

Self Arcana: A Self-Reflective, Story-Based Tarot Game

Popular abstract: *Self Arcana* is a collaborative, 2-player storytelling/self-reflection card game. The game requires players to create personalized tarot cards with which to play. Tarot imagery can be interpreted through the use of archetypes (Barrett 2009, 19), which can then become a tool for self-reflection (Hofer 2009). The creation of cards from personal symbols prevents players from interpreting meaning through traditional tarot imagery already associated with the collective unconscious or psychological resonance (Bowman 2017). Players are then encouraged to build narratives and role-play using cards that speak to them personally. We drafted the game through an initial design which we then built upon with research on Jungian psychology, archetypes, tarot and role-playing practices. After iterating our initial design, we playtested *Self Arcana* and wrote a duoethnographic playtest report on it.

Keywords: self-reflection, role-playing, tarot cards, duoethnography, game design

Ayça Durmus
Uppsala University
ayca.durmus.ad@gmail.com

Sedef Topcuoglu
Bilkent University
egesedy@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Having an end goal of self-reflection prompted us to design a role-playing game due to the genre's potential to transform the player and aid them in their individuation process. Bowman compares Jung's active imagination and role-playing practices: while active imagination is generally a solitary and internal process, role-playing is an inherently social activity and typically takes place among two or more players. Moreso, "In Jung's active imagination, the person undergoing the dialoguing is the primary ego identity of the participant, not an imagined character" (Bowman 2012, 1); thus, distance between the participant and fiction is reduced.

Nevertheless, active imagination can be done in role-playing spaces; after going through processes of envisioning, dialoguing, and enactment during gameplay, what has been discovered stands to be reconciled with once the magic circle is broken. "The Ego experiences itself as individual in this moment – separate, somehow, from the archetypal entities with whom it has interacted, and yet altered through the experience of interaction itself" (Bowman 2012, 13). In itself, this is the process of individuation. The importance of archetypes in role-playing games for the individuation process is furthered, as "Active imagination leads to the aforementioned stripping of one's individual Ego identity, allows for the player to tap into their personal unconscious, then to further delve down into the collective unconscious" (Bowman 2012, 6). In turn, archetypes from the collective unconscious emerge as players continue to engage in gameplay—a process, in itself, of active imagination in a ritual setting.

Before the *Self Arcana* game session, players create their own tarot decks with which to play the game. To help players in card creation, we decided to utilize archetypes already present in tarot, as they can be interpreted using Jungian archetypes (Cook, Eladhari, and Sullivan 2018). It should be noted here that the Fool's Journey can be likened to Hero's Journey, and "can be read as a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story" performing "the same function as mono-myth or 'hero's journey'" (Barrett 2011, 25). Moreover, Coulter (2004) claims that tarot contains "what psychiatrist Carl Jung referred to as deep-rooted transformational archetypes" and these archetypes "symbolize the hero's journey from childhood to adulthood" (as cited in Hofer 2009, 16), creating potential for storytelling practices through the cards and the archetypes.

Traditional tarot spreads and layouts can be used to create narratives using the archetypal symbols associated with the collective unconscious. Examples of these stories can be seen in games

like *tarocchi appropriati* among the Italian aristocracy based on the sonnets of 16th century Italian poet Teofilo Folengo, which incorporated themes and symbols from the Major Arcana (Cook, Eladhari and Sullivan, 2018). Another example is in Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, where he "realized the tarots were a machine for constructing stories" (1976) (as cited in Barrett 2011, 21), taking advantage of the "semiotic system, akin to languages" (Barrett 2011, 19) in the tarot imagery and symbolism.

Moreover, research suggests tarot can be used for self-reflection and in therapy, which is examined in Hofer's research (Hofer 2009). Kopp "investigated the archetypal themes that can be described as represented in each of the Major Arcana," which resulted in data implying that individuals who were not well versed in Jungian theory could identify said archetypal themes in tarot cards regardless (as cited in Hofer 2009, 25). The therapeutic potential and symbolic familiarity of tarot makes it a useful tool for self-reflection.

