they cannot reasonably expect and taking their money in the process. This kind of abuse undoubtedly occurs, but it is not unique to Tarot and is entirely absent from an engaged, personal practice. As we have seen, many contemporary tarot authors are explicitly disinterested in prediction. In this position, at least, even modern Pagans agree with Christians.

It is up to each of us to attempt to genuinely understand what we criticise. While it is clear that one may reasonably consider the practice of Tarot as heretical, depending on one's beliefs and attitude towards theological orthodoxy, it cannot be regarded as inherently unchristian.

# Acknowledgements

As mentioned in the preface, this short pamphlet is based on several of my already published works.

## Chapter 1, We Can Generate It for You Wholesale: Tarot and AI

- *ChatGPT as Tarot Oracle*, Medium.com, <https://medium.com/@skenwrites/chatgpt-as-tarot-oracle-1404ef9d200c>

## Chapter 2, Playing with Fate: Tarot in Games, Games for Tarot

- *Esoteric Tarot and A New Generation of Games*, The Playing-Card (journal), vol. 52, issue 3
- *Tarot Card Game: How it came to be and the games continuing to draw inspiration from the deck of destiny*, Tabletop Gaming Magazine, June 2023
- *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood, Demo Review: Sci-fi Remixed Tarot and Revenge*, Medium.com, <https://medium.com/@skenwrites/the-cosmic-wheel-sisterhood-review-sci-fi-remixed-tarot-and-revenge-7bb14151c419>

## Chapter 3, Tarot, a Heretical Mysticism

- *Recognising the Christian Mysticism of the Tarot*, The Christian Parapsychologist, Spring 2024

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A CRITICAL  
INTRODUCTION TO  
TAROT

EXAMINING THE NATURE  
OF A BELIEF IN TAROT

SIMON KENNY

Read more in [\*A Critical Introduction to Tarot\*](#), available at [CollectiveInkBooks.com](http://CollectiveInkBooks.com) and other retailers such as Amazon.