

Tarot, Money, and Mnemonics: Histories of Card Games Beyond Quantifiable-outcome Games

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Keywords

Tarot, card games, ludemes, speech act theory, agency, game historiography

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper takes a close look at Tarot games to show how dedicated Tarot scholars like Dummett & Mann (1980) and Farley (2009) either assume or overstate a clear difference between Tarot games with quantifiable outcomes (Juul 2003 and 2007) and Tarot oracle games (i.e., cartomancy); a difference that starts to already dissolve when we make the effort to look for the kind of ludemes historians of card games expect card games to have (Parlett 1990).

Parlett (2025) conceptualizes ludemes as game's conceptual building blocks. I will argue that *game-mechanic execution, state tracking, sorting, randomization, knowledge partition* (and others) can all be found *both* in quantifiable outcome and oracle games of Tarot.

I start with a brief summary (Perdana & Pollard 2024) of the history of playing cards and playing card games, with a focus on their suit systems, as it is commonly told within many historicizing disciplines of the Global North. Playing cards emerge, together with woodblock printing and paper money, during the Tang Dynasty (618–908) of medieval China (Hargrave 1930; Dummett & Mann 1980; Lo 2000), with three different money suits: coins, strings of coins, and myriads of strings of coins (Hargrave 1930). From there they are carried to the rest of the world, three suits become four – coins, polo stick, cups, swords – during the reign of the Mamluk Empire in Egypt in the 13th century (Dummett & Abu-Deeb 1973), and they most likely enter Europe via the port of Venice in the late 13th or early 14th century (Farley 2009), where the suits start to transform to coins, clubs, cups, swords, still visible in the most popular Tarot decks today, and change first to bell, acorn, leaf, heart in some of the German-speaking parts of Europe, and then to diamonds, clubs, spades, hearts in the French-speaking parts of Europe (Hargrave 1930), the contemporary so-called "standard deck".

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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Methodologically, I adopt a social constructionist view of games (Montola 2012; Searle 2010; Stenros 2014; Stenros and Montola 2024), while accounting for the limitations of its underlying theoretical assumptions stemming from speech act theory. Updating the static, categorical, and individualist picture of earlier theories (Austin 1962; Searle 1976), I treat language as fundamentally dialogic and different illocutionary forces as not mutually exclusive (Rosaldo 1982; Weigand 1989; Sbisà 2023). But, together with affordance theory (Gibson 2015), speech act theory will allow me to first conceptually stabilize above ludemes, and then ask for their historical origin, without turning them into self-contained formal abstractions.

I will then propose that the implicit metaphysical assumption made by the above historicizing scholars of playing cards and card games can be questioned in a similar way to strong formalist positions within ludology and the philosophy of games and sports (Malaby 2007; Nguyen 2017). The implied formalistic rule-centric structuralism of Dummett & Abu-Deeb 1973, Dummett & Mann 1980, Dummett 1993, Hargrave 1930, Farley 2009, and Parlett 1990 historicizes games around their supposedly identifiable deontic core of rules and game mechanics and leaves us with a simplistic (Anglo-)European story that I want to provincialize (Chakrabarty 2007) by foregrounding agency as the medium of games (Nguyen 2019).

The agential view will allow us to look at some historical and contemporary phenomena consistently co-occurring with playing card games – cartomancy, trading, and mnemonics – from a different perspective. I will argue that they deserve to be treated precisely as *games*; games equally worthy of dedicated game study, research, and scholarship as any rule-centric formal games.

After exemplarily discussing Tarot games, the paper then revisits the origins of playing card games in medieval China to ask how the above ludemes emerged if we don't treat playing card games as separable, enclosed phenomena that can be primarily studied by rule-centric structuralist means. Here I suggest that the history of playing cards as a history of money deserves more attention from any historicizing card game scholar because card games inherit most of their unique ludemes directly from paper money. Building on the work of anthropological archaeologists, studying the emergence of ledgers, coinage, and non-logographic writing systems (Graeber 2011; Graeber & Wengrow 2021), I conclude by discussing how above ludemes likely emerged together with money and how this "pre"-history of playing card games is connected to our perception of money and trading, quantifiable-outcome games, oracle games, and mnemonics as rather separate card practices, pointing at our own limiting bourgeois-influenced (Clüver 2021) cultural assumptions about the world.

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