2. METHODOLOGY

Design research "is a practice that requires reflection, leading to an emergence of understanding throughout the design process" (Hook and Coulton 2017, 172). It differs from "the more traditional positivist methodologies used by many researchers considering games; which place most value on quantifiable outcomes" as explained by Nacke et al. in 2009 (as cited in Hook and Coulton 2017, 172). With our end goal of *Self Arcana* being self-reflection, we utilized Research through Design framework when creating the game.

We adopted a duoethnographic approach to examine how our design can encourage self-reflection, starting with the design process' and design's effect on ourselves. "Duoethnographers seek to examine and reconceptualize their narratives of interpretation—how they have come to understand an incident or theme in and through their lives" (Sawyer and Norries 2013, 3).

While we had previous literature needed to create a vague framework before starting the design, the game necessitates players to engage in some degree of personal insight to first create the cards. Thus, our research started with an initial design draft highlighting our main goals. Game designers' "understanding (of) their own unconscious is the first step to understanding the unconscious of their society" (Rusch 2018, 5-6). Therefore, we took a personally intuitive approach to card creation before designing the guideline for it.

Before the playtest, we established the design by way of research on archetypes, transformative game design frameworks, and related fields. The report is based on duoethnographic observations on the design process and playtest session.

The game session is split into two parts, with the first part of the session having players act as the game master (GM)/non-player-character (NPC). This was inspired by Carl Rogers' humanistic psychology, in which it is supposed that clients seeking therapy will naturally "gravitate towards growth, healing, and fulfillment of their potential," while the therapist's role is to "hold space, help the client identify areas of growth, and to guide explorations of alternative ways of acting and being to overcome personal obstacles" (Rusch 2020, 11), similar to the GM/NPC creating space for players to identify topics that may then be addressed in the second part of the game.

We instinctively drafted card designs based on our previous familiarity with tarot and symbolism, referring to imagery from creative works; influential real-life places and people; literary motifs; nature; everyday objects; traditional tarot; and other personal attachments. The visual design was done by Topcuoglu while in a dialogue with Durmus, leading to further discussion on why certain symbols were chosen and their implications. The research aims to externalize this intuitive approach through

a guideline and systemize it in a way that any player, regardless of their background, can identify symbols relevant to them, allowing for a space to practice self-reflection.

We aim to invite players to create narratives from personalized cards and to form a semiotic system of their own. In an unofficial playtest of an earlier iteration of the game, we found tarot archetypes and their meanings were unclear to players who had no previous experience with them. In order to make the game more accessible and to avoid overwhelming players with getting acquainted with pre-existing cards, a guideline for personal card creation and layouts to help with narrative building is to be provided. Utilizing cards personal to players also allows for better immersion.

3. DESIGN

3.1 Card Design

To provide players with a systemic guideline for card creation, we chose the Major Arcana from the Rider-Waite-Smith deck to be our leadoff. This is not only the most common Tarot deck, but also depicts the Fool's Journey (Barrett 2011, 25), which is a common story structure, also relevant to the game. Based on the descriptions of the tarot cards by Arthur Edward Waite in *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* and intuitive interpretation, we simplified the deck by grouping cards according to concepts they represent (depicted in Table 1 below), as the rich archetypal symbolism of all 22 Major Arcana could prove overwhelming. Note these groupings are not definite, and some overlap may be present in the interpretations of the cards, as these analyses are ultimately subjective.

3.1 Card Design

To provide players with a systemic guideline for card creation, we chose the Major Arcana from the Rider-Waite-Smith deck to be our leadoff. This is not only the most common Tarot deck, but also depicts the Fool's Journey (Barrett 2011, 25), which is a common story structure, also relevant to the game. Based on the descriptions of the tarot cards by Arthur Edward Waite in *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* and intuitive interpretation, we simplified the deck by grouping cards according to concepts they represent (depicted in Table 1 below), as the rich archetypal symbolism of all 22 Major Arcana could prove overwhelming. Note these groupings are not definite, and some overlap may be present in the interpretations of the cards, as these analyses are ultimately subjective.

