

# **Magic in the Machine**

**Thoughts, Essays, &  
Speculative Oracles**

## Magic in the Machine

Research, Text, and Design:

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AY24/25

Final Year Project

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This project exists at  
the intersection of:

- machine / magic
- technology / divination
- rational / irrational
- data / intuition

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This publication is supplementary to  
the project – a compilation of contexts,  
thoughts, and anecdotes that occurred  
during its developmental process.

The project can be viewed in full at  
[www.magicinthemachine-cpj.com](http://www.magicinthemachine-cpj.com)

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I would also like to thank my supervisor,  
Andreas, for allowing the space for this  
unlikely exploration of computation.

Also, I would like to acknowledge all the  
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quote and write about in this book. Particu-  
larly the AIxDesign Esoteric AI community,  
as their resources have given me a space to  
explore this unique intersection.

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# AI might be our new God



Not the Bible  
Source: Unknown

"When you use Google, do you get more than one answer? Of course you do. Well, that's a bug. We have more bugs per second in the world. We should be able to give you the right answer just once. We should know what you meant. We should know you better than you know yourself – that's the whole point here."

The above statement was declared by Google CEO Eric Schmidt in 2005, a feat that appears to have been achieved today. In 2022, OpenAI launched its chatbot, ChatGPT, sparking a surge in generative AI technologies. Within a year, the app saw a weekly traffic of

100 million users, which doubled to 200 million the following year. Generative AI saw a 260% increase in deal value from 2022 to 2023. Evidently, the insatiable demand for AI has resulted in companies investing into further developments. Since then, Big Tech companies like Google and Microsoft have launched their own AI models. Far from just chatbots and image generators, AI models have also become increasingly immediate in proximity. The Internet of Things has allowed AI models to manifest in smart devices enabled by systems like Alexa and Google Home. Additionally, AI models have started being implemented into AI agents that act as assistants to automate tasks for users. Pasquale describes the opacity of such systems as a 'black box', highlighting the implications of data-driven decision making. Of the many implications of such AI, this research concerns itself with passive consumption and lack of diversity in information. (For instance, algorithm-curated content on the internet, or receiving one curated answer on ChatGPT as opposed to a list of Google results to choose from.)

In the field of engineering, the "oracle"<sup>1</sup> is a function that an algorithm consults to solve complex problems. Simonowski recontextualises the "oracle" in the context of divinatory practices<sup>2</sup>, a medium believed to provide guidance, insights or predictions from a divine source. In the pursuit of self-optimisation, AI has inadvertently positioned itself as a divine source of information,

**"for a world of unambiguous instructions about how to live with nary a verifiable basis is an enchanted one."**

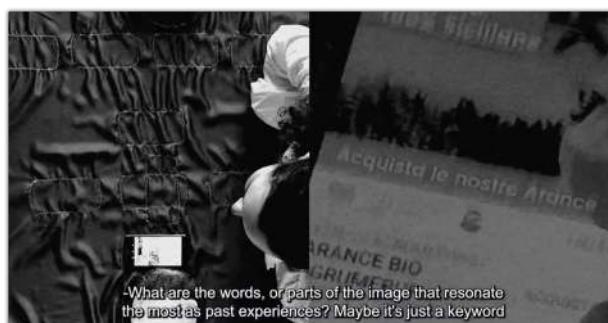
In other words, a God. As Adorno observes, there is an instinctual demand for an unknown authority to tell

<sup>1</sup> An "oracle" is an objective function that compares AI models to select the best one for processing a large amount of specific data.

<sup>2</sup> The definition of divination varies across cultures, but most refer to the practice of seeking meaning, truth, or direction from non-human sources.

readers what to expect and do in response to their own anxieties. Often thought to be rooted in the spiritual (traditional forms such as astrology, tarot readings, etc.), secular societies practise their own forms of divination as well – often in less overt or institution-alised forms. For instance, in most US federal courts, a lottery system is used to select a judge for each new case. Davis also observes a “media culture exploiting the crude power of the irrational” through pop culture, manifesting in science fiction films or therapies rooted in Buddhism, for instance. As Curry asserts, divination is a practice that has persisted through human history and societies. It is a beautiful thing that we have always done, but how does this instinct exist in the new age of technology?

Having established the persistence of divination, several designers and artists call for an esoteric perspective towards discussing AI technologies.



Ginevra Petrozzi, 'Digital Esoterism', 2021.  
Courtesy of the artist and Design Academy Eindhoven.

As Petrozzi so poignantly put it:

**"The language and intention of magic, along with the proper ingredients could generate a real change in the relationship with digital tools... When reality can only be imagined through productivity, profit, growth; use magic to resist and forge new languages to describe the world."**

## My Relationship with the Mystical

(The first section is an extract from Week 1 of my process journal. I'm probably still a skeptic, but I have since gained a more nuanced understanding of the subject. Regardless, I'm putting this here for context on why this was a subject of interest for me.)

Personally, I've always considered myself a skeptic to anything that I couldn't justify with science, or hard facts, whether its religion, ghosts, etc. The most I'm willing to dabble is in a little self-delusion, reading my horoscope to find some kind of validation that I had a good day ahead of me. Still, I enjoy the occasional (probably fake) UFO video 🚁, Big Foot 🐻, or Loch Ness 🐲 sighting. I am, however, very fascinated with how people react to things that they can't fully understand. Watching my mother pray to the Hungry Ghosts every year certain behaviours are run by feelings and thoughts that are not immediately recognised by ourselves – is it fear, respect, or just muscle memory?

On my trips, I've also seen many many many churches, cathedrals, minsters, that people have dedicated centuries of their lives to building and making beautiful. Regardless of my (non)belief, there is no denying that devotion to the mystical is one of the most powerful drivers of culture and society that we've seen in history – devotion built by the myths surrounding Gods, Heros, etc. Even today, millions of people travel across the world to religious sites to see the beauty of said devotion. Many, i'm sure, are in the same boat as I am – non-believers, but just fascinated with the concept.

Speculative AI -

What if AI were a religion/alien/mythical entity? How would it speak to humans, how would it react to humans? how have humans reacted to aliens/mythical subjects before? worship/fear? Who are the agents in this speculative world -

Jeff Bezos as the Mother Mary

(maybe find Common Religious Structures)

Religion - Morality - AI?

AI challenging what it means to be human/have a soul.

It is unrealistic to expect everyone to educate themselves about AI, understand the inner workings of it, the people behind it, the algorithm, what data is being used, etc. This leaves a shroud of mysticism around the AI, and the uncertainty around how people will respond to that is scary.

What I offer with this project, is to hopefully better understand/speculate how people will respond to AI by drawing parallels to religious/alien studies.

As opposed to previous forms of technology, AI's responses are very varied, more confusing, more... prophetical...

What makes a religion/cult

- They are both very broad themes, how are you going to specify?

hacking into the religious website

Screenshot, 22 August 2024

This train of thought has me wondering if there is knowledge from studies of mysticism, beliefs, and values to study the rise of AI in the present. Given how pervasive AI is in many of our lives now, could AI even become a new form of religion to us? (It might seem far-fetched, but I think there's something here.)

