



# Manifesting Desire via Playful Mechanics in Tarot Readings

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyse tarot readings and discern the game mechanics of the process. I specifically look at YouTube readings and document their ludic qualities by means of critical analysis and ethnography. I show the connection between gameness and tarot readings as a form of generating personal meaning from a system of predefined structures. Particularly, I argue that it is the ludic attributes of tarot what facilitates its therapeutic appeal as an act of self-care. I exemplify this argument by focusing on the choice-making mechanics of YouTube tarot readings. As I argue, these mechanics provide participants with the ability to manifest their desire. I draw further connections between these game mechanics, tarot, and self-care within the context of romantic love. Based on this, I finally support the ability of games to offer and sustain experiences of love due to their mechanics.

## KEYWORDS

Tarot, Mechanics, Self-Care, Tarot Readings, Tarot Cards, Desire, Love, YouTube

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*To a warm imagination, the dubious forms, that float,  
half-veiled in darkness, afford a higher delight, than  
the most distinct scenery, that the sun can shew.*

Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Tarot cards present a variety of functions. In the seminal book by Paul Huson, *Mystical Origins of the Tarot* [1], we learn that tarot cards were originally playing cards with suits deriving from, probably, Persia, that eventually reached Europe through the Mamluks, a slave-soldier caste in Egypt and Syria. Nowadays, tarots are widely used for divination. Tarots in cartomancy, using cards for fortune-telling, have been documented since as early as 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy, reaching their wide application in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century France and England. As Huson describes, the structure of tarots based

on universal symbols and signs makes them a great storytelling machine. Huson argues that tarot cards, tarot trumps especially, told from the beginning “the story of the soul’s journey through life into the afterlife, an archetypal and perennial story” (p. 77). In tarot readings, the tarot reader uses the conventional symbolism of random cards to create meaning and provide a narrative of past, current, and future events around basic aspects of one’s life.

The affinities between this storytelling affordance of tarots and design methods have already been explored. Chung and Liang [2] have developed an ideation tool called *Interaction Tarot*, which is designed to stimulate the imagination of professionals during their creative process using tarot cards. *Taro(t)ception*, an interactive installation by Levisohn and Gromala [3], “employs augmented reality (AR) technology, which incorporates an interactor’s physical actions and senses directly in relation to a highly subjective, multiply interpretive, interactive, partially self-constructed narrative” (p. 2). Sauma-Chacón and Eger [4] built “*Ex-Tarot*, a Tarot based narrative generation” (p. 1) system that uses tarot interpretations to create “short story-summaries, as could be used to advertise an upcoming movie, rendered as English text” (ibid). Their design is inspired by Sullivan, Eladhari, and Cook’s [5] tarot-based narrative generation system in the vein of games such as *Dixit* [6], *Mysterium* [7], *Gloom* [8], and *Once Upon a Time* [9], which use cards with images to elicit narrative. Digital games, indicatively *Persona* [10], *Arcana* [11], *The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery* [12], and *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance - Love Story* [13], have also used tarot cards as part of their gameplay in a similar fashion to how books, e.g. *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* by Italo Calvino [14], movies, like *Knight of Cups* [15], and artworks, as in the performance installation by Jill Sutherland and Anne Steveley *The Wheel of Fortune* [16], incorporate tarots to structure their narrative and experience.

While there is evident research and examples on how tarots can be used in or turned into a game, there is limited literature on how games fit into the tarot experience, about tarot’s ludic properties that is. In this paper, I analyse tarot readings and discern the game mechanics of the process. I specifically look at YouTube readings and document their ludic affordances by means of critical analysis and ethnography. I show the connection between games and tarot readings in their capacity to generate personal meaning from a system of predefined structures. Particularly, I argue that it is the ludic attributes of tarot what facilitates its therapeutic appeal as an act of self-care. I exemplify my argument by focusing on love readings. Tracing the genealogy of tarots back to medieval times, I demonstrate the similar structures between games and tarots as spaces of manifestation of desire for love as fulfilment. Based on this, I further support the ability of games to offer and sustain experiences of love due to their mechanics.