Applying these themes to the cards we initially created, we found parallels between ideas we wished to convey through our personal symbolism, suggesting that some level of archetypal engagement is manifested regardless of intent.

While the self is represented by one card, the remaining concepts can be paired by either their opposition to one another, or through their depiction of parallel concepts, thus becoming the upright and reversed positioning of the cards. In accordance, the reversed Self card represents the Jungian Shadow, exemplified in Table 2.

Table 1: Groupings of tarot cards based on concepts they represent (Waite 1959).

Tarot Card	Concept the Card Represents
Self	The Fool
Creation	The Magician, High Priestess, and Empress
Connections and Duty	The Emperor, Hierophant, and Lovers
Conflict	The Chariot and Lovers
Source of Power / Will	Justice, Hermit, and Strength
Transformation	The Wheel of Fortune, Hanged Man, and Death
Virtues	Temperance and Star
Ruin, Destruction, Chaos	The Devil and Tower
Enlightenment	The Moon, Sun, Judgment, and World

We ask our playtesters to create cards based on these concepts/binaries before the game session; doing so provides a foundation from which to build their ideas.

3.2 Character Creation

For the game session, we do not ask players to create complicated characters requiring extensive background writing. Based on Bowman's Nine Types of Role-playing Characters (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 403-404), and our assumptions of what would be best for self-reflection, we suggest playing as one the following character types:

Doppelganger: Play as yourself.

Devoid: Which part of you would you subtract? Play as yourself, minus that part.

Fragmented: Which part of you do you want to highlight?

Repressed: Which parts of you do you dislike? Repress? Ashamed of? Try to play with those parts in mind. OR, play as your favorite villain.

Idealized: Play as your ideal self OR as your favorite hero.

Oppositional: Who are you NOT? Who do you see when you imagine your opposite? Play as that person.

Table 2: Oppositional or parallel concepts and card positioning.

Example Card	Upright	Reversed
Goddess	Self	Shadow
God	Transformation	Enlightenment
Crow	Creation	Destruction
Mother	Source of Power	Duty
Sun	Virtues	Conflict

As this paper mainly focuses on card creation and tarot imagery, the character creation part of the game has been kept minimal.

Although asking players to consider their repressed aspects is difficult to do consciously and on demand, the game itself is centered around creating a magic circle between two players. It invites them to explore aspects of themselves they may not have previously been aware of and are therefore significant to include. Regarding this play space, Beltrán states, “The ego becomes relaxed enough to allow unconscious content to surface. This is very akin to Jung’s concept of active imagination,” which is a tool through which we implore players to consider their values, needs, and emotional states (Beltrán 2013, 98).

3.3 Spreads

Spreads provide structure upon which to build narrative, which players can do individually and by combining cards. “Once a spread is chosen, the referents are defined, and an interpretive code is established, a number of story-building techniques are available to the creator of Tarot texts. The generative narrative of the cards can be deliberately directed by the reader,” (Barrett 2011, 25). Similar

to how narrative structures give shape to language and lead to the creation of a story, the semiotic structure of tarot cards can be shaped by spreads into a narrative whole.

Tarot-Based Narrative Generation makes use of a 5-act story structure to generate a tale from tarot cards. Spreads can also function as a means to form narrative structure similar to McKee's principles (Cook, Eladhari and Sullivan, 2018).

The game has two stages—first, each player role plays with their own deck of 5 cards, then, players join cards. In the latter, a 10-card spread, freeform or pre-existing, can be used to generate a narrative. The first stage encourages individuation in the players separately, to then lead to the second stage, where the pair will role-play to form introspective dialogue.

3.4 Location

We encourage players to choose a location for their stories to take place. Preferably, the setting would be familiar to both players as this would both help with immersion in the role-play, and allow players to communicate narratives better. This factor is especially significant to consider during the second half of the game when narratives are combined.