## (Retrospective)

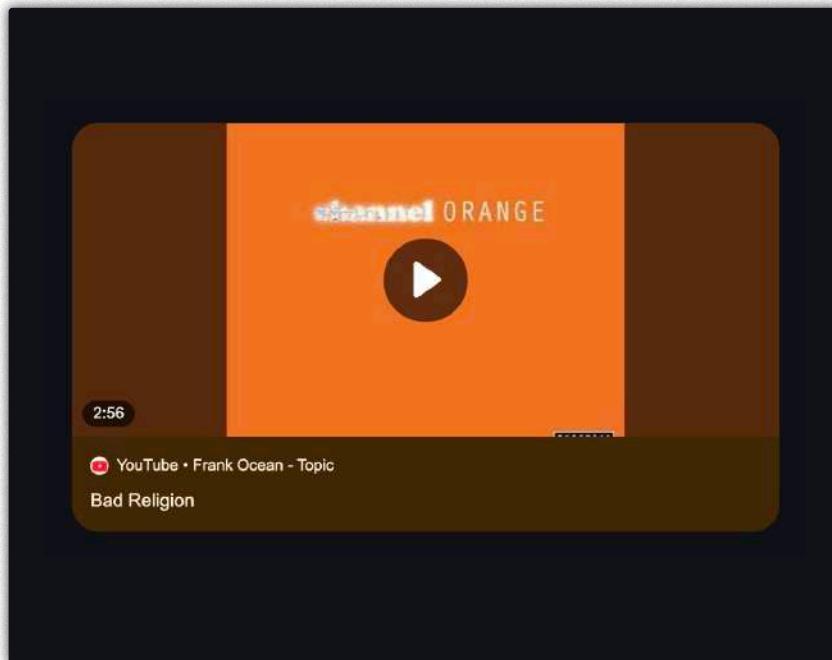
Looking back, what I was wondering was how we allow certain information technologies to influence our thoughts and behaviours.

**Particularly, I was talking about systems reliant on sources of knowledge we can't access — superhuman knowledge or hidden algorithms.**

More than that, I also knew how deeply we feel things we see online. We might not fully understand how it works, but it's strange how much it feels like it knows us. There is something uncanny, or superhuman, about these interactions.

As I would come to discover, magic and technology are not all too different, and there is a wealth of writers and researchers that share this sentiment. In the following chapter, I trace my journey towards finding the magic in our machines.

# A Crystal Ball, Magic 8-Ball, and Alexa Walked into a Bar (Techgnosis)



In Frank Ocean's hit song, 'Bad Religion', he writes:

*He said, "Allahu akbar"  
I told him, "Don't curse me."  
"Bobo, you need prayer,"  
I guess it couldn't hurt me.*

*If it brings me to my knees  
It's a bad religion.*

This excerpt is a dialogue with a taxi driver that Ocean turns to for advice with his unrequited love. He regards "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great) as a curse, in that a God to worship, in place of a lover was the last thing he needed.

This song falls under a media culture that taps onto the power of the irrational to communicate its message. Sometimes it looks like Gods, or Harry Potter, or The X-Files (depending on what flavour of mysticism you prefer). Entertainment aside, consider self-help cultures rooted in spiritual practices – tarot readings, astrology, etc. Erik Davis explores this phenomenon greatly in *Techgnosis*.

"According to this narrative, technology has helped disenchant the world, forcing the ancestral symbolic networks of old to give way to the crisp, secular game plans of economic development, skeptical inquiry, and material progress. But the old phantasms and metaphysical longings did not exactly disappear. In many cases, they disguised themselves and went underground, worming their way into the cultural, psychological, and mythological motivations that form the foundations of the modern world."



I then considered Anne Balsamo's writings in 'Designing Technoculture'. She brings forth the notion of "re-articulation", in which technological innovations happen alongside cultural reproduction. She posits that an innovation is understood through prior "language, desires, dreams, and phantasms" of the users.

More specifically, new technocultures are produced through the associations among past and present signifying elements. Here, Balsamo acknowledges the need to account for emotions and behaviours rooted in the symbolic or spiritual. At this point, it became clear to me that this was the same reason I even took on this topic. Regardless of my belief system, I was taught to see the world in a certain way – to wear red underwear before gambling, to knock on empty hotel room doors before entering, to see bird pooping on me as good luck.



Let's refer to the lyrics from earlier again. "If it brings me to my knees, it's a bad religion." Perhaps some of us can relate to this. The attention economy has made our focus and time the most valuable commodity. It's also been enough time that most of us understand the negative influence that our devices have on us, yet most of us return to it time and again. Whatever they are, perhaps technology now provides us with similar comforts that religion or spiritual practices do, the comfort of safety in the arms of a higher power.

In framing technology this way, we can perhaps have a discussion about belief, myth-making and dominant power structures.

By the way, if you wanted to know the end of the joke.

**A crystal ball, Magic 8-ball, and Alexa walked into a bar.**

**The bartender asked,  
"Hey, how can I help you?"**

**They all cried:  
"No one's ever asked  
us back before!"**

# The Internet as a Sacred Space (Signs)

**The inscrutable anomalies of contemporary technology are providing the conditions for a strange new form of spirituality. In the face of unfathomable complexity, culture and the world itself become new mediums of the divine.**

Text by Diana Walsh Pasulka

Studies of religion reveal that a growing segment of young Americans born between 1981 and 1996 refer to themselves as "nones". Not an assessment of their material wealth, "none" rather refers to a line on the census where one is asked one's religious belief. The nones claim not to have a traditional religion even though they may have been brought up in one; they are, they claim, "spiritual, but not religious". What does it mean to be spiritual, but not religious, and that this segment of the population is growing rapidly?

Religious scholars have proposed a number of theories explaining the rise of the nones, as well as reasons for that "spiritual, but not religious" motto. Dissatisfaction with traditional religious dogmas has spurred young people to disavow their parents' and grandparents' traditions, while the growing pluralism of the American religious landscape, especially since the influx of Asian philosophies embraced by white Americans during the 1960s and 1970s, provides different ways of practicing religion, including types of spirituality without a God or gods. Yet, these same reasons motivated many Baby Boomers not to abandon belief altogether, but rather to gather around gurus for their spiritual and religious guidance. The liberations of the 1960s, which included the attention to the rights of women and minorities, focused on abandoning normative and restrictive traditions, yet within religious practice the processes were less liberating and even confusing. Gurus replaced traditional religious figures like priests, but, as in the case of several well-known religious movements like those of OSHO, they were still restrictive. What is happening now with new generations of Americans is a rejection of religion itself, not just particular forms of religion.

What accounts for this change? The claim of being spiritual, yet not religious, makes perfect sense in the context of today's high-velocity media and technology environment.