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## 2 LUDIC MECHANICS IN TAROT READINGS

Mattia Thibault [17] in his paper about tarot as cartomancy contends that analysing the tarot in its capacity as a game helps us “reach a better understanding of play,” since “every experience of cartomancy shows some feature that is properly game-like,” (p. 7). Building on theorists that look at tarot from a semiotics perspective, Thibault understands tarot as a form of language, consisting of at least two elements: “a mechanism for the distribution of the cards, which generates sentences, and a vocabulary that explains the meaning of each card or idiomatic combination of cards,” (p. 3.) The gameness of tarot readings derives, for Thibault, from this linguistic quality of the cards and their system of sharing meaning.

A typical tarot reading consists of two interlocutors: the querent, the person to whom the cards are being read, and the tarot reader, who performs the reading. In this communication, both parties come with a deficit in knowledge. The querent most probably does not know the interpretation of the cards. Even if they have some knowledge of the general principles and archetypes of tarot, the final reading eludes them. The cards can have multiple meanings, also based on the context and the order they appear in, so they can be interpreted in a variety of ways with each reader giving their personal note; it is, after all, a process of intuition more than anything else. On the other hand, the tarot reader has a black spot of their own: they do not know the individual history of the querent. Interpreting the cards in a manner relevant to the querent involves an element of uncertainty and guesswork. The tarot reader must guess what will resonate with the querent to provide a meaningful, impactful, and useful reading. This holds true for cases where the tarot reader is a friend of the querent or the querent themselves. As Huson [1] comments, tarot predictions only picture a possible future out of many based on the querent’s potential actions, decisions, and impressions. So interpreting the cards always entails a choice-making process.

According to the semiotic analysis described by Thibault, it is in this lack of information for both parties that the ludic quality of tarot readings can be found. Since the querent does not know the tarot meaning – Thibault calls this the *signified* per Saussurean linguistics – and the tarot reader does not know the personal *referent* of the querent – again a Saussurean term – each tarot reading becomes a game of chance, or *alea* in Caillois’s [18] parlance. Both the querent and the reader gamble that the reading will resonate with the querent: “Winning this game is the only way to keep the fortune telling from being a failure, thus A has to be able to interpret the reactions of B and, if possible, gather some information on him before the session. Winning the game, on the other hand, will also win B’s confidence” [17, pp. 3 – 4]. This element of chance comes before and independently of whether the reading will actually be proven to be true or not. Tarot readings are a game of chance irrespective of their outcome, in and of themselves.

The reader has to match their interpretation of each card and all cards to the possible meaning out of all possible meanings that will correspond to the querent’s personal situation. This process, as a core game loop, is repeated throughout the reading. A convincing interpretation can very well be shuttered if followed by others that do not resonate. As with any form of communication, games included, tarot readings include feedback for both ends. The

querent receives feedback for how their past, present, and future actions will impact their fate, and the reader receives feedback as to whether they have been correctly reading the cards to the querent. Throughout the reading, the reader is attuned to verbal and non-verbal cues from the querent: whether they agree with what the reader is saying or whether they do not feel that the reading corresponds to their situation. Based on the querent’s reactions, the reader would then choose a different possible interpretation or embellish and expand on the current one.

As Thibault himself notices, the above is a limited exploration of how play is incorporated into the readings of tarot cards: “the game-like features of cartomancy are not limited to the struggle between the people involved but run deeper in its mechanics” (p. 7). As argued here, the main mechanic of the tarot of generating meaning out of rigid structures that are beyond the control of the querent is a properly ludic feature. The reader of the tarot, and by extension the querent, tries to form order and coherence out of random combinations of cards by following a coded matrix of possible outcomes: “cartomancy is characterized by rules, a certain amount of creativity and make believe, and even a dose of risk, which are all elements typical of games” (p. 8). Games as simulation systems often impose order in the randomness of our physical world [19]. They offer a more structured, limited, and thus controllable representation of our hectic existence. Tarot bridges the gap between the two. It is a liminal space where simulation actively informs our lived experience. It is not a game per se but uses properties of games to provide meaning, reason, and causality in happenstances and occurrences of life. This gives the reader, and the querent, a semblance of control over fate.

