The Waste Land Tarot

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Abstract
The Waste Land Tarot is a Flash game combining symbolic elements from the Tarot deck with mythological and literary elements of T.S. Eliot’s Modernist poem, “The Waste Land.” Mediated by an animated version of Madame Sosostris, the interactor is invited to explore juxtapositions of words and images that highlight archetypal themes.
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Introduction

This is an experimental game design created in Flash to explore the some of the symbolism and themes in T.S. Eliot’s poem, “The Waste Land.” The file can easily be accessed over the internet or downloaded to a computer for cross-platform use, provided the Flash 8 plug-in is installed.

One of the central characters in Eliot’s poem is Madame Sosostris, a clairvoyant of mediocre competence in fortunetelling. She gives the protagonist of the poem a Tarot reading, forecasting "death by water," but otherwise providing little clarity or truth. In my game implementation, a robotic Sosostris re-enacts the Tarot reading for the interactor. The material for Robostris' occult prognostications is derived from the poem itself, flavored with information from Eliot’s literary allusions, mixed with traditional Tarot meanings and seasoned with Jungian perspectives.

By implementing in visual and interactive form some of the symbolic elements in the text, I intend to explore the relationship of Modernism as expressed in the poem to themes of mechanization, fate, Spiritualism, religion, technology and voice. Inspiration also comes from different forms of Surrealist word and image play. This game attempts to create a kind of digital subconscious that takes as a starting point the imagery and allusions in the poem.

In his book, Mechanical Occult: Automatism, Modernism, and the Specter of Politics. Alan Ramon Clinton uses Aleister Crowley’s Thoth tarot as an aleatory framework to psychoanalyze Eliot’s life and work. With some biographical information and analysis of his poems, he creates a portrait of the poet that he then regards through the lens of the Tarot. Clinton performs the role of medium and draws a 15-card spread that offers archetypes to be compared against themes in Eliot’s work. For example, he draws the Queen of Cups and the Universe card in the position of “Psychological Basis.” He then applies intuitive observations inspired by the card to fuel discussion about the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” By employing this spontaneous method of approaching literary work, Clinton sees himself as “using the historical avant-garde as a model for adding the element of chance to criticism itself.”

Throughout his book, Clinton underscores the contrast between the random juxtapositions of fate and the strong degree of control that the Modernist poets maintained over their work, even though it was also experimental. Despite the great length of its final published version, The Waste Land benefited from a very thorough pruning by Pound before it was considered fit for publication. Though it gives the impression of many elements arranged by chance – overheard conversations, snippets of Biblical references, phrases from Shakespeare – the poem is the product of years of work and craftsmanship. Yet there is something to be gained by acceding to Eliot’s mise-en-scene, by appreciating the sensation of being an onlooker, a flaneur who is exposed to a myriad of happenstance human personalities and expressions.

Eliot’s poem is a work of literature that is richly allusive and full of symbolism. The Tarot deck of cards is a cultural artifact that shares these qualities. Both examples have been accused of being too “arcane” to be appreciated by the casual participant. By isolating, examining and recombining the symbols belonging to both these artifacts, a new grammar can be produced that sheds some light on these these subjects and allows them to be used by a wider audience.

In his notes to The Waste Land, Eliot admits that he is no scholar of the Tarot deck, “from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience.” He is able to identify “The Hanged Man, a member of the traditional pack,” which he associates with “the Hanged God of Frazer” as well as “the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part V.” He adds “The Man with Three Staves (an authentic member of the Tarot pack) I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself.” (Cited in North, 22) If Eliot was able to creatively adapt the deck to conform to his poetic needs, suppose that a model of a digital unconscious could be made that allows the ideas of the Tarot and The Waste Land to interpenetrate, creating a kind of crucible where
symbolic meanings can be combined in the form of play with dynamic Tarot cards.

This leads to the consideration of modernism with surrealist methods of automation of poetry. Though the practices of spiritualism at the turn of the century were not of personal interest to the majority of modernist poets, the techniques of automatic writing and divination for amusement were considered worthy methods of artistic production by the surrealists, as well as a topic of study by some early psychologists. In his book, Clinton muses upon the “...Surrealist project of using the dream logic of the unconscious to liberate one’s consciousness” (Clinton, p. 28). Furthermore, he is quite interested in the idea of “bringing the machine into the process of production itself,” and highlighting “Technology's fundamental automatism, its potential to continue producing long after the control exacted by human consciousness has been relinquished.”

Eliot himself writes in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together,” (reprinted in North, p. 117). This attitude suggests an organic process of juxtaposition that takes place on a somewhat unconscious level in the poet. The game that I am creating with this project is an attempt to emulate this process in an automated way. The advantage of playing with these symbols in a digital medium is that they can be combined in novel ways to create new meanings. Depending on the order and arrangement of the cards, complex interpretations can result. The cards are active, with the potential to evolve. By playing the game, the player is essentially learning how to use the system expressively.

**Problem Definition**

The problem is how to convey the essence of *The Waste Land* through a Flash game interface with dynamically generated Tarot cards. The goal is to share knowledge about the poem, highlighting the aspects of visual imagery and archetypes that stand out the most. Of all the poems in the English language, it is probably my favorite of all, and I’ve spent many semesters throughout my education since high school in re-reading and analyzing it. The older I get, the more I can relate to its themes, and the more nuances of meaning are revealed upon rereading.