The Power of None by Diana Pasulka

In the past year, I have allowed myself to become more accepting of messages from the universe. Half of me is joking, but the other half probably wishes it was true. But I have truly experienced some strange coincidences that led me to text my friends,

**"The universe just sent me a written e-mail again"**

I have perhaps stepped one foot into what Pasulka refers to in this article as a "None" — spiritual, but not religious. She traces the baton of spiritual information from Gods and priests, to spiritual gurus of godless religions. She posits that because contemporary society has come to expect access to authoritative information instantly, our link to religious authorities of the past (gurus, priests, centralised sites of religion) is faltering. What is at hand, however, is the internet — which provides unthinkable access to spiritual information.

The process of "reading the world", paying attention to signs and coincidences, has been a part of almost every traditional religion. Now however, the process is supercharged by technologies and media, which, without a God or gods, become their own form of sacred text.

This transfer of spiritual authority might also be attributed to our change in Nature. Curry writes about cultures in which its people are always in a "divinatory relationship with the natural world." In these cultures, a specialist is not required to start a dialogue (like tarot readers, palm readers, etc.) Instead, ordinary people become sensitive to signs and events that may speak to their enquiry. In the context of the modern people (at least in the context of my environment, the city of Singapore), the internet-of-things<sup>1</sup> have made it so our devices become second nature to us. Reading "nature" thus extends into the digital.



Source: Are.na (Author Unknown)

The devices from which we access these signs from then become sacred objects, vessels from which we access sacred spaces from. As Jurgenson observes, our online and offline behaviours are increasingly code-terminating, almost in a 'symbiotic' relationship.

Or as Briggs parallels through the basis of mystical practices—the belief that, "As I imagine, so I become".

<sup>1</sup> The Internet of Things (IoT) refers to a network of physical devices, vehicles, appliances, and other objects that are embedded with sensors, software, and network connectivity, allowing them to collect and share data.

# Every Night, I Kneel at the Altar of my Phone (Rituals)



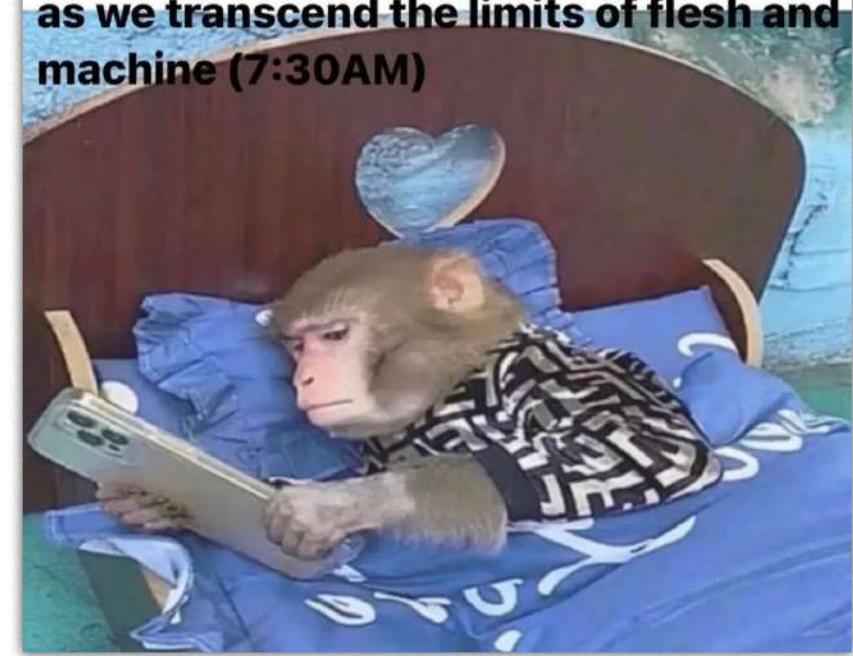
Source: Are.na

VICE writer Leigh Alexander revisits the phenomenon of blowing into our gaming cartridges in cases of malfunction. Turns out, wear and tear was more likely than dust interference. In fact, most manuals actually discourage users from doing that. Regardless, the act was collectively shared and reinforced by the anecdotal evidence.

Rituals are sometimes more important for what they symbolise and how it makes us feel, rather than the 'what' and 'why' of it. Our daily coffee marking the start of the day, kneeling before prayer to signify devotion and submission to a higher power, buying a birthday cake only to say "oh no, i'm watching my weight!" It is no wonder some rituals seem irrational or superstitious, for acts so embodied often happen before we have the chance to think why.

The warm glow of the screen in the dark of my room has come to signify the end of my day. It's come to my attention that this process has become choreography etched into my daily wind-down – a ritual. Perhaps a replacement for lighting a scented candle which offers the same glow, except I'm snorting at brainrot instead of inhaling Springtime in Paris by Bath and Body Works.

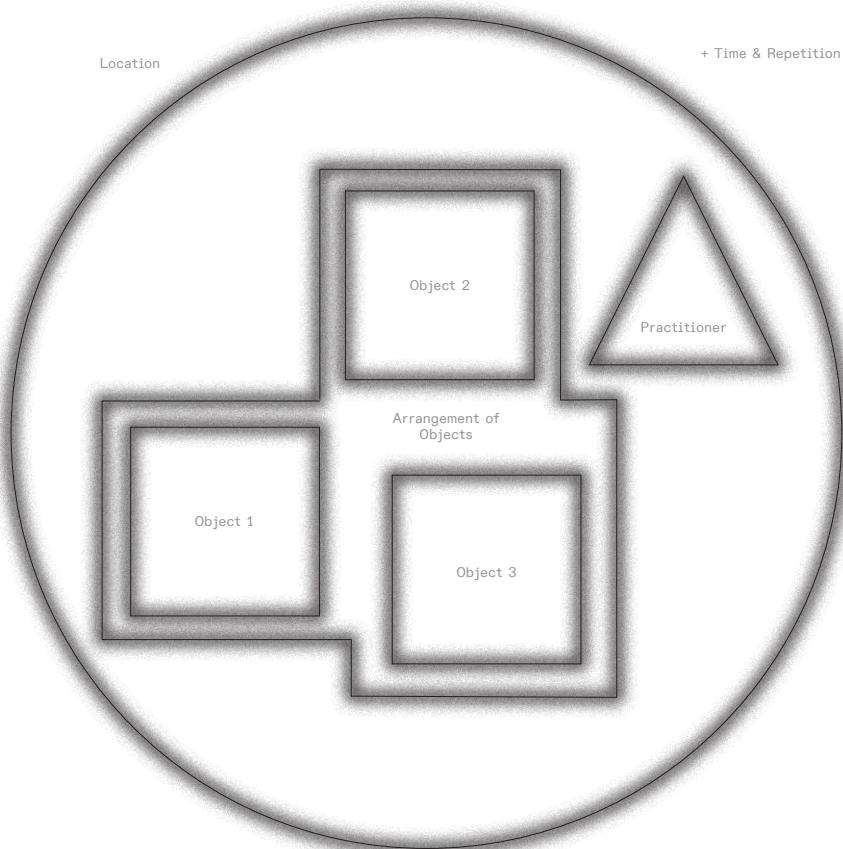
**me and my technological extensions of self  
engaging in our daily cyborgian dance  
as we transcend the limits of flesh and  
machine (7:30AM)**



Source: Are.na

I begin to wonder what this ritual, amongst the many I have with my devices, stand for. As I create new ones and reperform old ones, do I mark a shift into a state of connection or isolation, immersion or avoidance, indulgence or addiction? With each repetition, what powers do I legitimise and normalise?