Three techniques that have helped designers create stories are as such: tarot as a storytelling system, stories to story worlds, and storytelling to worldbuilding (Ciancia and Mariani 2019). Location was therefore a significant storytelling device to add, as it is necessary for both worldbuilding, and can be used to refer to players' real-world experiences.

3.5 Rituals

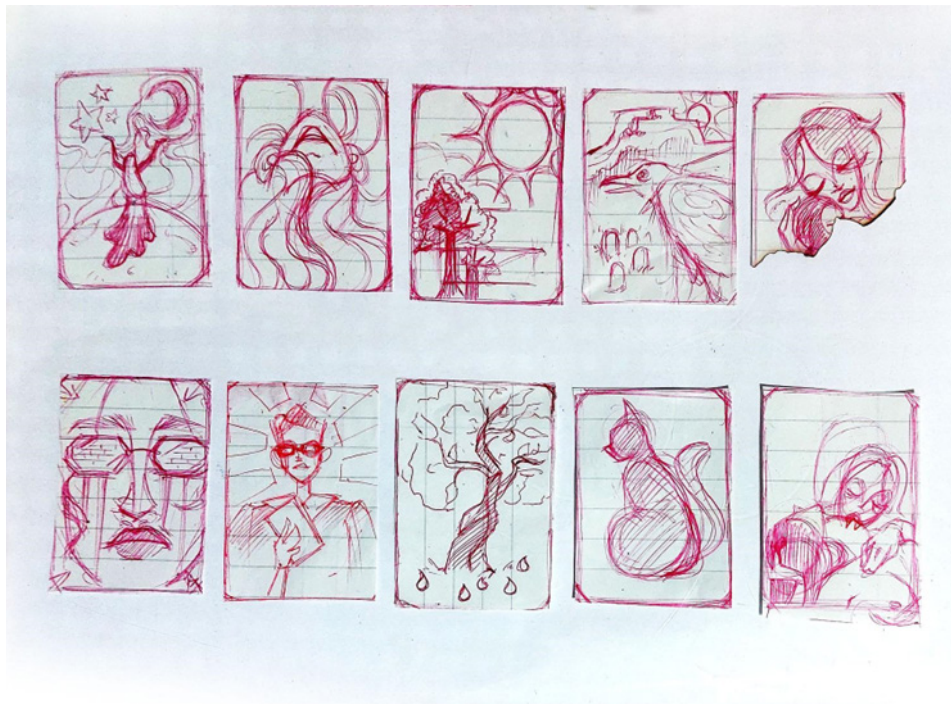
End-game rituals are significant as they encourage introspection, self-reflection, and provide players with an overall therapeutic experience. Asking players to choose one card to burn, to keep, and to change after the session will mimic rituals used in psychotherapy, which “are designed together with clients, oriented towards their individual needs and drawing on elements that are symbolically potent for them” (Rusch 2018, 7). Moreover, rituals can enhance mythic aspects of the game as Joseph Campbell explains, “Ritual is simply myth enacted; by participating in a rite, you are participating directly in the myth” (as qtd. in Rusch 2018, 7). Players are also encouraged to bring items or imagine symbols related to the location they have chosen for the session to enhance immersion through an altar-like ritual space.

In summary, players first create their own personalized mini-tarot decks with the card creation guideline (Table 2) and choose a character type they want to play as. Players can use cards to either play with a tarot spread or to play freeform. Furthermore, a location is chosen and they agree on what rituals to enact. After these preparatory steps are done, they can move on with the 2-part game session.

3.6 Playtest Report

We playtested the game with the cards designed, choosing the original sample scenario “The Bar at the End of the World” as it resonated with both of us. The Bar was meant to simulate a purgatory-like setting with no passage of time or foreseeable exit. We played as our Doppelgänger selves and used freeform spreads, improvising throughout. To increase immersion, we played music appropriate to the setting.

Figure 1: Example Cards Designed by Durmus and Topcuoglu. Art by Topcuoglu.