In a typical tarot session, the reader would draw a number of cards and position them in specific patterns on the table, for example in a cross or a line. They would then reveal the cards and perform their reading. The interpretation of the cards is an accumulative process following specific rules. Emily Short [20] calls tarot a procedural system: “The cards may be dealt randomly, but the card names, images, suits, and interpretive booklets create a space in which certain meanings can be expressed and other types of meanings cannot (or can be expressed only in a veiled and oblique way)” Firstly, each card has a variety of meanings that the reader can choose from. For example, the major arcana *The Devil* has the general meaning of someone succumbing to their passions in an unhealthy manner. However, if this card appears in a love reading it can also represent the honeymoon phase of a new couple during which passions run wild. So *The Devil* can be read as a positive experience or as a warning for moderation. These readings are not mutually exclusive and depending on context they can give a variety of semiotic combinations. Given that these are just two meanings of one card out of seventy eight cards, one can only imagine the amount of possible interpretations.

Secondly, each card changes its set of meanings if it appears in reverse. If *The Devil* appears upside down, it can signify letting go of addictions and negative passions, or breaking free from a co-dependent relationship in love readings. At the same time, because *The Devil* card upright might also imply playfulness, its appearing upside down could insinuate a more serious relationship. The various, and often conflicting, interpretations of the cards result in a branching narrative with continuous forking paths that the reader

should choose from every step of the process. Their quest becomes even more labyrinthine, for each card is not read on its own but in relation to the other cards around it. The semiotic associations between the cards are dictated by a preconfigured complex nexus while at the same time their interpretation remains open to the reader's personal understanding and knowledge. For example, if *The Devil* appears in a reading for a financial endeavour the querent is worried about, then this most likely means that their scheme will not come into fruition. If, however, *The World* is revealed next to *The Devil*, then this could mean that this particular scheme will eventually be successful after an initial challenging period.

Readings are also influenced by the cards imagery. Even though most tarot decks follow a similar iconography with four suits of minor arcana and twenty two tarot trumps, each deck usually features its own representation of the cards. Tarot readers pay special attention to the images on the cards to draw additional meaning. Different decks result to different readings and tarot readers may use more than one deck in the same reading for different inquiries or aspects of the same inquiry. Indeed, many tarot decks do not constitute mere reskins but a reimagining of the traditional cards enabling thus additional meanings and interpretations [20].

Evidently, even though tarot is based on a predefined system, each reading is an experience that derives from the process rather than being dictated by it. The elements of choice, emergent narrative, and procedural content generation that characterise the tarot are all ludic mechanics. To consolidate this argument, in the following section I look at YouTube tarot readings. I provide an ethnographic analysis of their content to unveil the systemisation of randomness and the exploitation of structures to generate personal meaning for their audience. Through this analysis, I moreover show that the ludic qualities of tarot are expanded due to the affordances of the platform. I then demonstrate that this expansion enhances tarots' capacity as an act of self-care and argue that it is tarot's ludic mechanics what primarily constitutes its therapeutic value.

### 3 GAMENESS AS SELF-CARE IN TAROT READINGS

Huson [1] calls tarot readings a process of "projection":

This process occurs when someone "projects" the inner, unconscious content of his or her mind onto outside events or objects, such as somebody else's actions, an ambiguous visual picture such as an inkblot provided by a psychologist, or the pattern of tea leaves left in a cup. Meaning is then read into these things by the person who is reacting to them (p. 319).

Yet, tarot cards help their readers and querents unlock meaning that is not only personal. It also responds to "primitive patterns of interpretation that are common to all humanity" (p. 320). This understanding of tarot draws from the concept of Jungian [21] archetypes and the notion of collective consciousness: that our psyche sprouts from the same developmental root since we all experience the same human condition. This psychological solidarity enables the tarot reader to connect with the psyche of the querent but only due to the imagery of the tarots, which is structured as such to allow it: "The symbols form a psychic bridge between the conscious you and the unconscious mind of the person you are

reading for and provides assurance that your interpretation of the cards drawn will be meaningful for both of you" [1, p. 320]. No matter if one believes in tarot's capability to predict future events, the interpretation of the cards and the meaning allocated to them helps to express parts of ourselves and makes us feel validated in our understanding by partaking in a structured and shared cosmology. Tarot is considered a "dynamic process of self-expression," which makes it an appropriate therapeutic tool [22]. The imagery in the tarots and the interpretation of the reader unlock impressions and understandings that the querent already has but needs a special language and trigger to access. In that, the tarot does not predict as much as it reveals in the same way that Plato would argue that to know is to remember [23].