# When Data Servers need to be Blessed (Materiality)



All divinatory practices find their significance in their materiality – objects, locations, and practices. The invocation of such practices subsequently promises to manage randomness for affirmations of recovery, need for resources, and wellbeing. As Morgan asserts:

**In economies of the sacred, access to practices or materials for divine assistance were regulated as an asset for negotiation.**

As such, trust was a necessary component for the success of such transactions, and this was acquired through the repeated use of such devotional material. The common experience of such practices lend themselves to cultivating a collective belief in the practice, or rather, an ongoing connection and relationship with the higher powers.

The maintenance of faith also relies on the arrangement of materials. Each practice has their unique set of rules to maintain, and any deviation from which leads to a disruption of belief, or at the very least, puts it up for question.



INTERNAL [@internal] on Instagram. "Priests and monks blessing server rooms and sprinkling holy water on computer systems as a way to prevent them from ever shutting down"

One of the first visual references observed prior to this research was the likes of those by popular social media accounts SAINT and INTERNAL, portraying a collection of images of religious figures conducting blessing rituals upon server rooms and data centres (see left). In the spirit of imagination, I refer to the supercomputers in the rooms as divinatory objects, for their superhuman abilities that assist our pursuit of stability through data processing.

A brief semiotic observation reveals similar signifiers like screens, cables and machinery juxtaposed with figure(s) dressed in religious attire, either monks or priests. The blessing ritual falls under Morgan's second category of divination, in which a practice is invoked to manage uncertainty – in this case, techno-

logical failure. Perhaps the fascination, as apparent in the images' virality, could be attributed to the dissonance between digital technology and mysticism.

As Davis asserts:

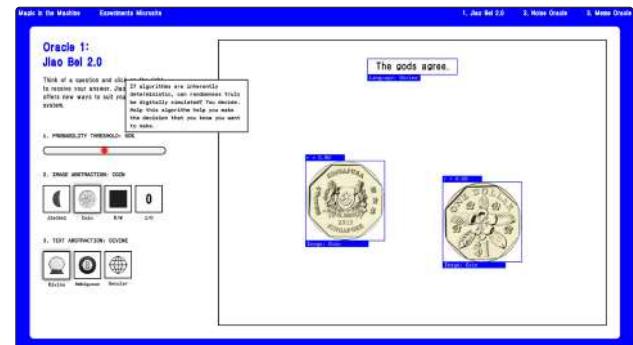
**The introduction of scientific rationality disenchanted the once-mystical world through industrial technology in pursuit of economic development and bureaucratic control.**

This contrast could be further described as the tension between the “old” and “new”, “rational” and “irrational”, or “science” and “non-science”, depending on what the angle of discussion is. Regardless, two separate systems of beliefs with very different materialities are conjured within one image, which might bring to question the efficacy of either or both of these practices. Perhaps the fascination derived is in the irony that the pursuit of control has come full circle, that “irrational” practices are called upon to assist the very technology that replaced them.



# Speculative Oracles

① Jiao Bei 2.0



② Noise Oracle

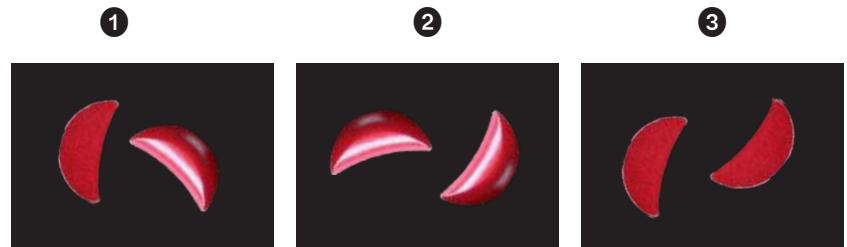


③ Memesis of an AI Oracle



## The System

A practice commonly seen in Chinese religions, the jiao bei is used to communicate with deities or ancestors through throwing the blocks. The responses given are generally:



① 聖筈 Shèng Jiāo  
(Divine Answer)

It is read as the diviner's approval of the question, representing a 'yes' response.

② 怒筈 Nù Jiāo  
(Angry Answer),  
哭筈 Kū Jiāo  
(Crying Answer),  
沒筈 Méi Jiāo  
(No Answer)

Seen as palms slammed on the table, represents a 'no' response, showing the diviner is upset or disapproving of the question.

③ 笑筈 Xiào Jiāo  
(Laughing Answer)

The rounded sides cause the blocks to rock back and forth, which is interpreted symbolically as the diviner's laughter. This can be interpreted as a 'no' response, or that the answer is laughably obvious, or that the question is unclear.

**What happens when we simulate a divinatory practice digitally?**

## Iteration 1

```
1 var p5charlist; // Stores loaded images
2 var lastImageIndex = -1; // Last image to display
3 var originalHeight = 3000;
4 var originalWidth = 1000;
5 var originalRadius = 500;
6 var probabilityValue = 0.5; // Default probability for first image
7 var maxRadius = 1000;
8 var lastRadiusValue = 0; // To track changes in size
9
10 function preload() {
11   loading();
12   heading();
13   // Load images automatically based on older value
14 }
15
16 function loading() {
17   if (lastImageIndex < 0) {
18     for (var i = 0; i < 2; i++) {
19       p5charlist[i] = loadImage("img/" + i + ".png");
20     }
21   }
22 }
23
24 function setup() {
25   createCanvas(originalWidth, originalHeight);
26   noLoop();
27 }
28
29 // Probability values (constant for all images)
30 var probabilityValueConstant = 0.5;
31 var probabilityValueStart = 0.5;
32 var probabilityValueEnd = 0.5;
33 var probabilityValueStep = 0.001;
34 var probabilityValueMin = 0.001;
35 var probabilityValueMax = 0.999;
36
37 // Other variables (sliders) which are not loaded
38 var radiusValue = 500;
39 var heightValue = 3000;
40 var widthValue = 1000;
41 var smallerRadiusValue = 500;
42 var smallerHeightValue = 3000;
43 var smallerWidthValue = 1000;
44
45
46 function draw() {
47   heading();
48   background(255);
49
50   // If values from sliders
51   if (radiusValue != originalRadius || heightValue != originalHeight || widthValue != originalWidth) {
52     var probability = probabilityValue;
53
54     // Map slider values to 1, 2, 3
55     var mappedProbability = 1 + (probability * 2);
56
57     // Only update images if the variables changed
58     if (mappedProbability != lastImageIndex) {
59       heading();
60       loading();
61       lastImageIndex = mappedProbability;
62     }
63     lastRadiusValue = mappedRadiusValue;
64   }
65
66   // Set new value
67 }
```

## First iteration on p5.js - A simple simulation

The process of putting the puzzle pieces together in code made me realise how intentional I had to be with each element of the practice. The elements being:

## 1 Object

(Symbolises Ritual)

2 Language

#### (Specific Interpretation)

### ③ Throwing Motion

(Simulates Randomness)

Each of these are ways to read the practice that were legitimised and passed down across generations. If we push the simulation, how does this shift the authority for decision-making?

