

Tampa Tarot: An Experiment in Community Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

Tampa Tarot combines web-based interactive storytelling and an Augmented Reality (AR) feature that displays virtual tarot cards on users' smart phones in specific geographical locations throughout the city. The project attempts to answer the following question: In a world of diffuse and fragmented media, where old places and stories are displaced and obscured by layers of disconnected images and a growing, changing population, how do we understand who we are as a community? Emphasizing the intrinsically social and historical character of the tarot, the project employs the narrative structure of *cartomancy* (card reading) as a form of community storytelling.

KEYWORDS

Tarot; Tampa; community; storytelling; narrative; news.

RESUMO

O projeto *Tampa Tarot* combina histórias interativas na Web e um recurso de Realidade Aumentada (RA) que mostra cartões virtuais de tarot nos *smartphones* dos utilizadores em localizações geográficas específicas por toda a cidade. O projeto tenta responder à seguinte pergunta: num mundo de meios de comunicação difusos e fragmentados, onde lugares e histórias antigas são deslocados e obscurecidos por camadas de imagens desconectadas e uma população em crescimento e mudança, como entendemos quem somos enquanto comunidade? Enfatizando o caráter intrinsecamente social e histórico do tarot, o projeto emprega a estrutura narrativa da *cartomancia* (leitura de cartas) como uma forma de contar estórias da comunidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Tarot; Tampa; comunidade; contar estórias; narrativa; notícias.

For years, business and civic leaders in my hometown of Tampa, Florida, have engaged in periodic bouts of hand-wringing over the city's identity. As with local leaders in many cities, their anxieties center on economic development and manifest themselves during discussions of branding and tourism campaigns. As the city prepared to host the Republican National Convention in 2012, local boosters fretted that Tampa was too nondescript: "Florida's metropolitan areas have well-established identities — Orlando for its theme parks and Miami for international flair. But, what is Tampa Bay's identity?" ("Ad2 Event Recap", 2012). While the trifling preoccupations of promotional campaigns may seem unlikely prompts for humanities research, something in that seemingly banal question resonated with greater significance, something that sparked my interest as a media scholar. I re-frame the question this way: In a world of diffuse and fragmented media, where old places and stories are displaced and obscured by layers of disconnected images and a growing, changing population, how do we understand who we are as a community? My response, at the risk of sounding glib, is to tell the city's fortune. To do so, I have developed *Tampa Tarot*.

Tampa Tarot is a community art project that on one level is a fun or interesting way to learn about the city's history and culture, but on another is an experiment in alternative knowledge legitimation grounded in electronic social networking technologies. Starting from the concept of *psychogeography*, a term defined by French cultural theorist Guy Debord (1955) as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviors of individuals," *Tampa Tarot* attempts to evoke a community's collective dream of its own identity and destiny. The project currently resides on testing servers, but once it launches people will be able to encounter *Tampa Tarot* through two interfaces: a website that describes the project and generates tarot card readings and an augmented reality (AR) application that displays virtual cards that I have designed in locations throughout the city. In addition, members of the community will be encouraged to participate in the project by producing their own tarot cards that offer complementary or contrasting community narratives.

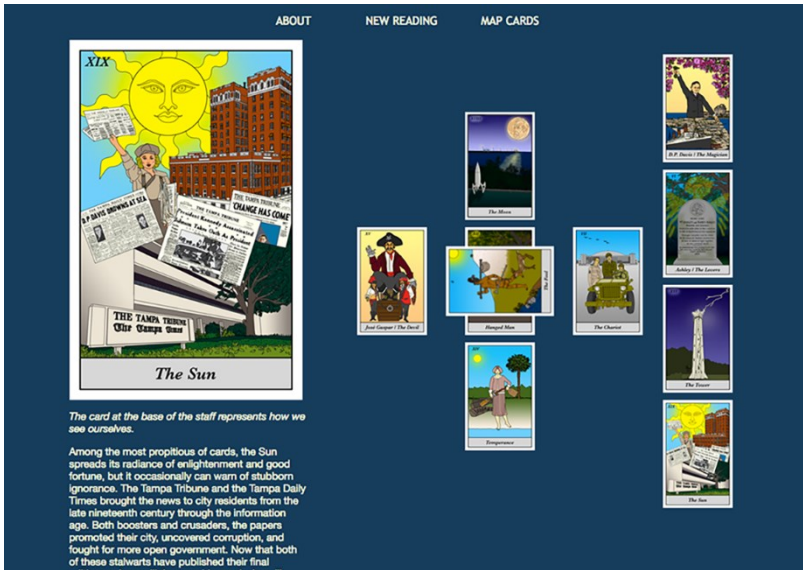


Figure 1.