Apart from seeking knowledge in tarot, the querent also enjoys the comfort of the inventive reality created by their personal fantasy while being read the tarot. Tarot readings are prompts to manifest oneself. One can even argue that it does not matter as much if the predictions would come true or not. Paraphrasing Maurice Blanchot [24] when he was talking about the thanatological function of religion, what comes after is not as important as the fact that something will come. Equally, tarot gives the reassurance of a fate that is subject to meaning. One can anticipate it by rightly interpreting random signs in accordance with a systemised structure and their intuition. It is this game-like quality of having a rigid system which allows the emergence of a personal narrative that makes tarot therapeutic. During this small interval that is the tarot reading, the querent becomes the centre of attention, and the system works for their desires. If these desires will come to fruition outside the tarot reading is a secondary concern. While being read the tarot, the querent is being taken care of, and this is what matters first and foremost.

In physical tarot readings, the tarot reader would need to make sure that they gain the trust of the querent. They would need to show that they have sufficient knowledge and intuition to read the cards. Normally, tarot readings start with reconnaissance [17], where the reader tries to discern the querent's past and present concerns. The obvious reason is that this reassures the querent as to the future realisation of their reading: that the reader is a legitimate fortune-teller. While this may be the case, I argue that this initial phase has another, more important function. The querent is reassured that the reader is a good storyteller, that their time will be well-spent and that their need to be ascertained as to their desire's validity will be woven artistically between the spindles of tarot's rigid structure and the imaged make-meaning of the reader. This accentuates the tarot's service as a form of self-care, an element that is more evident in YouTube readings because of their accentuated ludic affordances described below.

There are many YouTube creators posting videos about tarot and divination readings. Five of the most popular channels at the time of writing are in descending order: The Gem Goddess with 790K subscribers, Vanessa Somuayina with 439K subscribers, EsoTarot with 305K subscribers, Kino Tarot with 292K subscribers, and Soul Whispers Tarot with 232K subscribers. All channels have a consistent presence in the platform with video posts ranging from one to multiple times per week. With the exception of Vanessa Somuayina, whose channel initially had beauty and lifestyle content, all channels are dedicated to tarots and other types of fortune-telling.

These YouTube creators approach tarot and divination as a form of self-care, combining it with meditation, exercises in grounding and manifestation, and advice about mental health and energy balance.

In YouTube tarot readings, unlike face-to-face tarot readings, there is no single querent. There is one tarot reader, but the tarot readings are published for the whole community, which in the channels referenced here varies from hundreds of thousands to millions of viewers. One may assume that since these readings are by default general, they would not be as successful for they cannot possibly and accurately predict the future for all members of the audience. The popularity of these channels points to the fact that tarot readings are not about the future after all. On the contrary, their value lies in their ability to provide a personal narrative that emerges from a structured and determined underlying system depending on the querent's choice. This makes the connection between YouTube tarot readings and games more striking.

The element of choice might seem diminished since the content of these channels is pre-recorded and the viewer consumes a ready-made reading for all. Some creators provide personalised readings but not on YouTube. The platform is only used for general readings. Yet on YouTube the querent has more agency than in an individual reading. While in an individual reading the querent poses the question that the tarot reader is meant to answer by using the cards, in YouTube readings the querent can choose the question and the answer. A YouTube querent cannot actually form their own question, but the variety of videos and content creators ensures that there is a post about a similar, if not the exact same, concern that the querent has. Indeed, many tarot creators use YouTube's community page or their other social media to ask their audience through polls or direct questions what type of video they should film next.

Apart from that, most videos entail a series of choices. Usually, a tarot reading will begin by showing three or more piles or decks of tarot cards. The viewer can then choose which pile they are drawn to by using the video's timestamps. For example, in one of the readings by EsoTarot with the title "How They're Currently Feeling About You" [25], there are four different piles. Each pile has a different deck of cards and, most of the time, a different accompanying accessory, e.g. sticker, stone, or crystal. The viewer can then choose the timestamp that corresponds to the pile they want and watch their reading of choice. There is another form of choice to be made. All readings come with a short disclaimer in the beginning. Since these are general readings, the tarot reader prompts the viewer to take what resonates. If the querent feels that the reading does not resonate with them at all, then they are invited by the tarot reader to choose a different pile. If none of the piles works, then the tarot reader reassures the viewer that there are no messages for them in that day's video. They can then choose to watch a different video and perform a different decision-making process from scratch.