I would like to imagine this project working on two levels; both as a toy based on the imagery of the poem as source material, and a tool for better communing with the poem. I expect it to be engaging to the user as a kind of toy, at first trying out the automated card readings and then playing with the user-defined compositions. The primary audience that I have in mind is the individual who has already been exposed to the poem, but I hope that it is enjoyable by anyone who has ever shaken a plastic Magic 8 ball. (Recently ranked by VH1 among the top 100 toys of all time).

The goal of my project is to playfully deconstruct Eliot’s poem with a mechanical Mme. Sosostris as the central figure, as she mediates the interpretation of the outstanding characters, settings and other elements of *The Waste Land* through a re-enactment of the fortunetelling sequence. Though it takes one of the prime examples of high modernism as its subject matter, my project itself is post-modern in attitude. There is a certain degree of self-conscious reflection in that the game allows the player to create their own card combinations, thereby undermining the privileged status of the fortuneteller as the sole arbiter of the card’s significance.
Context

Tarot Origins

Though their origins are somewhat disputed, early Italian Tarocchi trumps of the 15th century are generally agreed to be the precursor to the Tarot and the modern deck of playing cards. Some associations with Egyptian origins have been made, but may be historically doubtful. In *From Ritual to Romance*, Jesse Weston asserts that there is a connection between the use of the Tarot and the prediction of the annual Nile flood. (Cited in North, p. 37). In the Renaissance era, the Tarot was played as a game of chance and strategy, somewhat like bridge, played by individuals in groups and teams, taking “tricks.” Later, due to the French occultist Eliphas Levi, the Tarot was embraced as a divinatory tool. Levi was also responsible for instigating the convention of ‘reversals,’ or cards having opposite meanings when positioned upside down in a reading.

The most well known Tarot pack at the time of Eliot’s composition of *The Waste Land* would have been the Rider-Waite deck, commissioned for the Order of the Golden Dawn and published in 1910. Its name derives from Arthur Edward Waite, who originated the idea of the deck, and William Rider, the publisher. Pamela Colman Smith was the illustrator of the deck, though her name wasn’t acknowledged in its title. (From usgamesinc.com website).

The deck contains 78 cards, of which 22 form the Major Arcana, featuring such archetypes as the Hanged Man, the Wheel of Fortune and the Empress. The remainder are considered the Minor Arcana, which are divided into 4 suits: Wands, Cups, Swords, and Pentacles. Each of the suits loosely correspond with the playing card deck as we know it, from ace to king, though a Page replaces the Jack and a Knight is added.

In *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Tarot and Fortune-telling*, (Tognetti, p. 87-94) the authors provide some useful correlations between the Tarot and Jung’s archetypes. The cards in their numeric order are listed below:

- Fool, 0 - Divine Child
- Magician, 1 - Trickster
- High Priestess, 2 - Wise Woman
- Empress, 3 - Anima
- Emperor, 4 - Animus
- Hierophant, 5 - Persona
- Lovers, 6 - Romeo/Juliet, Tristan/Isolde, etc.
- Chariot, 7 - Struggle between light & shadow
- Strength, 8 - Hero or Heroine
- Hermit, 9 - Wise Old Man
- Wheel of Fortune, 10 - Destiny
- Justice, 11 - Lessons and Rewards
- Hanged Man, 12 - Release from material/mundane
- Death, 13 - Transition
- Temperance, 14 - Moderation, Tolerance
- Devil, 15 - Obsessions, doubts, shallow thinking
- Tower, 16 - Sudden change
- Star, 17 - Hope and inspiration
- Moon, 18 - Imagination, illusion
- Sun, 19 - Revitalizing light
- Judgment, 20 - Resurrection
- World, 21 - Wholeness, understanding of one’s place, Achievement
Fig. 1 and 2. Some examples of an early French fortune-telling game from the beginning of the 19th century. (Printed in D’Allemagne, p. 19)

Tarot and the Unconscious

Joan Bunning, on her website for learning the Tarot, describes the unconscious as a “deep level of memory and awareness that resides within each of us, but outside our everyday experience” and asserts its relevance to the picture cards of the deck. She writes that, “Even though we ignore the action of the unconscious most of the time, it profoundly affects everything we do.” She compares the views of Freud and Jung on the subject, citing that “In his writings, Sigmund Freud stressed the irrational, primitive aspect of the unconscious. He thought that it was the home of our most unacceptable desires and urges,” while “Jung emphasized the positive, creative aspect of the unconscious. He tried to show that it has a collective component that touches universal qualities.” On the same page she suggests that techniques of psychotherapy, dream interpretation and Tarot are useful techniques to “explore the landscape” of the unconscious. Bunning adds that “it is human nature to project unconscious material onto objects in the environment. We always see reality through a lens made up of our own inner state. Therapists have long noted this tendency and have created tools to assist in the process. The famous Rorschach inkblot test is based on such projection.” (Bunning, [www.learntarot.com/less1.htm](http://www.learntarot.com/less1.htm)). The significance of this statement is that images have an adaptability that allows for more open interpretation than words alone. The unconscious can make itself apparent through observation of a person’s reactions to a specific piece of art. This ties in with Freud’s dream analysis techniques as well as Jung’s views on the collective unconscious and the origins of archetypal thinking.

Tarot Inspiration in Art and Literature.