In the first stage with individual spreads, the player whose cards were being used played the main character, the other the GM/NPC. Roles were then reversed to observe the other player's deck.

During the playtest, we wanted to see how we could create stories with as little narrative structure as possible and see to what degree we could improvise. Freeform role-playing with the cards created confusion and lack of harmony. Though personal reflection through the cards was possible, it was limited to characters reacting to them or wanting to switch their Doppelganger character to the archetype associated with the chosen card. As part of the playtest-improvisation, we came up with possible game rules on spot, testing them out. Though this approach showed possible rulesets and mechanics that could be adapted to the game, the meta aspect of it broke immersion in role-play.

We both realized the majority of the reflection process came from the card creation, rather than the game itself; as mentioned before, choosing which symbols to use for the cards led to conversations about the importance of the said symbols.

3.6.1 Durmus' Perspective

The burning ritual felt meaningful because I felt a connection to my cards and the symbols associated. This connection transformed into desire to play as characters depicted in the cards, to change my perspective. Such an approach led to dialoguing with different selves, suggesting that active imagination was practiced. Therefore, I believe the cards have storytelling and self-reflection potential but lack structure.

I had an easier time immersing myself in the story thanks to my role-playing experience; however, the reflections I had during gameplay when I wanted to play as one of the archetypes in my cards disturbed the flow of the story.

The playtest we had triggered distress regarding one of the archetypes portrayed in my cards. To this day, I find myself thinking about the archetype and what it has signified for me in the past,

the effects that it has on me currently, and the possible reflections it will allow me to make in the future. However, since I am one of the co-designers and researchers of this game, and have an existing tendency to ruminate on personal issues, it is challenging for me to separate my designer and player roles. It should not be assumed the processes that I went through will occur in the same manner for all players, or have the same impact as they did for me, as personal interests and perspectives on life may differentiate. Even within the parameters of this duoethnography, the significance of the game session had for Topcuoglu highly differs from the significance it had on me. Future playtests can allow for varying experiences to be observed.

3.6.2 Topcuoglu's Perspective

Starting the game with the end goal and expectation of self-reflection limited my ability to play the game fluently. Because I was aiming to understand myself better overall, but didn't have a specific question I wished to find an answer to, I played the game through arbitrary decisions, choosing cards at random. However, in doing this, I generated narratives for characters through role-play, actively drawing connections between cards picked, their contexts, and interpretations. I therefore believe the game is better suited to build stories than it is as a tool for self-reflection (which is difficult to engage in on demand). Narratives generated in this process hold potential to incite self-reflection, either through the player's personal connection to the themes present, or through retrospective analysis and reflection.

I believe the game is successful in creating space to improvise narratives. Shifting its focus to story generation would allow players to take an indirect approach to self-reflection, which may be more effective for introspection, and appealing to a broader group.

4. DISCUSSION

The playtest-improvisation led to the following takeaways:

- 1) Because the game relies so heavily on improvisation and role-play, players who have had no experience with either may have trouble with immersion. They may also find it difficult to role-play in scenarios that have similarity to real life situations, as they are playing with cards that hold personal symbolic meaning.
- 2) Familiarity between the two players also affects the way the game is played. Limitations, as well as advantages, may arise from the level of intimacy between players.
- 3) Players should negotiate the game terms and story elements before starting the session for safety reasons as well as to create a coherent narrative.
- 4) As the card creation process was so significant to our pre-game discussion and reflection, we wanted to use cards during gameplay to facilitate role-play, or further the plot of the game. In turn, the cards acted as prompts. However, a tarot spread creates a story through interpretation, not role-playing; future players can bear this in mind and adjust rules accordingly to avoid lack of harmony.
- 5) Generating stories through cards personal to the player invites them to intrinsically make connections to their own experiences. Thus, having players create narratives in this manner can allow for better self-understanding.

As a limitation, the analysis of the playtest results is limited as it is based on duoethnography and not on comprehensive playtests conducted with other players.