#### 4 PLAYFUL YOUTUBE READINGS

This structure of YouTube readings described above allows the viewer to choose more freely the semiotic triggers that elicit emotions and meaning in them. Tarot's function to offer prompts of

personal meaning out of a predefined system becomes more pronounced here. Despite the readings being general, the viewer has free access to the tarot system in a multitude of combinations, unlike personal readings, to generate a personal narrative that corresponds to their situation alone. As shown before, this game-like element of choosing from different possibilities of a predetermined system, evident in cybertexts [26] – Huson, actually, compares tarot cards to *I Ching* [1, p. 85] – is what makes tarot readings an act of self-care: a guaranteed manifestation of one's understanding in accordance with a universally approved system which gives credence to one's interpretations and the reassurance of controllability and anticipatoriness. Tarot exhibits a psychological merit of playfulness by facilitating our imaginative relation and agency within our world; enabling us to realise our make-belief.

There are two other aspects of YouTube readings that increase the querent's agency due to their participatory nature, which, in turn, enhances YouTube tarot's ludic attributes in comparison to standard readings. These are audience co-participation and the responsibility of one's choice. The first one concerns the fact that under each YouTube video, all members of the audience can comment on the content. In most YouTube tarot readings, people share their pile of choice and thoughts and remarks about their reading. This feedback is often personal stating how the reading resonated with them and describing parts of their life. Other times, the comments provide solace and solidarity. When a pile results in a negative outcome, describes a tough situation, or foretells of rough times, the members of the audience who chose that pile express words of sympathy for their fellow pile-choosers, as in wishing them good luck, encouraging them to stay strong, and reassuring them that they will get over the challenge. This communal engagement strengthens tarot's therapeutic quality and attribute of generated making-meaning. Not only does seeing that fellow humans go through similar difficulties provide consolation, it also gives more credence to the act of watching tarot readings. If a reading resonates with more than one person, it does not decrease its effect on the individual. Instead, it provides the comfort of knowing that other people seek the same respite and affirmation to life's ambivalence. If tarot is effective on the basis that it corresponds to a universal human condition, then having evidence that indeed other people have equal needs solidifies its effect all the more.

The other aspect concerning accountability for one's choice is more properly game-like. As explained before, in YouTube tarot readings, the querent chooses the pile that resonates with them. Their reading of choice begins and after a couple of minutes they should be able to tell if this pile speaks to them or not. Different tarot readers perform this initial stage of reconnaissance differently. EsoTarot, for example, usually begins her love readings with animal cards that describe the energies of the people involved, the querent and the person they are interested in. This gives the viewer the opportunity to see if they find themselves in these descriptions, and after they do, they can continue to listen to the answer of the video's main question. Once the viewer is more confident that this pile is indeed for them, an iterative process begins, or a feedback loop. With each part of the reading and new addition to the overall meaning, the viewer needs to reaffirm that their choice has been correct. The original descriptions could have sounded true, but

later the reading might develop in a way that does not concern the querent at all.

If that were a standard tarot reading, the querent would probably think that the reader is not a true fortune-teller and remain passively unconvinced. The reader, who in most cases shares the same space with the querent or at least has access to their reactions and expressions, could then perceive the querent's dissatisfaction and positively adapt their reading so that they regain the querent's trust. In YouTube readings, on the contrary, the viewer has to bear the responsibility of having chosen wrong. Since these readings come with a disclaimer that they are general, the agency has moved from the reader to the querent. They become sole executioners of the feedback loop based on their own hermeneutic cycle: keep listening to the reading and constantly reaffirming their choice that this reading responds to their own personal narrative by making the associations between the general descriptions and their own life's story. If, at any point, the reading stops resonating, they can then discard it and make a new choice.

This is not a choice without consequences. Each reading lasts usually more than an hour so there are actual resources spent in engaging with it. If the viewer chose wrong, it means they sacrificed their time and their mental capacity to make the inferences and associations required. One or two missteps do not immediately signify loss. As per tarot's mystic nature, some associations may not be immediately evident, anyway. If most of the reading is accurate for the querent, they can tolerate a couple of misses for it is a general reading, after all. Like most games, the player can survive a few blows to their health bar or lose a life or two. Yet if the reading keeps going towards a direction that has nothing to do with the querent's circumstances, then they have to accept defeat. It is not unlike an instance of permadeath in which a game-over means a complete loss of one's involvement with the game. It shows that the player did not interpret the game system correctly and must re-inform their in-game actions in accordance with the feedback they received – you died – to reach their desired outcome at the end of the game. Equally, when a tarot querent makes the wrong choice, they have to lose their time spent, and perform a new set of actions to get to the end of the reading.