## 1. Object

I then thought about the way my family practises this using coins. A different object is used, but because of the individual and the setting that it is used in, it bears the same significance, albeit altered for convenience. The ritual holds.



How far do I go before it loses its meaning?  
The association with our **ancestral language** of  
divination fades the further we go from this.



I stage a shift here, presenting the shift from **divinatory authority to computational authority**. The further I pushed the image, the further the absurdity of the practice seemed. I would argue that this mechanism mirrors the way a computer makes decisions through a binary system – one we understand as 1s and 0s. If the binary system is truly left to chance, or instructed so, the computer then becomes an object where divination occurs infinitely.

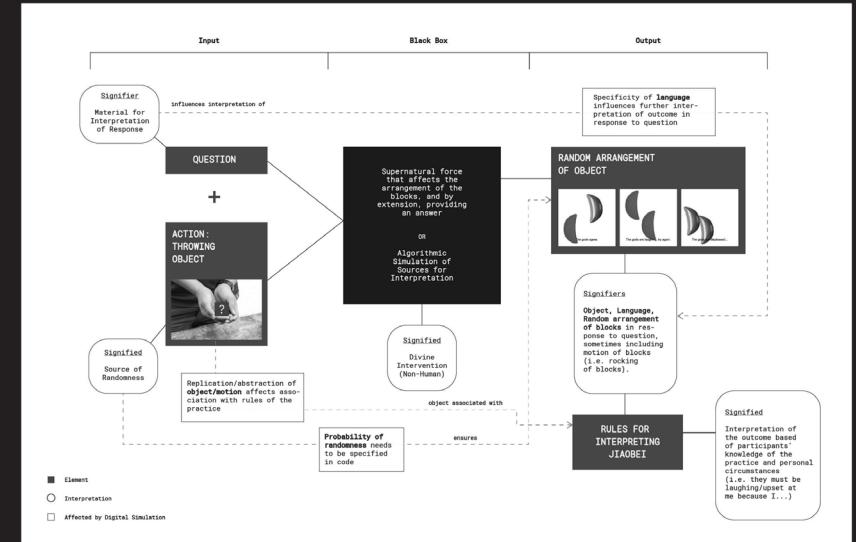
## 2. Language

"The gods are laughing" → "Concentrate and try again" → "Maybe"

Particularly with the *nù jiāo*, and *xiào jiāo*, the text displayed contributed an emotional response that lends itself to additional interpretation by the audience. For instance, if one used the *jiāo bēi* to communicate with an ancestor, their response might be further dependent on their prior understanding of the person. Further questions asked might be "why are they laughing at this question?", or "why does this make them upset?". The evocation of such emotional language gives the outcomes another layer of significance, bringing the inanimate objects to life.

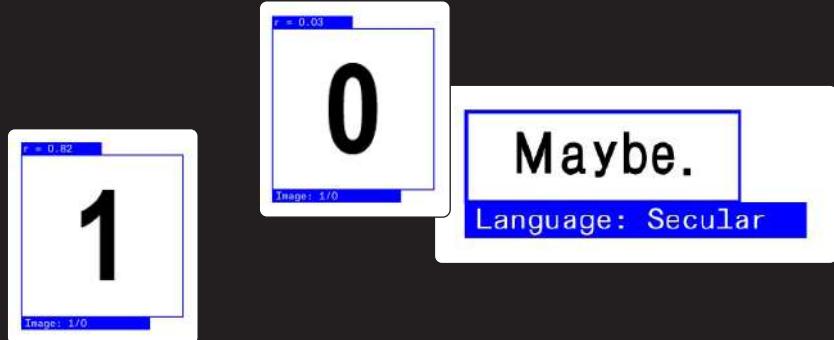
## 3. Probability

The last observation of this experiment is the simulation of statistical probability. The random positioning of the objects across the canvas seeks to replicate the appearance of the blocks when thrown. Throwing the blocks simulates the appearance of randomness, specifically one removed from human manipulation. However, if we account for the outcome of a coin toss, researchers suggest that the probability of heads or tails is not a 50-50 chance. Through this digital recreation, it is possible to adjust the likelihood of each image being generated simply with the introduction of probabilities in the code – a code necessary even if the probability was 50-50. The concealment of which from the participant would be an example of real secrecy in a black box algorithm.



Map of Significance for the Experiment

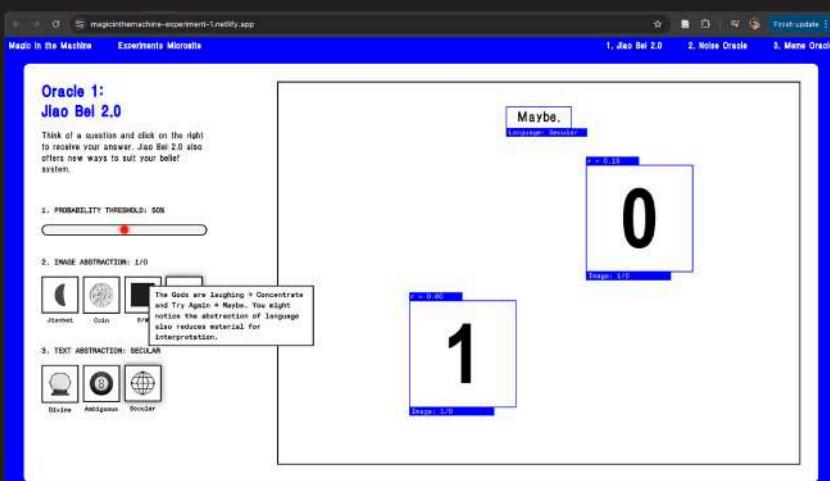
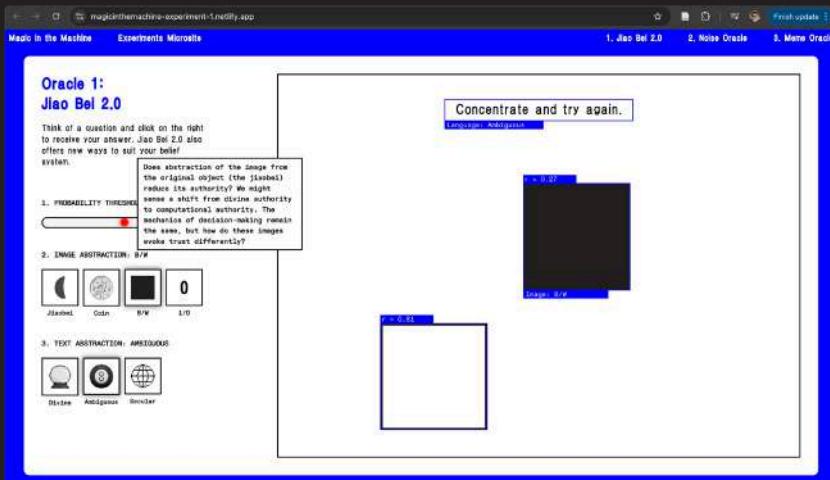
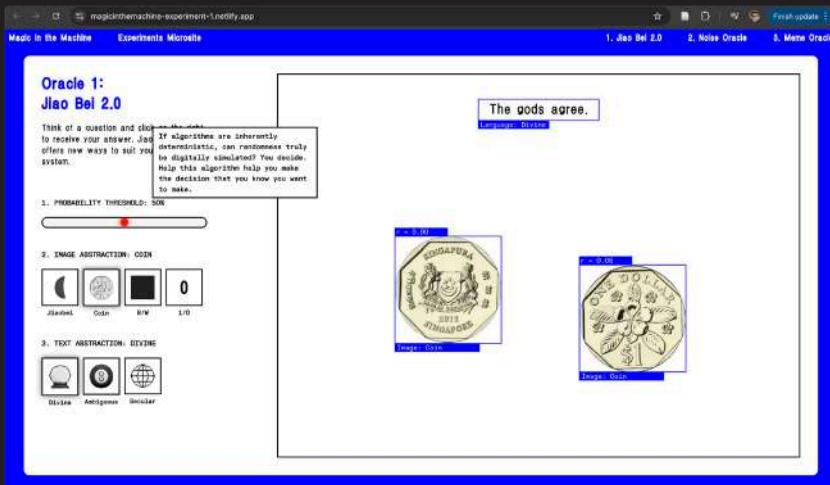
# Interactive Outcome