Published by U.S. Games in 1989, this deck makes use of the Rider-Waite arrangement of cards, while imitating the illustration style of John Tenniel. According to an online review of the deck by Tom LeBlanc, here the standard suits have been converted from Swords, Staves, Cups and Pentacles to Flamingos, Peppermills, Hats, and Oysters. This is one example of how a work of literature can be incorporated into the versatile Tarot paradigm, though it was probably never an intention of the original author.
In his novel, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, Italo Calvino creatively incorporated the idea of storytelling using the Tarot as narrative fragment blocks into the design of his work. He described the Tarot as “a machine for telling stories.”
Created by writer Cliff Johnson, “The Fool’s Errand” was a puzzle game made in HyperCard for the Macintosh system in 1987. It featured characters from the Tarot deck who alternately menaced and challenged the protagonist as he made his way through a world of lovely silhouette artwork. The website claims that the game was “the first computer metapuzzle, a rare blend of storytelling, playful hands-on visual puzzles, and cryptic treasure map.”
Existing Tarot Software Examples

As can be seen from the examples below, there are many creative online Tarot implementations, both in shareware and commercial forms.

Fig. 6 and 7. Tarot.com reading and user interface. Note the “man with three staves” card.
Tarot.com is a commercial service that carries advertising and provides divinatory readings of many varieties with paid membership. The reading appears to be implemented using a combination of Flash and PHP.

With Thomas Scoville’s satirical online Tarot game, the user is dealt a three-card spread with brief interpretations and images directly related to the corporate world. Ideal for fans of the movie, “Office Space.” In this cgi application, the user first types in a query related to work life, which is later echoed back on the resulting page, along with an “aggregate reading” which appears to be a non-sequitur.

The well-designed Orphalese Tarot shareware program allows users to choose among various decks at will, create custom spreads and add personal notes and interpretations.
Objective Tarot is a downloadable Windows implementation of the traditional French card game similar to Bridge, using a Tarot deck that resembles standard playing cards. This game has no divinatory aspects, but plays much like a software version of Hearts or Crazy 8s, for example.

**Why Eliot's Poem Lends Itself to this Exploration**

Because of the difficulty in finding a single dominating voice that expresses the essence of the poem, it is an interesting experiment to disassemble its components and rearrange them, not unlike the process that Eliot himself went through during the development of the piece.

I. A. Richards writes in his essay, “The Poetry of T.S. Eliot” that the bewilderment of readers with *The Waste Land* lies in the “unobtrusiveness, in some cases the absence, of any coherent intellectual thread upon which the items of the poem are strung.” (Reprinted in North, 170). He makes a strong point about Eliot's use of allusion, which also stymies readers. In Richards’ view, Eliot’s references to other works of literature are not self-serving, but are done “for the sake of the emotional aura which they bring and the attitudes which they incite. Allusion in Mr. Eliot’s hands is a technical device for compression. 'The Waste Land' is the equivalent in content to an epic. Without this device twelve books would have been needed.” (Reprinted in North, 171) What I found interesting about this quote was the kind of parallel it made in my mind to programming – by throwing in bits of Shakespeare and Marvell, Eliot is doing something roughly equivalent to a coder writing “include studio.h.” Provided the reader is equipped with the relevant libraries, a magical shorthand can potentially take place.

Eliot's poem has been criticized as obfuscated and lacking in coherence, which can be blamed for the most part on the pervasive allusions. To look at this in a positive light, the poem's structure is flexible – pieces could be rearranged in many sections without apparent damage to the meaning, as can be seen in the annotated version of the poem with notes by Ezra Pound. This is why expression in the form of symbolic cards seems very appropriate to me. It is not so much the order of events that makes the structure apparent, but the groups that appear together and the
many layers of meaning within the characters and symbols, which makes the poem fascinating to me. Eliot uses these ambiguities to his advantage. The art is in permitting the reader's mind to be a cooking pot for the various pieces. The meaning in the poem is not handed to you; you are not led purposefully along a clear path. The reader must wander through this landscape unassisted, which may bear a resemblance to being lost. These traits of the poem make it an ideal point of departure for this kind of interactive exploration.

F.R. Leavis writes in his 1932 essay “The Significance of the Modern Waste Land” that in comparison to the mythological Waste Land described in Weston's book, the meaning of Eliot’s modern version “may be read in what appears as the rich disorganization of the poem. The seeming disjointedness is intimately related to the erudition that has annoyed so many readers and to the wealth of literary borrowings and allusions.” According to Leavis, this is an intentional reflection by the poet on the state of modern civilization. “The traditions and cultures have mingled, and the historical imagination makes the past contemporary; no one tradition can digest so great a variety of materials, and the result is a breakdown of forms and the irrevocable loss of that sense of absoluteness which seems necessary to a robust culture.” (Reprinted in North, p. 173-4)

It is interesting that Leavis also uses the same vocabulary that Freud does in his discussion of the dream work. “By means of such references and quotations Mr. Eliot attains a compression, otherwise unattainable, that is essential to his aim; a compression approaching simultaneity – the co-presence in the mind of a number of different orientations, fundamental attitudes, orders of experience.” (Reprinted in North, p. 181)

To a very great degree, the underlying darkness of the poem is unclear until one has gone on the scavenger hunt of researching the many references that Eliot makes use of. There’s a lot of murder, rape and betrayal happening under the surface, which Eliot merely alludes to, always suggesting but never making explicit. In a way, the author’s voice is quite hidden in the work. He lets the characters do the talking, allowing them to make the incriminating statements. Some critics have called this a “ventriloquist” act. “The poet, like Sloppy reading to Betty Higden in Our Mutual Friend, is behind all the voices of men and women we are to be asked to listen to.”(See Helen Gardner's essay reprinted in North, p. 79).