The end of the reading comes with a satisfaction that is fitly ludic. In normal tarot readings, this satisfaction is twofold. Firstly, the act of being taken care of by manifesting one's personhood in accordance with universal truths described above has reached its culmination in a sort of cathartic function. Secondly, reaching the end of the reading without the querent having lost their faith in the reader assures them as to the reading's effect. They gambled their time and trust – most likely their money, too, since readings do not usually come for free – and they won. The querent leaves the reading more informed as to their psychic world and/or more prepared for their future, depending on whether they believe in fortune-telling and to what extent that is.

In YouTube tarot readings, this satisfaction entails an additional, personal element regarding the viewer's choice. True, the reader is still responsible for gaining the viewer's trust. If the querent is not satisfied, they might choose another YouTube creator which will cost their channel views, publicity, advertisement income, and commercial collaborations. Many creators use their influence to

sell their merchandise, like tarot decks, crystals, stickers, or private readings. Additionally, in the description box of some videos they include links for extended readings, which are on payment. Convincing the viewer of their worth guarantees them financial benefits. Nonetheless, the success of the reading depends on the choice of the querent as well, more actively so than in a standard reading. Did they make the right choice? Did they correctly interpret their intuition in deciding on a pile? This provides the querent with more agency but makes the stakes of the gamble higher, too; having chosen wrong becomes partly their fault since their options are more varied than simply choosing the reader. They can choose the reader, the reading, and the pile. Thus, reaching the end of the reading carries along the satisfaction of having made the right set of choices. This contributes to the viewer's investment in the outcome, not only for the reasons described above that pertain to normal readings, but also for a positively playful cause: having guessed correctly. It is not unlike guessing that the next car to cross the street will be red and the elation one feels when the car is actually red. The fact that these guesses concern the querent's personal life and their psychological well-being makes their involvement all the more substantial.

This is relevant for another possible result of the reading: taking a turn for the worse. There is already the ludic satisfaction of gambling on a random outcome, as discussed before. If now this outcome of the gamble takes on an ethical value of positivity and negativity and is matched to a personal situation, then the satisfaction of success becomes a relief. With every new meaning there is a risk that the reading will reveal something negative. If the querent believes in the fortune-telling ability of the tarot, they would be devastated to hear that something negative awaits them. So with every new spin on the hermeneutic cycle, the querent risks the validity of their decision-making and their peace of mind at the same time. Querents who do not give credence to fortune-telling, yet treat tarot as a system for revealing their own beliefs and deep-rooted preconceptions, are equally affected. In that case, hearing that something will go badly might influence the querent to the point of a self-fulfilling prophecy or force them to deal with hard, and thus avoided, personal truths.

In the above simple example with the car, it is now like telling yourself that if the next car to cross the road is red, then this means that your crush reciprocates your feelings. Imagine the added happiness if the next car is indeed red and the utter dissatisfaction if it is not. Combine that with the reassurance of a universally acknowledged truth that a red car definitely means that your crush likes you and you can begin to comprehend the comfort provided by the tarot. Or the dread that comes along, when the same system dictates that a red corvette means heartbreak instead, and a yellow car jealousy but not if followed by a yellow bus of a darker shade. The combinations can go on forever and in tarot they absolutely do. This effect is enhanced in YouTube tarot readings since the outcome is dependent on the querent's decision making. This exemplifies the ludic attributes of the tarot, and the correlation between the game mechanics of tarot readings and their quality as therapeutic activities of self-care. In the following, last section of this paper, I look specifically at love tarot readings to showcase this further. Through this, I eventually demonstrate how gameness affords the representation of love as a self-consoling manifestation of desire.

## 5 LOVE TAROT

YouTube videos include a variety of tarot readings: messages from your spirit guides, personal predictions, what you need to know about yourself, the secrets of your dreams, and your unfolding path. What is impressive, and pertinent, is that the most popular content revolves around love readings. Out of any ten consecutive videos, almost half of them are concerned with love questions, e.g. what they absolutely love about you, is this connection worth the wait, how are they currently feeling about you, love predictions, everything about your soulmate, etc. Indeed, the top ten most watched videos in all channels are readings about love with the most views belonging to The Gem Goddess with more than 3M views for a video titled “Who is Your Soulmate” that was uploaded two years ago [27].