Tampa Tarot adopts many conventions of popular tarot decks and reading practices to make its interfaces as familiar and intuitive to users as possible. The web-based card-reading interface randomly deals a spread from a deck of seventy-eight cards composed of twenty-two “trump” cards known as the Major Arcana and four suits of fourteen cards each. The trumps take us through a journey of innocence, initiation, temptation, sin, and redemption, just as they do in traditional tarot decks. The figures and events they depict have been modified to reflect Tampa’s people, history, and mythology, but their meanings are intended to coincide in spirit with other decks. The suits of Bolts, Doubloons, Estuary, and Swords in the Tampa Tarot correspond to those of Wands, Coins/Pentacles, Cups, and Swords featured in Waite-Smith and other popular decks.¹ Interactive readings are generated using the Celtic Cross spread, probably the most recognizable card-reading arrangement. The spread was popularized in the early twentieth century by Arthur Edward Waite, who described it as “the most suitable for obtaining an answer to a definite question.” Although many users no doubt will approach the reading as a tool for personal divination, instructions on the website encourage visitors to frame their questions around the entire Tampa community.

My work on this project began as a more playful exploration of how residents perceive their community identity in the age of networked electronic media, but its focus has shifted during the intervening years as the stakes for defining and sanctioning common knowledge have increased. With the rise of social

¹ Known also as the Rider-Waite deck, this set of cards was drawn by Smith based on instructions provided by Waite, a scholar and mystic. In recent years, the Waite-Smith name has grown more prevalent as scholars have sought to more fully recognize Smith’s role in the work.

media over the past decade, the effects of what Eli Pariser has described as “the filter bubble” (2011) have eroded our shared sense of community and, with it, a mutual understanding of the world around us that underpins our ability to make collective decisions. As Zeynep Tufekci notes,

Social media’s business model financed by ads paid out based on number of pageviews makes it not just possible but even financially lucrative to spread misinformation, propaganda, or distorted partisan content that can go viral in algorithmically entrenched echo chambers. (2017: 241)

We witness this phenomenon globally in the rejection of scientific consensus on climate change by the president of the United States, no less. But we see it also in our communities. An example from my community arose in June 2017 when a large number of residents rejected a sand renourishment plan to protect beach communities on Florida’s Gulf Coast from storm surge even though these renourishment programs have been implemented without controversy for decades to the great benefit of our barrier islands (Douglas, 2017). While many interpret the increasing lack of consensus regarding the most basic states of affairs as a problem that must be corrected *within* the paradigm of literacy—such as increasing the use of fact checkers, for example—these perspectives underestimate the extent to which our culture exists in a world no longer governed by the conventions of print culture.

Benedict Anderson (1983) has described the confluence of printing press, capitalism, and the nation state that emerged half a millennium ago to shape our modern world as “print capitalism.” In *Imagined Communities*, his seminal work on nationalism, he posits that, under print capitalism, thousands—even millions—of strangers could consider themselves “Brazilians” or “Germans” or “Japanese” or “Canadians” even to the point of sacrificing themselves, even though these entities really are contrivances, “imagined communities,” that forge common identities based around shared language and cultural practices. In a much-cited example, he writes of the silent newspaper reader who “is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (35). The power of that image to comprehend social cohesion is now belied by its belatedness. We have spent the past two decades in the twilight of print capitalism, and as we watch the more tangible elements of the apparatus give way we must consider what else will ebb with it.

The decline of newspapers and its attendant toll on accountability journalism has been chronicled by scholars for more than a decade.² The effects are manifest not only in the thousands of professional journalists thrown out of work but also in the physical structures of our cities, which were shaped largely by twentieth-century communications technologies. New York’s Rockefeller

2 See Henry, 2007; Jones, 2009; and Madigan, 2007.

Center, whose modern towers have housed some of the most powerful media organizations of the last century—RCA, NBC, and the Associated Press—is an obvious example of the powerful influence of broadcast-model media on our urban landscapes. Although Rockefeller Center still stands, the locus of media power has shifted far west of midtown Manhattan to the sprawling office parks of Silicon Valley. Locally, the effects on our cities are more tangible as landmark buildings that once held the trappings of centralized media authority within a community—the gatekeepers, philanthropists, and sports franchise owners—have been repurposed or erased altogether. In my city, the downtown headquarters for *The Tampa Tribune* for more than forty years met the wrecking ball in early 2017. For several weeks during the spring, video of the demolition filled my social media feeds alongside the latest political outrages and the perpetual calls to end “fake news.” The choice riverfront lot will soon house luxury condominiums. I have marked the location with a virtual tarot card.



Figure 2.