Eliot's reliance on allusion to inform his poem with layers of meaning. The depth of the reader's acquaintance with literary and historical works helps in appreciation of the poem, though the side effect may be the misleading of the reader and diffusion of the poet's intended message. Each reference has links, connotations and associations, which can lead away from the poet's clarity.

**Eliot's Position on Mythology and the Role of the Poet**

Eliot had a very restrained character, preferring to keep his inner psychological life to himself. Though it would not be difficult to argue that his own emotional problems were sublimated into the expression of his work, his overt goal in writing was to achieve an alchemical transformation of the personal into the universal. His friend Ezra Pound was instrumental in helping him on that level, especially with his involvement in the editing of The Waste Land manuscript. As a founding father of New Criticism, where a work of literature is considered without regard to biographical information about a writer, but instead focuses on the written piece as a self-sufficient entity, Eliot wrote at length about the role of a poet in the composition of work, as well as in society.

Eliot writes in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality...It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I, therefore invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a
chamber containing oxygen and sulfur dioxide.” Here he’s making the analogy that the poet is like a catalyst. In the case of the platinum, it makes sulfurous acid. Eliot asserts that “The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum.” (Reprinted in North, p. 117)

In his essay, “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot speaks further on this point: “When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.” (Reprinted in North, p. 125).

Discussion of Freud, Jung, Campbell and Archetypes

Freudian dreamwork involves the concepts of condensation, displacement, representability, and intelligibility, which are described in his 1947 book, On Dreams. In the early chapters of the book, Freud discusses the way that dreams can condense aspects of one person into another:

I may build up a figure by giving it the features of two people; or I may give it the form of one person but think of it in the dream as having the name of another person; or I may have a visual picture of one person, but put it in a situation which is appropriate to another. In all these cases the combination of different persons into a single representative in the content of the dream has a meaning; it is intended to indicate an “and” or “just as,” or to compare the original persons with each other in some particular respect, which may even be specified in the dream itself. (Freud, p. 30)

This common element is discovered by analysis, and not always obvious to the dreamer. Freud is saying that this is a method employed by the unconscious as a kind of shorthand. “Dream condensation” thus becomes a language of the mind, using and substituting symbols in a sometimes illogical way.

Freud writes that “Dream symbolism extends far beyond dreams: it is not peculiar to dreams but exercises a similar dominating influence on representation in fairy tales, myth and legends, in jokes and folklore. It enables us to trace the intimate connections between dreams and these latter productions. We must not suppose that dream symbolism is a creation of the dream work; it is in all probability a characteristic of the unconscious thinking which provides the dream work with the material for condensation, displacement and dramatization.” (Freud, p. 74). To me, this sounds quite similar to Jung’s views on the collective unconscious.

Jung himself observes in Man and His Symbols that “elements often occur in a dream that are not individual and that cannot be derived from the dreamer’s personal experience. These elements, as I have previously mentioned, are what Freud called “archaic remnants” – mental forms whose presence cannot be explained by anything in the individual’s own life and which seem to be aboriginal, innate, and inherited shapes of the human mind.” (Jung, p. 67)

Jung emphasizes that archetypes are not conscious inventions, but resemble an “instinctive trend” which is manifested “in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic images. These manifestations are what I call the archetypes. They are without known origin; and they reproduce themselves in any time or in any part of the world – even where transmission by direct descent or “cross fertilization” through migration must be ruled out.” (Jung, p.69)

In the poem the themes of disillusionment, guilt, and lack of are projected through the
consciousness of various characters, bringing about a kind of universalism of the feeling. These speakers are Eliot’s medium, through which his voice is channeled. This personal malaise is breathed and expressed through these fictive beings, semi-cognizant of their nonliving status. So we play with the idea of mediumship and media.

In Creative Mythology, Joseph Campbell describes the ideal that writers and artists should strive for in the use of archetypal themes:

The art required is to make sounds, words and forms, whether of base or noble provenance, open out in back, as it were, to eternity, and this requires of the artist that he should himself, in his individual experience, have touched anew that still point in this turning world of which the immemorial mythic forms are the symbols and guarantee. In fact, if one may judge from the record, the shared secret of all the really great creative artists of the West has been that of letting themselves be wakened by – and then reciprocally reawakening – the inexhaustibly suggestive mythological symbols of our richly compound European heritage of intermixed traditions. (Campbell, p. 94)

This overlaps somewhat with the philosophy held among a few of the Surrealists. “To some extent the Surrealist project can be seen as a search for, and intervention in, the new myths underlying contemporary history, the unconscious current beneath everyday events...Part of Breton’s rejection of the position of the ‘artist’ was his belief that personal creativity produced only a personal mythology, the task and importance of collective activities being the creation of collective myths.” (Gooding, p. 161)

Jung would be very much in agreement with this: “But while personal complexes never produce more than a personal bias, archetypes create myths, religions, and philosophies that influence and characterize whole nations and epochs of history.” (Jung, p. 79)