It can be surmised that tarot readings are especially apt for questions concerning love: how do they feel about me, where is this relationship heading, who is my partner for life, do they miss me, what they thought last time they saw me, why did they ghost me? These readings are not only future predictions; they involve the past and present as well. They target questions that the querent has and to which they cannot find answers elsewhere, as in they cannot directly ask the person they are interested in: they might be shy, not know them well, if at all, their relationship may be at an early stage, or they are not in contact with them anymore, after separation for example. The querent, through the tarot reader, uses the tarot to gain access to the collective unconscious described before and find their answers there.

Indeed, I argue that for this reason the querent might even prefer to address their queries through the tarot than any other means. Tarot holds the value of pertaining to a universal system of meaning and at the same time it allows the querent to manifest their desires in an act of self-comfort. Due to tarot structure and function, the meaning revealed in the cards is more valid than anything a single person can say since it draws from universal truths and cosmic interpretations of the subconscious. At the same time, one’s interpretation depends on their wishes and desires, especially in love readings. The imagined present and future that is mentally manifested when hearing a love reading – they will contact you, they are missing you, they are in a process of transformation because of you – satisfies a need for agency. Even if the real-life outcome is not the one promised, the respite that the tarot offers holds merit in and of itself. Being told by someone that they love you does not hold the same stability and guaranteed satisfaction of archetypical, global structures manifesting the same reassurance. A person can lie or mean it in a different way from what one wants, expects, and understands. When the querent is being read the tarot, they are receiving triggers to manifest their desire according to their imagination. This is more pronounced in YouTube readings because of the choice-making process described before. Indeed, I argue that YouTube love readings make the connection between playfulness and tarot as generator of meaning all the more evident. Based on this, I illustrate how apt games are for the representation of love in its particular understanding as stability of desire.

The connection between tarot and games can be made stronger when seen through the lens of love. Huson [1] tells us how in the sixteenth-century courts of Italy and France, storytellers would use

the fanciful images on the cards as prompts to develop a story; an act that could be performed by a single demiurge or by a group, in which case each player would draw a new card and use it as inspiration or guide to continue on with the story of the previous player(s). The verses were created about the creators themselves, another person, “or most popularly, to praise certain well-known ladies around the court” (p. 91). This, understandably, brings into mind the tradition of troubadours, who some centuries earlier would comprise impromptu songs to exalt ladies of the court [28]. These songs would usually describe quests of indomitable knights to save the woman they unconditionally love.

How the imagery of tarots relates to this love described in medieval songs is made clearer when one notices the common root of both: chivalry. As Huson [1] argues, the appearance of tarot as a storytelling game “seems to have represented the nostalgic fantasies of a fourteenth-century aristocracy about a time and set of ethics that never really existed outside their own minds and maybe in the otherworld of Jungian archetypes” (p. 38). Huson makes another interesting remark when he talks about a noble family from Ferrara whose court might be considered the point of origination of the tarot decks: “The D’Este nobles involved themselves deeply in chivalric tales about Emperor Charlemagne’s paladins, the mystique of which they tried to recapture in elaborate jousting tournaments as well as in the tarot cards they are known to have commissioned” (p. 43-44). Tarots were used as a trigger for an imagined, chivalric mode of being in the same way that jousts, medieval games that is, were used as a means to re-enact the imagined experience of the same noble ethics.

In his book *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* [29], Johan Huizinga shows how jousts expressed the nobility’s need to act out the chivalric romances they have been reading about. Jousts allowed their participants to perform in accordance with the moral code of chivalry, a code of conduct that was more imagined and fictional than real [30; 31], thus better achieved in the constructed experience of the joust. While jousts contained a physical design, it was the pretence of chivalry that discerned them as games from mere sports activities. This enactment found its leitmotif and inspiration in the concept of romantic love; an exalted love of purified sentiment due to struggle and perseverance as described in the romantic tales of the era:

The warlike sports of the Middle Ages [...] overloaded with pomp and decoration full of heroic fancy, they serve to express romantic needs too strong for mere literature to satisfy. The realities of court life or a military career offered too little opportunity for the fine make-belief of heroism and love, which filled the soul. So they had to be acted. The staging of the tournament, therefore, had to be that of romance [29 p. 81].

