

Game of Tarot

The History:

Playing cards arrived in Europe during the latter half of the 14th century probably not much earlier than 1370. The first documented appearance is in Spain. In the Middle East, specifically Egypt, playing cards had been known for a few hundred years already. These early decks were made up of 52 cards divided into four suits much like the modern playing cards we know with only a few differences. The earliest suits were swords, polo-sticks, cups and coins. Each suit included pip cards from 1 (Ace) to 10, as well as three court cards: a King and two deputies (sometimes called marshals). The two deputies were distinguished by the way they held their suit signs - the higher ranked one held his suit upright and the lower ranked one held his down holding it from the top. The use of corner indexes and double-headed court cards were much later additions (18-19th centuries).

As cards and card games grew in popularity through the 14th and 15th centuries, people started experimenting with different deck configurations. Sometimes it was a reduced deck. Other times it was changed by adding cards (such as the Queen). Around the 1440's an additional group of cards, called the triumphs or trumps, were added to create what we know as the Tarot deck. These cards were used in a variety of trick taking games beginning in Italy (where it was called Tarocchi) and spreading to France and the rest of Europe. The occult uses of the Tarot cards did not start until the 18th century.

The version presented here is based off of Master Justin du Coeur's "Early French Tarot" reconstruction, which in turn is based off of a game presented in Michael Dummett's The Game of Tarot. While it is slightly post period, it does give you a good feel for how the games were played.

The Game:

Playable by 2-6 people, this is a trick taking game. There are four suits with 14 cards each (King, Queen, Knight, Page, 10 - 1), plus 21 Trump cards and the Fool. Trump cards are ranked 21 (XXI) down to 1 (I) and beat any suit cards. Swords and Staves are ranked King, Queen, Knight, Page, 10-1, while Cups and Coins are ranked King, Queen, Knight, Page, 1-10 (so a 4 of Cups will beat a 9 of Cups). The Fool is a special card and not ranked (always loses a trick). Randomly choose one player to be the initial dealer.

The dealer deals twelve cards to each player. The player to the dealer's left leads the first trick, and the winner of each trick leads the next. You must follow suit if possible; if you cannot, you must play a trump if you have any. If a trump is led, you must play a trump if possible. If you do not have any cards in the suit led or any trumps, you may play any card. The trick is won by the player who played the highest ranking trump, or the highest ranking card of the suit led if no trumps were played. The winner of the trick collects all the cards played in that trick and adds them to their score pile.

The Fool, called the Excuse, may be played at any time regardless of whether the player can follow suit or not. The Fool can never win a trick, but when played it is not claimed by the winner of the trick. Instead it is retrieved by the owner and exchanged for a card from their own score pile. So the person who played the Fool, adds it to their score pile, but gives the winner of the trick a card from their score pile. If they have no other cards, then the trick winner may claim the Fool as their replacement.

If the Fool is led, it is essentially invisible; the next player can play whatever card he feels like, and subsequent players should consider that card to be the lead for the trick.

Scoring:

After all the tricks are played, each player totals up their resulting score. If a player has won fewer than 12 cards, they lose one point for each card they are short of 12; if they have more than 12 cards, they gain one point for each card above 12. To this, add the following point for scoring cards taken:

The Fool: 5 points
The World (Trump XXI): 4 points
The Magician (Trump I): 4 points
each King: 4 points
each Queen: 3 points
each Knight: 2 points
each Page: 1 point

The other cards do not count towards the score, except in counting how many cards held. Record everyone's points. The deal passes to the right and another hand is played. The points from each hand are added to each player's total. You can play to a specific point total like 50 points, or play until all players have had a turn at dealing at which point the player with the most points wins.

Sources:

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Waks, Mark (aka: Master Justin du Coeur)
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