In “The Waste Land: An Analysis” Cleanth Brooks, Jr. writes that “The thesis that suffering is action, and that out of suffering comes poetry is a favorite one of Eliot’s. For example, Shakespeare, too, was occupied with the struggle – which alone constitutes life for a poet – to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal.” (Reprinted in North, p. 193-4)

Maud Ellmann writes in “A Sphinx without a Secret” that “In ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ Eliot celebrates the voices of the dead, but he comes to dread their verbal ambush in The Waste Land. In the essay, he claimed that ‘not only the best, but the most individual poetry’ is that which is most haunted by its own precursors. Only thieves can truly be original. For any new creation gains its meaning in relation to the poems of the past, and writing is a voyage to the underworld, to commune with the phantasmal voices of the dead.” (North, p. 267)

The point that I’m trying to make with all the quotations enumerated above, is that Eliot believed strongly in the transmutation of personal pain into a more universal form that made it available to a wider audience, something that all people would be able to relate to. Jung, Campbell, and the Surrealists would appear to have similar views on the role of the artist in relation to society.

**Tensions Between Religion and Science Expressed in Modernism**

Mechanization, automation. Machines doing the work that had been until recently the purview of humans only. Mass production and the growth of advertising, which was also an especial topic of derision among the surrealists and dadaists.
It would seem on the surface after reading *The Waste Land* that Eliot longs for old-time religion. Has mundane thinking rationalized God out of existence, or are we little more than beasts subject to passions as Conrad depicts in *Heart of Darkness* – Eliot’s first choice as a source for the epigraph to commence *The Waste Land*, but eventually rejected by Pound. Eliot’s poem is historically presented as a declaration of modernity in literature. Religion is central – we have the thunder of religious figures but no rain for the garden. The corpse has not begun to sprout. Belief in old deities and rituals is ineffectual, but technology hardly gives us a satisfactory replacement. Faith has no place to rest, so we are subject to hallucination (the third figure) and allow ourselves to be deceived by mediums and fortunetellers with pretensions of prophecy. What comfort is there for the lack of depth and meaning in everyday modern life? When Eliot wrote the poem, he was in his early thirties, experiencing much personal turmoil in his life, as well as physical exhaustion and the distractions of his wife Vivien’s unresolved medical ailments. In a materialist worldview, humans are no more than biological robots. A soul cannot be measured, quantified. There is no scientific basis on which the premise of life after death can be founded. In behaviorist psychology, human thought and emotions are mechanical functions, not Deity-endowed privileges that separate us from animals. The rise in scientific thought, industrialization and technology is concurrent with the time period in which *The Waste Land* was written. Of even more impact was the devastation of the First World War and its aftermath, particularly in Europe.

Fatalistic belief, we are living in a mechanistic universe, without souls. We are merely automatons, subject to the demands and whims of our physical selves, spirituality merely a construct to frame our psychological idiosyncrasies. Or our emotional states are not self-generating but dictated by the stars or the cards. Art is reduced to a happenstance amalgamation of elements. Here, we have dream symbols. There is no unity; there is no divine plan. We are empty robots responding to stimuli, moving alone or in crowds, without connection. Our delusions, which have previously given hope, are revealed to be merely the work of chance, upon which we have erroneously deposited our hopes and dreams, invested our misplaced emotions. There can be no true intimacy.

In his book, *The Demon-Haunted World*, which is an essay on the importance persevering with scientific rigor over superstition in examining the natural world, Carl Sagan discusses the work of anthropologists studying cultures and ethnicities with varying religious beliefs:

> In every such society there is a cherished world of myth and metaphor which co-exists with the workaday world. Efforts to reconcile the two are made, and any rough edges at the joints tend to be off-limits and ignored. We compartmentalize. Some scientists do this too, effortlessly stepping between the skeptical world of science and the credulous world of religious belief without skipping a beat. Of course, the greater the mismatch between these two worlds, the more difficult it is to be comfortable, with untroubled conscience, with both. (Sagan, p. 297)

This seems to describe the modern situation in a nutshell. It is difficult for the concept of evolution to co-exist with beliefs about the grand design of a spiritual being who is always looking out for the well-being of humankind.

Despite everything, a human mind is necessary to tie all the elements together. In life, poetry and dreams, random bits combine that we as individuals interpret according to our individual experiences, much in accordance with Eliot’s alchemist view of poets, or as in Freud’s theories of dream interpretation, or Jung’s descriptions of the collective unconscious.
Design Implementation

Description of Project

The Waste Land Tarot is a casual Flash game that potentially amuses interactors for dozens of minutes at a time. It is easily implemented online, with fairly low bandwidth, or else downloadable as a self-contained Flash player application. In the program, the role of narrative is subverted to the fluid rearrangement of fragments, so many story situations are suggested, but not explicitly defined. Chance and haptic juxtapositions are emphasized, generating sometimes poetic morsels in a stream of consciousness way. It’s a very limited art and language machine.

Key Features

Three different modes of interaction

1. Creation and interpretation of individual cards, one at a time
2. Creation of unique three-card spreads with interpretation
3. Player mediated amalgamation of card elements, to explore poetic and psychoanalytic affordances of manipulation of associated text

I envision the cards as windows into the Waste Land world, something like the setting of a stage. Ideally, I’d like the cards to resemble the way photos are portrayed in the Harry Potter books and movies – active, moving, almost conscious, but really ghosts repeating their lines, caught within the constraints of their emotional space.