In a similar fashion, tarot cards facilitate the construction of an imaginary narrative about a romantic mode of being, love included. Tarot cards are distinguished from mere playing cards or cards used in psychological experiments for example, because of the meaning-making they entail which corresponds to an acknowledged system, that of the romantic tradition of chivalrous ethics. The interpretations tarot allows may be personal, but they are structured in

accordance with an underlying rigid system of beliefs, which despite being fantastical remains real. This gives the tarot reader, and querent, the satisfaction and guarantee that there is an ultimate truth that dictates a universal meaning, which the tarot cards help translate if read properly.

The question arises: how can this still be the case almost a thousand years after medieval times and a little less after the emergence of the tarot deck? How can the meaning of the tarot cards and the underlying system of their structure remain unaltered throughout the centuries? Even if the meaning has taken on new interpretations, for example tarot readings are much more inclusive now talking about energies rather than sexes [32], the *raison d'être* is the same. Tarot readings continue to function as archetypal manifestations of our collective mind, as explained in the previous section building on Jungian theory. Jung, like other Freudians, believed that human psyche is shaped by universal stimuli common to all, most notably the separation trauma of our infantile state. As has been argued elsewhere [33], this notion is fallacious. Not only did Lacan show that there is no such thing as separation because identity and memory have always been fragmented [34], but, as other theorists [35; 36, 37] have proven, human psyche is not developed the same for all individuals. The Freudian system might potentially work for the heterosexual cis-male psyche, but does definitely not work for any other person.

That being said, Jungian archetypes find credence and application because they correspond or respond to paradigmatic and hierarchic societal conventions, most notably patriarchy [33]. Since the system of generating power has remained unaltered and untested in almost all cultures, especially the western and dominant ones, the meaning that derives from it continues to be the same in both form and content, representation and function. Understandably, the means to access this meaning is also born from the same, conventional system. It is not that there is an underlying cosmic truth that tarots give access to. It is instead that tarots provide a semiotic bridge between the conventional structures that continue to condition us all and our personal situatedness. Because these structures have not been changed, they keep informing our experience and expectations. Tarots offer a momentary solace and quench a thirst for an imagined ethos that continues to plague the individual with its promise of stability and fantasy of control.

In this universal system of make-believe, love is the centrepiece. This is not only due to the fact that chivalry was an ideal deriving from romantic love [38; 39]. It is also the result of love's position as an ideological power in our global nexus of societal dynamics. In chivalric ethics, love is positioned as saviour to one's existence. It is the sacred power that can make us whole and help us reach utter fulfilment and satisfaction. As described by Lauren Berlant [40; 41], love in this dominant paradigm, expressed also in tarots, has taken on the role of the stabiliser of desire. Within this system humans are conditioned to desire love as this force of absolute bliss and reason of being worthy of all sacrifice and hardship [42]. Tarots, just like romances and jousts, have been designed to correspond to a manifestation of desire within the context of love as an imagined fantasy.

As argued in this paper, tarots can function as a space for manifesting one's desire for love as a stability of fulfilment due to their

ludic properties. Analysing these playful mechanics of tarot readings shows that games afford the experience of love as fantasy because of their mechanics: allowing the player to interact with a predefined structure based on randomness and convention and make meaning through triggers to their imagination and cognition. Gameness, be it in virtual worlds, jousts, or tarot readings, offers more than an imaginary recounting of love. It facilitates it as a personal manifestation of desire.

## 6 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I looked at tarot readings in terms of their ludic attributes. Analysing the content of YouTube tarot channels by means of ethnography and critical analysis, I argued that tarot readings constitute a self-care activity. They allow the querent the comfort of having their imagination triggered as a response to a predetermined system that gives them insight and control over their fate. I then showed how this ability of tarot cards is due to their game mechanics of allowing the querent the choice of the meaning they want to be subjected to from a set of preconfigured possibilities. Lastly, by focusing on love readings, I drew the historical, ethical, and psychoanalytical connections between tarots, love, and games, concluding thus that the game mechanics of tarots allow the manifestation of desire for love as fantasy. This conclusion shows gameness's therapeutic merit, it addresses the popularity of tarot readings in a critical manner, it promotes the argument that games can represent love as fantasy due to their mechanics, and finally it feeds into the discussion of how we traditionally understand, conceptualise, experience, and anticipate love, desire, and play.

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