Based on takeaway 4 and 5, future iterations of *Self Arcana* can employ design principles detailed by Wallis (2008). He argues that game instructions and mechanics making use of players' genre familiarity lead to story creation games that produce coherent stories. Although *Self Arcana*'s card creation guideline holds potential to help players who are unfamiliar with tarot symbolism, it does not offer a sample story that can be created with these mechanics. Thus, future iterations of *Self Arcana* will aim to provide players with rules and guidelines that familiarizes them with story development and creation.

5. CONCLUSION

Future iterations of *Self Arcana* will be based on qualitative and quantitative data we plan to collect in future playtests, as well as autoethnographic observations made throughout the design process and playtest. We aim to test *Self Arcana* to observe its effect on players with differing role-playing experiences and various relationship dynamics to iterate the design based on playtest data.

REFERENCES

- Barrett, Ava L. 2011. "Tarot, Archetypes, and Storytelling." *Cognita* 18: 19–30.
- Beltrán, Whitney "Strix." 2013. "Shadow Work: a Jungian Perspective on the Underside of Live Action Role-Play in the United States." In *Wyrd Con Companion Book 2013*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek, 94–102. Los Angeles: Wyrd Con.
- Bowman, Sarah Lynne. 2012. "Jungian Theory and Immersion in Role-Playing Games." In *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White, 31-51. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- . 2017. "Active Imagination, Individuation, and Role-Playing Narratives." *Triade: Revista De Comunicação, Cultura e Midia* 5 no. 9: 158–73.
- Bowman, Sarah Lynne, and Karen Schrier. 2018. "Players and Their Characters." In *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, 245-264. New York: Routledge.
- Ciancia, Mariana, and Ilaria Mariani. 2019. "Character-Driven Narrative Engine: Storytelling System for Building Interactive Narrative Experiences." In *Proceedings of DIGRA '19: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*.
- Cook, Michael, Mirjam Palosaari Eladhari, and Anne Sullivan. 2018. "Tarot-Based Narrative Generation." In *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*.
- Hofer, Gigi. 2009. "Tarot Cards: An Investigation of Their Benefit as a Tool for Self Reflection." Dissertation. University of Victoria.
- Hook, Alan, and Paul Coulton. 2017. "Games Design Research through Game Design Practice." In *Game Design Research: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, 97-116. ETC Press.

- Rusch, Doris C. 2018. "21st Century Soul Guides: Leveraging Myth and Ritual for Game Design." In *DiGRA Nordic: Subversion, Transgression, and Controversy in Play*, University of Bergen.
- Rusch, Doris C. 2020. "Existential, Transformative Game Design." *Journal of Games, Self, & Society* 2, no. 1: 1-39.
- Sawyer, Richard D., and Joe Norries. 2013. *Duoethnography Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press.
- Waite, Arthur Edward. 1959. *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*. 1910. Reprint.
- Wallis, James. 2008. "Making Games That Make Stories." Electronic Book Review, January 19.

Ayça Durmus is a Master's student in the Department of Game Design at Uppsala University. She has a background in English Literature and Language and is interested in narrative design in games. Durmus aims to create game designs that can move games as a medium and aspires to do that with connections to literary studies and humanities. She has worked as a level designer and project manager in Dream Connection, a 2D platformer game that has been presented in Gotland Game Conference 2022, as well as on What the Eye Sees, her interactive story/Bachelor's thesis project about grief, friendship and meta-stories.

Sedef Topcuoglu is an English Literature and Language graduate from Bilkent University, with a minor in graphic design. She is a self-taught game designer, artist and storyteller. Topcuoglu enjoys using experimental mediums to tell stories and present narratives. Her current projects include Self Arcana, "The Misadventures of Coconut Girl" zine, various short stories, and her blog, where she experiments with her writing style and comments on various topics. She comes from a multidisciplinary and multicultural background. Topcuoglu's previous projects include translation projects, academic writings on English literature and culture, and volunteering in the Socialist Thinking Society in Bilkent University.