What the Project Does in General Terms

Specific items mentioned in the poem were selected for illustration, and separated into the following categories:

- Characters
- Settings
- Animals
- Furniture
- Props

These image assets are called upon by a pseudo-random number generator and displayed along with the following:

- A Tarot card title
- A Tarot card color background, corresponding to a time of day
- A randomly-selected line from the poem itself, serving as a thematic gestalt (epigraph) for the reading
- Interpretive text, written by myself, which accompanies each of the illustrated elements. The text establishes the name of the illustrated element, hints at some context of its place in the poem, and extrapolates a divinatory meaning loosely based on Jungian archetype and traditional Tarot associations.

In the two random-card shuffle modes of the program, (the single card and 3-card spread options) the original art, animations and text passages that I have created are displayed by means of Actionscript generation of pseudo-random numbers which correspond to the image assets. In the Make-your-own mode of the program, the user can choose from menus listing all the available categories, which bring to the screen the corresponding images, which are then draggable within the workspace. Once the elements have been selected, the user presses a button to go to the next page, where the invented card is displayed along with informative text.
How the Game Progresses

The title screen sets up initial setting of a deserted beach, (where perhaps Prufrockian mermaids sing each to each?), and then the boardwalk scene with the coin-op fortunetelling machine.

Fig. 10. The title screen establishes the beach setting with the boardwalk.

Fig. 11. The boardwalk scene establishes the presence of the coin-operated machine.
The scene with the close-up of Mme. Robostris begins the interactive portion of the game. The player can choose between 3 different readings: 1 card, 3 card, or “Make Card” mode with draggable movie clips to construct a card of their own composition.

In the 1 Card Spread, a single card appears with full interpretation of card’s elements. It’s easy to click a button to shuffle the cards and see a new one.

In the 3 Card Spread, the user can choose from a row of shuffled facedown cards, which are then turned face-up and arranged in the order of past, present and future. Each is displayed with corresponding fortune descriptions. By clicking on the card, its particular text block is made to appear in the interpretation area.

The “Make Card” Mode is like the single card spread, but starts with a workspace where selected card elements can be dragged and combined by the player. When finished, the created card is displayed with its own interpretation.

At the end of each of the spread interactions, there is the option to return to the main choice screen or to end the session. A souvenir card printout screen (optional) may be eventually implemented as well.
Fig. 13. The single-card spread elaborates on each of the elements shown on the card to create a divination for the player. Each new card is drawn from the "top" of the deck.

Fig. 14. The screen for the three-card spread. The user can select three cards from the spread arranged facedown in the upper portion of the screen.
Fig. 15. This mode allows the player to create their own combination of elements, which are then composed in a card with interpretation on the result page.
Conceptual Goals

In The Waste Land Tarot, my goal is to emphasize the concept of a dynamic card instead of the static composition that is found in the traditional physical card deck. To simplify my work for this prototype, I also limited the field to the 22 major arcana cards, instead of the full traditional 78-card deck. A static physical card with a set composition, as the physical Tarot card deck is traditionally conceived, reflects an author-centric narrative view, a conveyance of a particular message. In comparison, a dynamic, ever-changing set of digital cards allows player exploration, with juxtapositions of symbols and themes, allowing some agency.

By creating a set of dynamic cards, the intent is to mimic Eliot’s technique of using a variety of disparate voices. The poem has been described as non-cohesive because of the frequent changing of perspective. As Eliot points out in his notes to the poem, this can be exemplified in the character of Tiresias, who has experienced life from both a male and a female viewpoint. Whether there is a single protagonist in the poem is debatable. The author’s meaning is conveyed diffusely, with some ambiguity.

Leavis has some relevant observations on the use of the Tarot pack as well. Noting that it suggests “destiny, chance and the eternal mysteries, it at once intimates the scope of the poem, the mode of its contemplation of life. It informs us as to the nature of the characters: we know that they are such as could not have relations with one another in any narrative scheme, and could not be brought together on any stage, no matter what liberties were taken with the Unities.” (Reprinted in North, p. 175-6)

The separateness of the characters reflects a disillusionment that does not stabilize us in the direction of accepting and working with reality but instead leaves us alone with our loss. There is no redemption, no footing to be found to continue or evolve. This is a dead end place, populated by ghosts and memories. Being buried alive in anguish and isolation. The symbols of the poem are all we have to work with. We can recombine, analyze and decipher the entails of this dead thing in order to create our little prophecies for the future, just as oracles of ages past have done. However, it brings us no nearer to intimacy with others or with any god. Individuals suffer alone, trapped firmly in their own delusions. The delusion does not bring happiness, it only tantalizes with the hope that some beautiful lost state of being can be regained. Our idealized world comes to nothing. We are kept separated by the unrealized dreams.

Themes in The Waste Land that I find most compelling include the following which are related to the concept of modernism:
- Lack of true intimacy between people
- Rootlessness, no unifying divine mandate
- Psychic divorce of emotion from reason
- Romantic and religious disappointment
- Mechanization, industrialization, urban life
- Fragmentation

Fortunetelling, the medium and the message
Cumaean sibyl epigraph
Madame Sostra
Tiresias
Biblical prophets

Voice and muteness, ventriloquism
Original title “He do the Police in Different Voices”
Eliot as ventriloquist
Philomela and lack of articulation
Evaluation

Explanation of visual and stylistic choices

The characters on the cards are without facial features. This was a conscious choice reflecting the view of several critics who describe the characters in the poem as faceless and anonymous. Also, to abstract out details in the faces universalizes the image and encourages the viewer to use their imagination to perform the necessary closure, much as Scott McCloud describes in *Understanding Comics*. This stylistic convention also acts as a reminder that the characters are like ventriloquist dummies, that their voices are not their own. Consequently, my characters in the game bear a visual resemblance to the spindle-headed figures in DeChirico’s art, an early surrealist who painted stark and dreamlike cityscapes.