In attempting to create the jiaobei digitally as a study of materiality in divination, I discovered the endless possibilities for meaning-making that I can create with the same mechanisms.

Jiaobei 2.0 thus invites people to consider how they choose to receive information/make decisions, particularly when it comes to digital interactions.

**Signs point to yes.**  
Language: Ambiguous



# NOISE ORACLE

## Machine-Learning to Make Meaning

This activity started with a curiosity of how image machine learning worked. There was something quite human about the way it was trained to find certainty in what it saw (arguably because it is a system trained by humans).

The screenshots illustrate three attempts at training a machine learning model to identify three facial expressions: Sad, Shocked, and Happy.

- Attempt 1 (42% - 74%)**: Shows three classes with 50 image samples each. The "Training" section indicates "Model Trained". The "Preview" shows a video feed of a person's face, and the "Output" bar shows predictions for Class 1 (~42%), Class 2 (~74%), and Class 3 (~4%). A note says: "Not super accurate. Got 2 out of 3 right(ish). I thought that it might have been because the samples weren't the same amount. So for the next one, I tried a consistent sample size (50) for each class."
- Attempt 2 (80-94%)**: Shows three classes with 50 image samples each. The "Training" section indicates "Model Trained". The "Preview" shows a video feed of a person's face, and the "Output" bar shows predictions for Sad (~80%), Shocked (~94%), and Happy (~0%). A note says: "Better, but still not super confident about it. I then realised that it was only getting the answer right when my face was at certain positions on the screen. I figured it was because all my samples taken was of me in the same position. So, I decided to add more samples of the expression but in different positions."
- Attempt 3 (100%)**: Shows three classes with 200 image samples each. The "Training" section indicates "Model Trained". The "Preview" shows a video feed of a person's face, and the "Output" bar shows predictions for Sad (~0%), Shocked (~0%), and Happy (~100%). A note says: "After I added more samples of my face in different positions, the machine was able to much more accurate predict the right facial expressions."

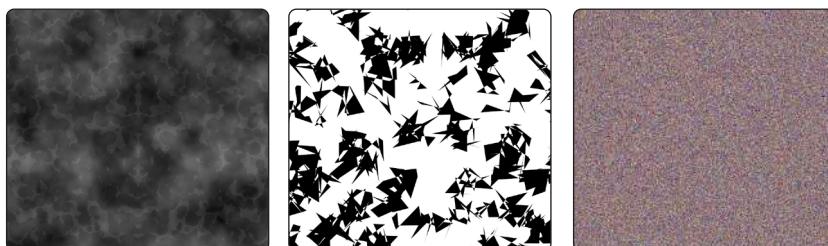
If our ancestors were given current technology, how would they have used it for meaning-making like they did the stars?

## Creating the Stars

In "Divination, Material Culture, and Chance", Morgan writes:

Each of these devices depends on the random generation of a pattern or result of an action that is so random it could not reasonably be expected to have been influence by any agency but those at work in a non-human realm—gods, spirits, ancestors, saints. The evident margin of chance assures participants that the mechanism was not manipulated, resulting in the harvest of purpose from sheer randomness.

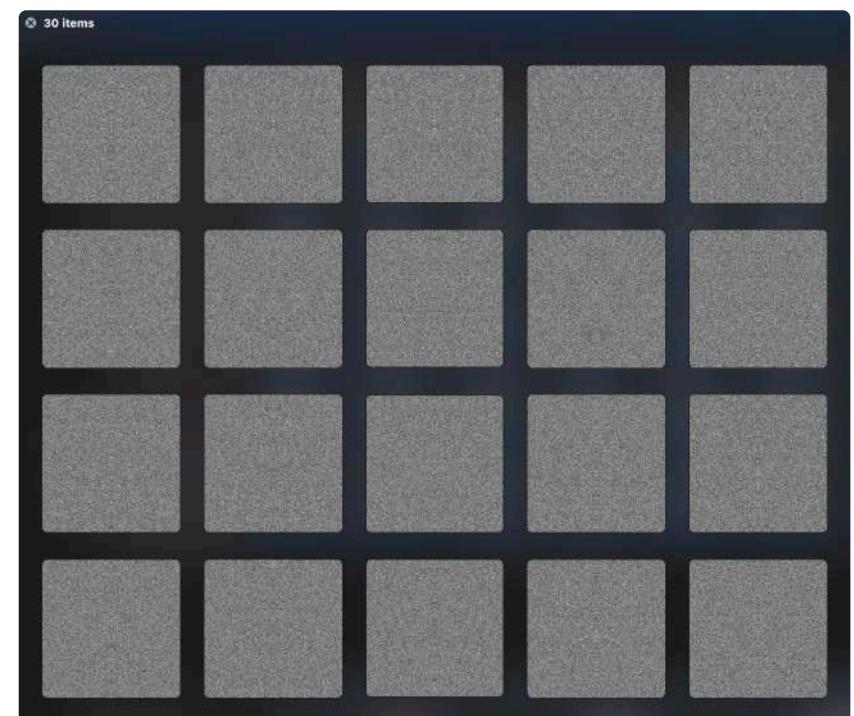
I started looking for a way to simulate randomness in this way through code, eventually landing on **noise generation**. Realising that code was inherently deterministic, there likely is no true way to be random (there are ways, like including external input for randomness, but I aimed to create solely through computation).