Yet to leave the Tarot there, as a farewell postcard to print capitalism, does not even vaguely satisfy. To respond to “What is Tampa Bay’s identity?” with “I have divined the future and it’s not that old newspaper plant anymore” will not suffice. Such a response does not get at that deeper, more urgent question of what the Tarot can teach us about who we are as a community. To accomplish that, it is necessary to understand the cultural history of tarot cards and how much of that history involved collective rather than individual practices of signification.

Contemporary industrialized culture understands the Tarot within the context of individual beliefs and concerns. Tarot card readings have been compared in popular culture and even in some scholarly work to Hermann Rorschach’s inkblot tests—in other words, as instances of individual psychological projection. For example, Paul Martin Lester’s *Visual Communication: Images with Messages*, groups Tarot cards, the I-Ching, astrology, and ink blots as examples of “projection,” which he describes as a type of mental activity that affects visual perception (Lester, 2011: 63-64). A quiz on the website of the Science Channel’s *Oddities San Francisco* series (2012-13) noted that some psychologists “might see tarot as a way of accessing a subject’s subconscious through that person’s free associations in reaction to images, much like a Rorschach test” (“Tarot Quiz”). Yet portrayals such as these miss the intrinsically social and historical character of the Tarot and its narrative structure. With origins tracing back to at least the late Middle Ages in Europe, the Tarot draws on powerful cultural narratives that often frame the subject of a reading within the bounds of social approbation or condemnation. Those narratives were most prominently depicted in the Triumphs, which were allegorical pageants enacted in cities throughout Europe. Triumph narratives, such as Petrarch’s *Il Trionfi* in the fourteenth century, followed the tradition of *The Psychomachia*, the story of the soul’s journey through life and death written in Spain in the fifth century CE (Thomson, 1930: 109-112). The pageant processions contained a series of carts depicting a portion of the story, with later carts triumphing over or “trumping” the carts preceding them (Huson, 2004: 30-31). The Triumphs were prevalent in Renaissance popular culture, and illustrated versions appeared “on Marriage chests, tapestries, relief carvings, and other decorative arts” (Place, 2010: 17). Robert Place, a well-known Tarot scholar and artist, notes that these illustrations, however intricate they may appear to us today, were cultural commonplaces whose lessons for the observer would have been obvious. He states that, “Instead of coming from the text, these illustrations seem to be informed by the popular symbolism of the day, possibly from the depiction of these characters in actual parades. All of these images were popular at the time of its creation and were as easily recognized as Santa Claus or Uncle Sam is now” (2010: 17). Tarot cards themselves appear to have been quite popular in Renaissance Europe, and, although surviving examples are mostly from hand-painted decks commissioned by wealthy patrons and treated as *objets d’art*, numerous inexpensive decks were produced

from woodcuts and engravings (9). Thus, the meanings of tarot cards were commonly understood, and the stories that emerged from card readings would have been situated within knowledge of everyday actions and values of the community.

If we are, indeed, entering an era in which our understanding of facts is no longer rooted in a sense of sharing the day's accounts with thousands of other newspaper readers or television viewers, then exploring the Tarot may provide insight into what may comprise our new imagined communities. The *Tampa Tarot* project will allow me to test that hypothesis. Can a set of seventy-eight local cards sorted on a website and arrayed virtually around the city approximate a shared cultural experience or a point of common understanding? Can they do any more than amuse us, or perhaps teach us a little local history? Those answers have yet to be divined. In the meantime, I will conclude with one final image.

On a street corner in Central Tampa near where the construction of an interstate decimated a vibrant African-American community forty years ago, stands the Three of Swords. Known to many tarot enthusiasts as the Sorrow card, it is depicted in the Waite-Smith deck as a heart pierced by three swords, and it portends deep sadness and painful truths. In the *Tampa Tarot* version, the three swords plunge into a palmetto thicket outside of Fort Brooke, the U.S. military outpost established during the Seminole Indian Wars and around which the city grew. That old fort stands for many things, but in this case, it stands for insides and outsides, and for enforcing what goes where, in much the same way that the construction of highways does. In 1967, a Tampa police officer shot a young black man named Martin Chambers in the back because he suspected him of robbing a pawn shop in the Central Avenue district. Days of riots followed. Scores of businesses along Central Avenue were burned and looted, and within a few years the interstate came through and finished off what was left. An investigation soon after Chambers' death ruled that the police shooting was justified, a decision that bitterly divided the city and continues to resonate five decades later. Subsequent attempts to hold police accountable for the shooting, including an official request by the City of Tampa as recent as 2008, have been unsuccessful (Guzzo, 2017; Hutcheson, 2007; Morrow, 2017). That is the story of my city's sorrow. A few years ago, the city dedicated a portion of a park to commemorate Central Avenue. Near its entrance resides my own commemoration, the augmented reality Three of Sorrows, speaking its painful truth.



Figure 3.

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