For example, Robert Langbaum writes in “The Walking Dead” that “The characters in *The Waste Land*, however, are nameless, faceless, isolated, and have no clear idea of themselves. All they have is a sense of loss and a neural itch, a restless, inchoate desire to recover what has been lost. But in the very minimum of restless aliveness, they repeat the pattern of the Quest. And it is the archetypal Quest pattern, exemplified in the Grail legend, that gives whatever form there is to the protagonist’s movement through the poem.” (Reprinted in North, p. 231)

*Fig. 16. Giorgio DeChirico’s 1916 painting “The Disquieting Muses”*
Outcomes - Achievements and Further Avenues to Explore

I would like to be able to make the elements more contextual when relating to each other. Less use of random numbers and more juxtaposition based on relevant kinds of alignments. Using a dynamic of weighted randomization, showing effects of choices that contribute, add weight to likelihood of particular events. For example, maybe I could allow the interactor to type a specific question to ask Robostris, and that phrase would then be used as a “seed” in some way for generation of numbers.

Freud writes in his book *On Dreams*, “Wherever the possibility arises, this portion of the dream thoughts exercises a determining influence upon the form taken by the content of the dream; it constitutes, as it were, a nucleus of crystallization, attracting the material of the dream thoughts to itself and thus affecting their distribution.” (Freud, p. 40). Now, it would be cool to somehow proceduralize this idea, to somehow make Flash “crystallize” various visual elements according to an underlying structure. An earlier thought that I’d had in the development of this application was a kind of procedural implementation of tea leaf reading. If I could figure out the physics of how the leaf bits are attracted toward each other just enough to amalgamate into vague and interesting shapes, that would also be a fun adventure in surrealist art.

It would be interesting to have a place in the game where users could add their own content, adapting the cards to their own personal symbols, or customizing the text with information input by the player.

I recently read *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and was musing about the idea of androids writing poetry. Or a weird future where the *Waste Land* poem is posited as a “Voigt-Kampff scale” or Turing test using poetry as a means to differentiate between machines and humans. There are many interesting *Waste Land* parallels in Philip K. Dick’s 1968 novel, including the death/resurrection cult of Mercerism, the ruined state of the city the characters live in, inability to communicate on intimate interpersonal level, lack of empathy or compassion, dust overcoming everything, and profound religious disappointment symbolized with the clockwork toad at the end of the novel. It could be fruitful to further examine and compare the two works of literature in light of mechanization/automation and its influence on society.

In real life, Tarot readers are often put into the role of psychotherapist when doing a reading for a client. The querent may mention a recent break-up with a boyfriend, which a skilled reader might incorporate into her interpretation of the cards — “Ah, yes, I see it here, the Lovers card reversed in the recent past position. How do you feel about the breakup? Ah, here is the Moon card, which shows that you were experiencing mistrust and betrayal at the root of the problem.” It would be interesting if Mme. Robostris could run a kind of psychotherapist script and play a similar role. In our textbook, *The New Media Reader*, (p. 369) there is a discussion of Weizenbaum’s horror when his psychoanalytic program DOCTOR running the Eliza script was so readily embraced by users as a replacement for a human therapist. There is certainly a good deal of irony in the idea that people were forming emotional bonds with a machine that was completely without empathy. Despite the “delusional thinking” and mistaken rapport that users fall into so easily, there could be some merit to using the tool as a therapeutic journal exercise patterned as a dialogue. The machine running the program is not an entity that passes moral judgment on the interactor, but instead encourages the user to express thoughts and feelings that might otherwise be withheld in human company. Thus, with the machine, the user can address and release problems in a truly neutral space. There might be some validity to enlarging Robostris’ role to include an Eliza-like chat component that relates the cards to aspects of the querent’s current emotional concerns, much like a human reader would do. This might be a controversial use of the program, however.

Another possibility that I had thought of for a more game-like experience in my project would be that perhaps at the beginning of the game session, a poetic phrase is generated, which the player
must strive to reproduce by arranging symbols according to the meanings that have been displayed. Much like the game Mastermind, in which the player must reconstruct a sequence of colors and receives feedback about the number of correct items in each guess.

**Design Problems**

With this game concept, the idea of interpretation and mediation is foregrounded by the centrality of Mme. Robostris and her potentially questionable work of foretelling the future. In practice, the combination of the card’s identity and position is what gives meaning to reading in the context of the Flash game.

