

REPLY

Three decks and more

Georgina Voss, g.voss@lcc.arts.ac.uk
University of the Arts London, UK

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I landed my first Tarot deck from the comic shop I worked at in Brighton after no one else would buy it. Small businesses with wafer-thin margins cannot afford to bin unwanted stock, so even the most unloved books and comics would hang around on the shelves getting sunbleached, waiting for the day when they would be picked up by a random customer who had been searching for that specific variant edition foil cover of ‘*BATMAN MAKES FRENCH TOAST*’.

But truly nobody wanted that deck and, after many months of accumulating dust, it was quietly passed my way.

Speculation is a collective act. Those in the business of creating speculative devices are sharply aware that the design of the object itself is only half the story – what also matters is stagecraft. In their work on edible futures, Kaya Barry, Michelle Duffy and Michele Lobo describe that while skilled facilitators were vital for carefully introducing their worldbuilding workshops, audiences were also unexpectedly affected by the identity of the festivals where the workshops took place which in turn influenced the flavour of speculations that they produced.

When I started rifling around with that first deck, it became rapidly apparent why no one had bought it. The set was illustrated by a famous Italian artist who specialised in figurative watercolours – and also, I realised, erotic comics. Some of the cards were chaste and pretty but a whole bunch were wildly explicit (Seven of Wands, I’m looking at you). Doing a reading would have involved asking someone gently probing questions about whether there were any unresolved situations in their lives that they wanted to address, while they sat in front of what resembled a storyboard for ‘Carry On Occulting’. The cards got rehomed into a glittery sock – the cardboard box having disintegrated somewhere down the line out of sheer lust – and put back onto another shelf.

The second Tarot deck arrived a decade later. I had left Brighton and the comic shop by then, and was now co-running a design studio that specialised in working with people to unpack the dramaturgy behind technological spectacle. My colleagues and I

at Strange Telemetry made this deck out of a shared frustration at how flat imaginaries of the future influenced any discussions we tried to have around technology. Ask ‘What do you think of this system? How might it look in 50 years’ time?’ and what we would get back were either delirious fantasies of a chrome-plated paradise filled with jet-packing elders uploading themselves to the cloud; or visions of a terrible wasteland where those same elders were now being used for target practice by quadruped military robots.

We called these cards the ‘Futures Poker’ set. Although functionally similar to a Tarot deck, we wanted to strip away baggage around either futurity or Tarot itself. In science fiction studies, these affordances are known as reading protocols, and they do the heavy lifting to help transport the reader into a specific state of mind. Pick up a book with a spaceship on the cover and a mention of ‘Captain Zorg’ on the back and you will probably assume you have got some hard sci-fi in your hands rather than, say, a treatise on economic theory. Similar to the use of symbols in Tarot, reading protocols frontload meanings and expectations into a limited and contained space.

In Michelle Westerlaken’s work around multispecies worlding, reading protocols can be intentionally subverted. Dotted throughout what appears to be a traditional academic article on designing multispecies engagements are simple line drawings of people and animals. These pictures do what images in essays do: they illustrate the article, providing visual cue and complement to the writer’s descriptions. Yet these illustrations also act subversively, challenging the text-based reading protocols around much worldbuilding work, asking the reader to step away from language-oriented forms of thinking and to take in the multispecies engagements which are already here, all around us.

Our ‘Futures Poker’ set also explored how the reception of images. The deck was illustrated with open source black and white etchings and woodcuts of an aesthetic that leaned unspecifically historical. Each card captures a scrap of some moment from the near future or the many nows: climate migration, ageing populations, hikikomori epidemics and – an audience favourite – animals being granted personhood status. We wanted its use to be something closer to gambling, where a spread still invites narrative paraeodilia but the story is not allied to some expected ‘ask’ of an uncertain future.

We have used Futures Poker in loads of settings: on green baize tables in the subterranean snooker rooms at Somerset House; spread out on wooden desks in an artists’ collective in the heart of Athens; in a turret room at the top of a winding stairwell in Whitehall. By making the cards freely available as an online PDF, other people have used them too in ways we had never planned but had always hoped for – a personal favourite were the folks in Portugal who blew the cards up into A3 print and used them for an impromptu exhibition on ‘Lost Lisbon’.

These days, my own Futures Poker sets (plural) sit up on a shelf next to the sexy cards in the glittery sock. I tend not to take them down and look at them unless I am doing a workshop – which, writing this in January 2021, feels unlikely to happen anytime soon. Although I like them as artefacts, they are also work and I have boundaries.

The deck that I look at most often these days is the final one that was a gift from a friend for a big decade-crossing birthday a few years ago. This is Alistair Crowley’s Thoth Tarot: proper full-stack occult that comes with its own fancy box and accompanying book. Together with A.E. Waite – creator of the Rider-Waite deck – Crowley was a member of the secretive Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn whose goals included striving to change Western society through symbols.

The Thoth deck was a collaboration between Crowley and illustrator Frieda Harris, whose work comprises a radical artistic style which brings together projective synthetic geometry with emblematic colours, allusions to Egyptian gods and a modernisation of classic Tarot symbolism.

Gorgeously illustrated, the Thoth cards are satisfyingly large to handle – laying down a spread involves assembling a glowing abstract tapestry of symbols and hieroglyphs. Time moves more slowly when doing a reading with the Thoth Tarot. The deck flutters pleasingly loudly when shuffled. As rich with detail as a full-scale painting, each card invites closer inspection after it has been pulled from the pack.

Markéta Dolejšová describes this embodied aspect of speculation in her work on speculative listening and melting sea ice. These approaches force a move away from a solely representational view of the world and ask us to really pay attention to where possible futures might be *felt* in the present. An embodied perspective reminds us that we are not fixed objective points positioned face-forwards towards uncertain futures, but are our own sensory instruments, always detecting the world around us.

Frieda Harris took the Thoth commission on the condition that Crowley would not visit her during her work, nor practice black magic during this time (he complied). Acutely aware of the project's notoriety, she also insisted on her own anonymity throughout; and both she and Crowley died before the deck was published in 1969.

Like many of my colleagues and collaborators, I feel increasingly chary about the growing formalisation of speculative approaches across design and political spaces. Although elements of these techniques can be traced back to RAND strategic foresight work from the 1950s, or, further still, to hepatomancy in ancient Greece, talk of doing 'speculative design' often deploys a slab subcultural capital that masks how these approaches are too often separated from political context, power dynamics and personal responsibility. Tools divorced from accountability and control rapidly become weapons which serve the strongest and scaffold their position. Yet the act of speculation itself still has potency – as art critic Zarina Muhammed (2020) writes of Lola Olufemi's work, speculation has the potential to be a vehicle and accomplice to activism; describing the system as it is and how political liberation could shape it. Rather than a singular point to march towards, my three Tarot sets provide a star map, a dispersed constellation to triangulate myself within. I am quietly excited by whatever the next deck will bring.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References

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