

# The Game of Tarot Amid Fact and Fiction: Tracing Cultural Histories with Digital Maps

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## Abstract

The popular imagination tends to associate the tarot with divination. However, its origins lie in the profane rather than the sacred. While scholars have debunked centuries' worth of tall tales, the eccentric fictions surrounding the cards continue to shape how they are understood today.

The project "Mapping the Tarot: Game and Divination Across Time" traces the cultural histories of the tarot, both fact and fiction, with ArcGIS. Using select holdings from the George Clulow-United States Playing Card Company Gaming Collection at Vanderbilt University, this project maps the relationship between the real and the imagined, plotting out the factual evolution of the tarot alongside its identified sites of misinformation.



A spread of hand-painted, late 19th-century tarot cards painted by an unknown artist of French origin, part of the Clulow collection.

## Research Questions

- When did the tarot transition from a tabletop card game to a tool used for divinatory practices?
- What were the impetuses for this transition in play?
- Who were the main proponents of the tarot's esoteric turn?
- To what schools of thought did these proponents belong?
- What false origins have been associated with the tarot?
- How does the factual evolution of the tarot intersect with its fictions?
- Where were the main sites of play?
- How did the iconography of the tarot shift across time and space?

## Project Workflow

Initially, this project endeavored to "correct" the popular narrative that views the tarot as having esoteric origins. Using ArcGIS, a multimedia, online mapping tool that allows for interactive digital storytelling, I planned to identify the geolocations of the fact-based, historical evolution of the game in an attempt to unravel the mystery surrounding it.

As I continued to collect data, however, I noticed that the falsehoods invented about the tarot's origins also served a valuable function. In addition to plotting the historically accurate figures, I decided to map the incredible fictions propagated throughout the game's history. The goal, now, was to discern the relationship between the real and the imagined, to see where these lines come together or stray.

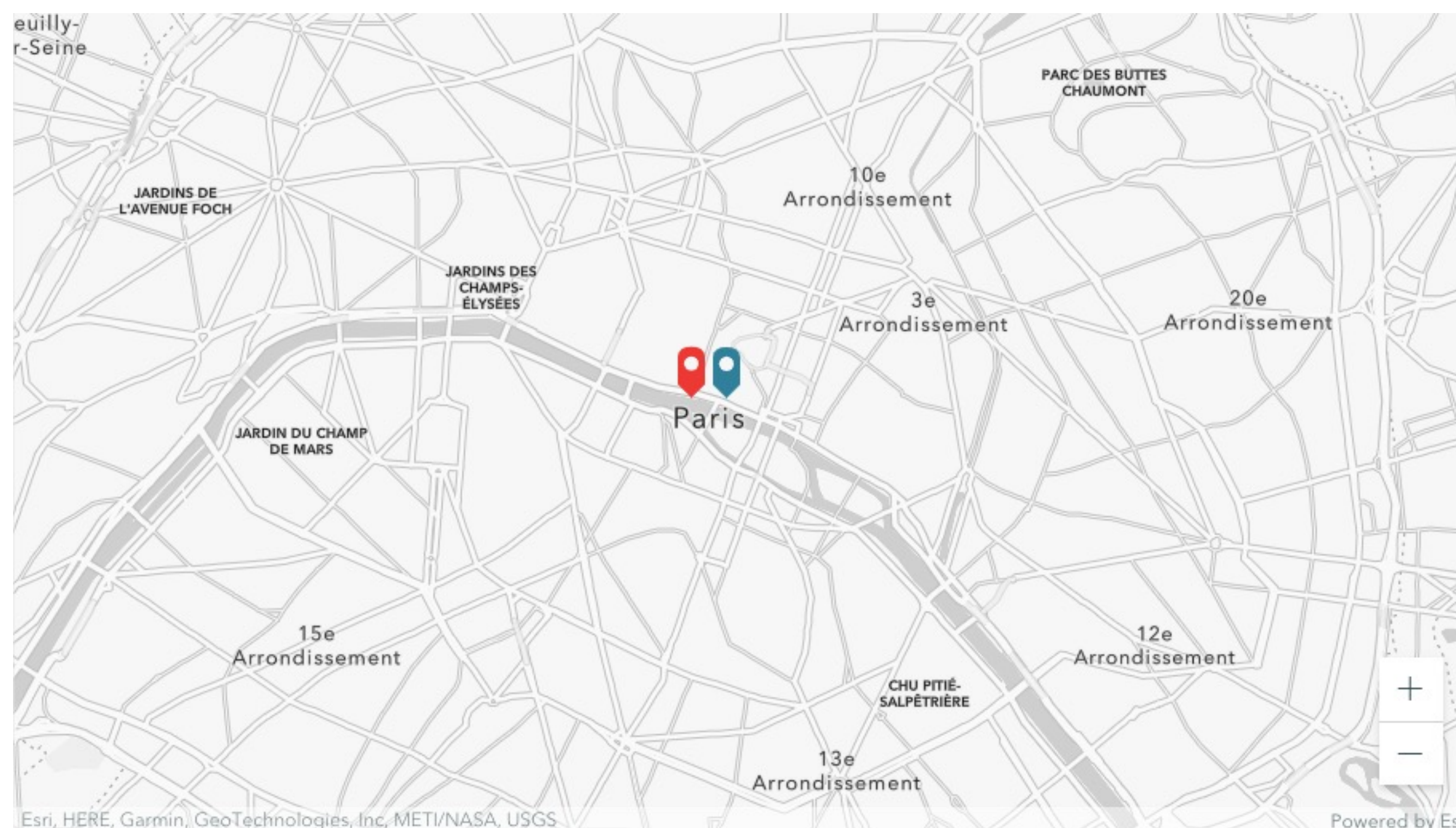
## Preliminary Results

On this ArcGIS StoryMap, the two colors represent the geolocations of the data gathered from various sources: blue for factual information and red for falsehoods.

Although the tarot as a divining tool is a worldwide phenomenon today, I choose to focus on the game's purported invention in 15th-century Italy to its dominant occult strains in 19th-century France and England. Many of the recorded falsehoods originate from these 19th-century occult figures.



Much of the fictional information presented in said accounts lacks precision. For mapping purposes, I used the current capital city of the countries in question when the source material did not supply a specific locale. The French, for example, gripped by a potent strain of Egyptomania after Napoleon captured the region, assigned fantastic, yet vague, Egyptian origins to the tarot.



In multiple instances, fact and fiction meet. In Paris, for instance, a late 14th-century document was misinterpreted by its 18th-century reader. This led many to believe that the tarot was of French-origin, created for the amusement of King Charles VI. However, the cards in question could not be confirmed to be tarot cards at all. Later, the tarot is introduced to France through Italy, where its occult transformation begins in earnest.

## Next Steps

This project aims to be accessible to all those who have an interest in the tarot. For this reason, I would like to build a multimedia glossary of the terms that the occult tarot figures used to define their theories and principles. This glossary would help contextualize the schools of thought that were synthesized and stretched by many tarot practitioners, from Kabbalism to Swedenborgianism to Rosicrucianism.

The tarot is, perhaps, best known for its iconography. Another future step in this project is developing a companion ArcGIS StoryMap that acts an introduction to the symbolism of the tarot. Like the StoryMap that traces the historical evolution of the game through fact and fiction, the iconography StoryMap will aim to document shifts in artistic interpretations of the cards across various countries and time periods.



"The Lovers" tarot card across time and space. From left to right, earliest to latest: The Visconti-Sforza (Italian), The Clulow Collection (French), The Rider-Waite (English)

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