Janet Murray explains how computer games can be described as procedural, participatory, encyclopedic and spatial in her book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, and these ideas are expressed as well in her essay, “From Game-Story to Cyberdrama” in the book, *First Person*. It is also useful to consider the overlapping concepts of Contest, Game, Story and Puzzle which she clarifies in a very useful diagram, approximated below:

![Fig. 17. The overlapping of Story, Game, Puzzle and Contest, as described by Janet Murray in the book, First Person. I recreated in Photoshop the diagram from Figure 1, Sidebar 5 of page 9 of the book in order to show in color how the zones interrelate.](image)

When she describes the overlap between storytelling and gaming, Murray writes, “The computer is procedural, participatory, encyclopedic, and spatial. This means it can embody rules and execute them; it allows us to manipulate its objects; it can contain more information in more
forms than any previous medium; and it can create a world that we can navigate and even inhabit as well as observe.” (Included in Wardrip-Fruin, p. 8) I believe that The Waste Land Tarot falls into the zone somewhere between Puzzle, Story and Performance. Since there are no elements in my artifact that create a challenge between the user and the computer or other players, it’s hard to categorize it as a contest or really a game in itself. There is no apparent struggle between forces, or heart-pounding conflict on display. Instead there is a kind of exploration that takes place not exactly in a virtual space, but somewhere in a conceptual space, maybe even a limbo of ideas.

By clicking buttons and clicking on face down cards spread on the screen, the player is shown a card procedurally composed on the spot. What the interactor will find satisfying — I think that having both a random display of cards and the option to rearrange card elements independently satisfies something along the lines of taking turns between being told an interesting story and creating a story of one's own, a balancing between a narrative angle and one that allows more agency.

Procedural and participatory elements — The procedural elements include the random number generation and the script that the program follows to display items on the screen in a certain sequence. The participatory elements include clicking buttons to control which mode to enter, controlling when cards are placed face up, and the ability to modify cards in the sandbox mode.

How it creates experience of agency — I hope that the sandbox mode will contribute a sense of agency, which is meant to contrast against the concept of Fate, which is inherent in the historical divinatory use of the Tarot cards, and illustrated in the two random modes of play.

**Summary**

In a way, I’d like to think of this project as a kind of ultimate recap of what I’ve learned as a student in IDT. My courses in procedural expression, game design, interactive narrative and literary translation have served to inform my work and to guide my progress. Having a design problem of this scope has also helped me to learn Flash and gain some confidence in using Actionscript, though I am far from claiming that I’m now an expert!

This is perhaps a stretch of an analogy, but I like to compare the interpretation of a work of literature to the preparation by a chef of a particular food. If the novel is an orange, the reader must peel it himself to arrive at whatever success he is capable of. The interpreter as chef opens the orange and prepares it in a certain way. Maybe he cuts it crosswise and serves it in a bowl with a spoon, so that the star-like spokes are visible. Maybe he carefully peels it, removing membranes and anything that the chef feels detracts from the flavor. The point is that the fruit can be prepared dozens of ways, some more palatable to an individual than others. All these various creations can co-exist without one necessarily becoming the definitive version, just as there are many different readings of a work of literature. Faithfulness to the text can be measured in the skill at enhancing or underlining the essence of the fruit. The Waste Land Tarot is my attempt to illustrate a particular, perhaps oblique view of the poem.
Bibliography


Objective Tarot. http://objectivetarot.free.fr/objective
A traditional French card game similar to Bridge, using a Tarot deck that resembles standard playing cards.


Scoville, Thomas. “Silicon Valley Tarot” http://www.svtarot.com/


Recommended Resources

These items were not directly quoted in my project, but offer further background and information of interest.

Calvino, Italo. *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. 


DeChirico. Information about the surrealist artist. Coincidentally, he was born in 1888, the same year as Eliot. 
http://artchive.com/artchive/D/de_chiricobio.html
http://www2.regione.veneto.it/cultura/museionweb/prelazione/images/dechirico.jpg
http://www.nicolarandone.com/arte/dechirico2.htm

A fair amount of history about the deck and its European origins. There’s an interesting article here that makes an analogy between the development of the Tarot deck and the popular game Monopoly.

This site has several links to works of Tarot and religious scholarship.

Memmott, Talan. “Self-Portrait(s) [as Other(s)]”
http://www.uiowa.edu/eko/Eiareview/tirweb/feature/memmott/spo_Memmott/index.htm. I just like the style of collage that is used here and the way the information is presented. I was inspired to construct my cards with similar functionality.


http://www.sacred-texts.com/tarot/pkt/index.htm

U.S. Games, Inc., probably the world’s largest current publisher of Tarot decks.
http://www.usgamesinc.com/
Appendices

Appendix A: Cultural and Biographical Timeline

1875 – 1947 Aleister Crowley’s lifetime
1875 – 1961 Carl Jung’s lifetime
1888 – 1965 T.S. Eliot’s lifetime
1890 - The Golden Bough by Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941) is published
1904 - 1980s Joseph Campbell’s lifetime
1910 Eliot graduates from Harvard with a M.A. and goes on to Sorbonne.
1911 Visits London for the first time. Completes “Prufrock”. Age 23.
1915 Marries Vivien Haigh-Wood. Prufrock is first published.
1917 Begins working at Lloyds Bank.
1920 First mentions TWL in letter to his mother in September
1921 Given 3 months leave from Lloyds to recuperate from mental and physical collapse. Stays at Margate in October and Lausanne in November, works on drafts of TWL
1925 Leaves Lloyds to join Faber & Gwyer as ed. & publisher. The Hollow Men published.
1927 Joins Church of England and becomes British citizen
1930 Ash Wednesday published.
1933 Separates from Vivien, who is certified insane by 1938 and committed to an asylum. She dies in 1947.
1948 Eliot receives Nobel Prize for Literature
1957 Marries Valerie Fletcher

(much of this info from North, p. 293-5)