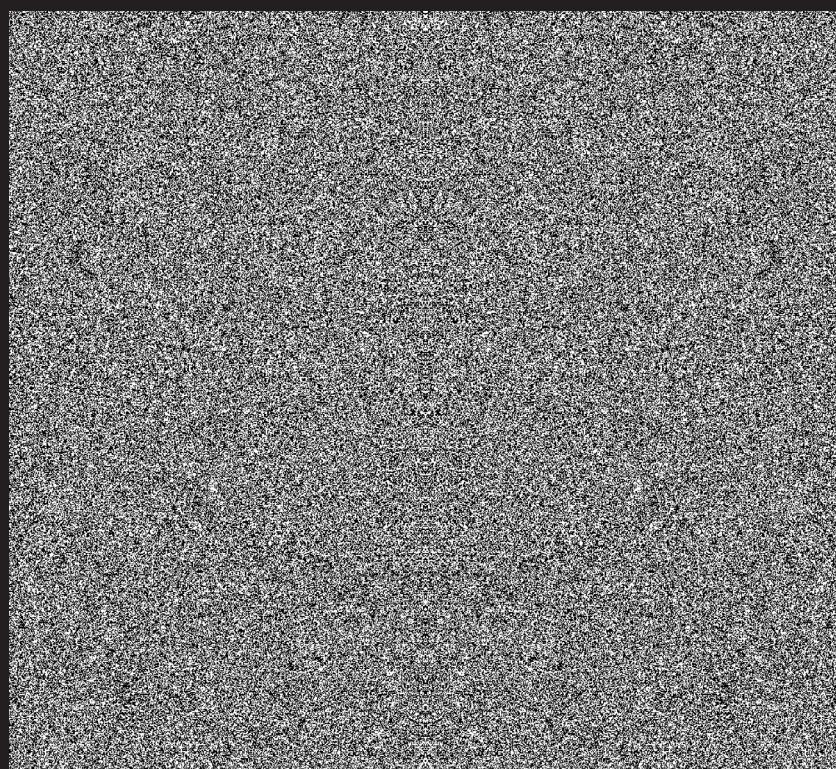
Different iterations of noise made in p5.js

As I stared at the noise, I wonder if I might start to see patterns that I can't perceive yet. Maybe the machine will be able to read the noise for me. Ultimately , I decided to go with just a 1000x1000px canvas (below), each assigned to a binary outcome, black or white. I felt like this embodied the true binary decision-making process of the computer.

With (literally) a million binary variations at play, it is virtually impossible for 2 of the same images to be recreated.

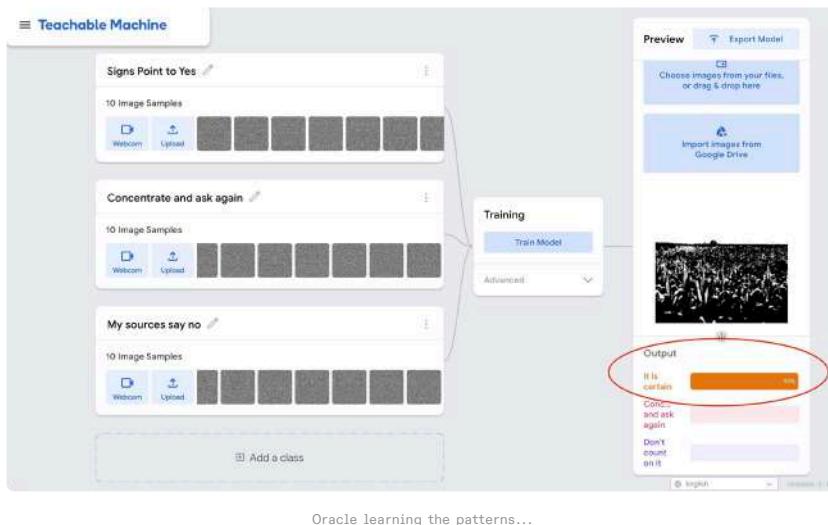


A poetic framing of these images positions them as computer-generated maps of stars, which – like the skies or water – served as a medium for a type of divination known as **scrying**. Unlike augury, which interprets observable events, or divination, which follows standardized rituals, scrying's impressions arise within the medium itself.



## Creating the Oracle

The user's input would come from an image that had an sentimental value to them. This would be the equivalent of utilising the belongings of the deceased to communicate with them<sup>1</sup>.



It took no time to train the model to assign meaning to different sets of noise images. Some trial and error and the model was able to assign meaning to different images uploaded — assessed from patterns imperceptible to the human eye.

## Ambiguous Language



In looking for language that was **idiosyncratically spiritual**, I looked towards the Magic 8-Ball. In 1950, the device was rebranded from the Syco-Seer — a device rooted in spiritualist techniques — to a device that distanced

itself from its existing belief systems. This saw a shift in its appearance, interactivity and language, allowing a more spiritually ambiguous audience to trust in its authority, a move that catapulted it into pop culture iconography (Hu). Upon reviewing the affirmative, non-committal and negative answers of the Magic 8-Ball, I selected one of each. Respectively:

**"Signs Point to Yes",  
"Concentrate and Ask Again"  
"My Sources Say No".**

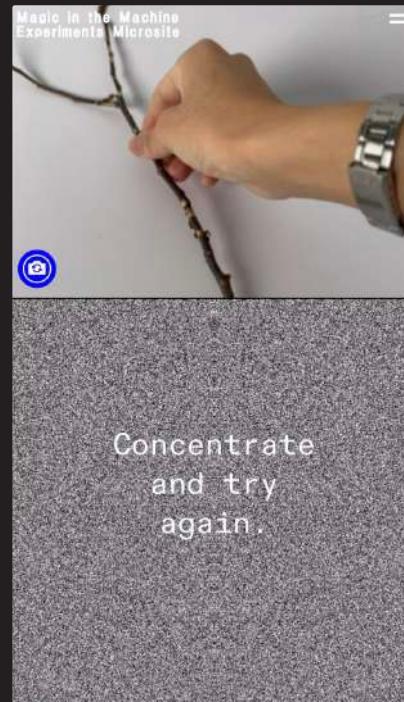
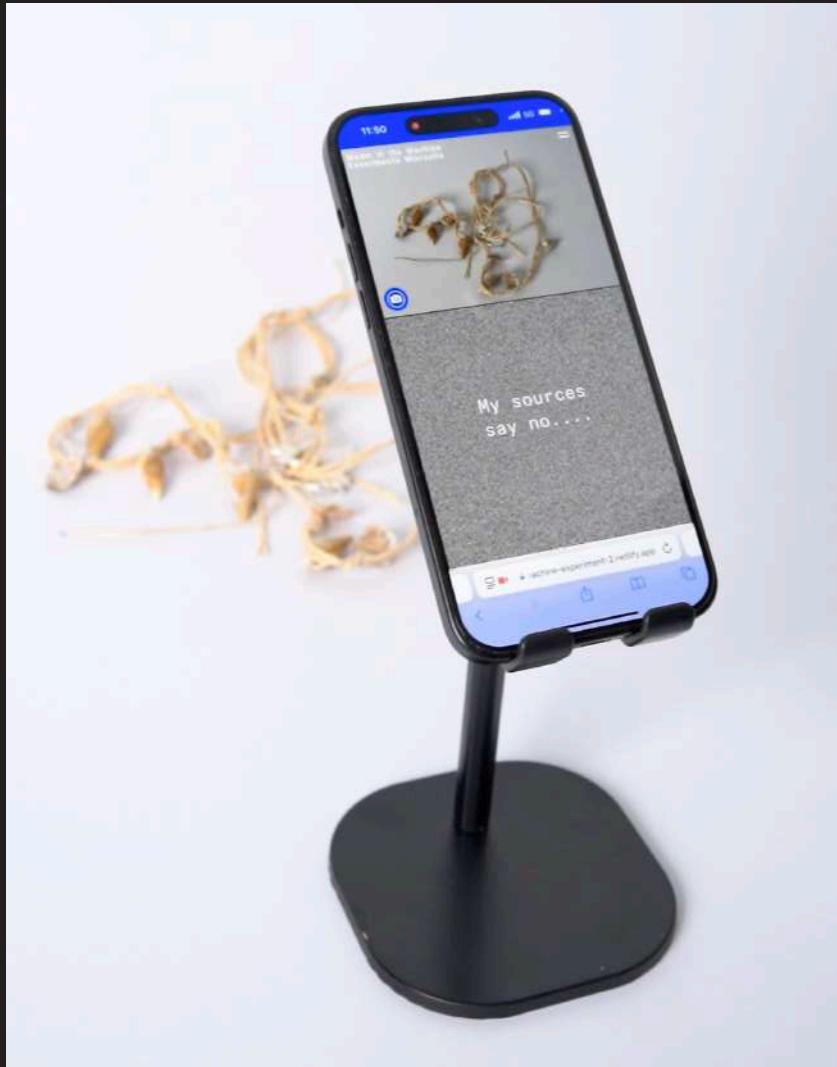


As I put it to the test, I started to think about how I would assess the success of this oracle. Was is how believable it was to people? Was it only if it managed to assign all 3 categories fairly, I wouldn't even know how to begin doing that, as the oracle was inherently based in randomness and unpredictability.

Perhaps that's not the point. The point is in these questions that would've only arised in the making of this oracle.

<sup>1</sup> See 'Granny's Ring' by Cornelius

# Interactive Outcome



# MEMESIS OF AN AI ORACLE

## Memes as a Hermeneutic Encounter



Whether its images, text, video or just a concept, Internet memes have changed the way we communicate with one another, this phenomena which Cole Stryker calls the “language of memes” and “visual vernacular” that allows people to communicate emotions, thoughts and opinions.

It has become almost impossible to talk about the internet without memes. The concept of the meme was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) as part of a theory that explained why certain ideas, catchphrases, trends, and other pieces of cultural information replicate through a population. Seemingly inconsequential and humorous, the meme has been a source of study for meaning-making. The humour of memes itself primes itself as a mechanism from which we create symbolic boundaries, who gets it?

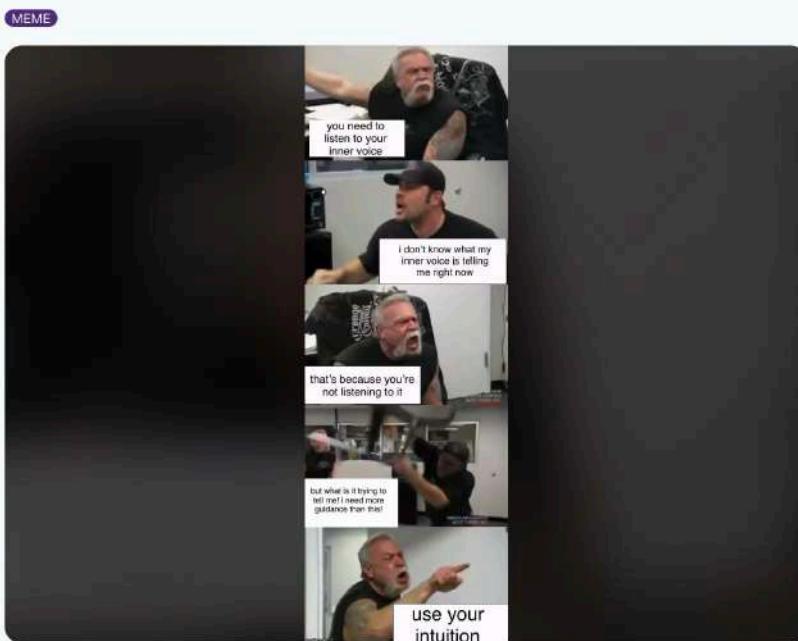
All this to say that there is much we can say about memes as a medium for interpretation, one that is particularly relevant in the post-internet age. It is simultaneously individual, yet collective. It is innocuous, yet offensive. It is cool, yet cringe. It is rational, yet irrational.

## Memes as Lost Media and a Source of Intuitive Meaning-Making

## Tarot as a Hermeneutic Encounter

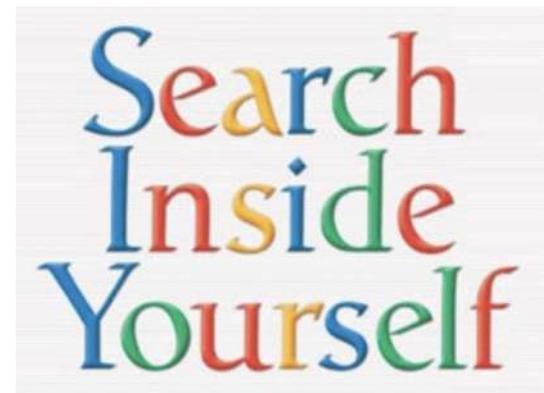
The process of tarot card reading is inherently a hermeneutic one. One can approach tarot cards with or without a spiritual perspective. One simply asks a question, and observes the symbolism of a card to interpret their current predicament.

when i try to do a reading for myself during a difficult time



Podcast host of *The Tarot Diagnosis* says, “There’s something about the images that allow our brains to unlock memories and thoughts and feelings. My approach is secular and from a standpoint of self reflection. What can we discover about ourselves?”

## Intuition as Resistance



If we are indeed hypothetically moving towards an AI superintelligence that delivers an ‘objective truth’, perhaps leaning into the ultimate subjectivity of our intuition is the ultimate act of resistance for crashing the algorithm, and leaning into our embodied knowledge to regain agency over decision-making.



The Fool vs. The Fool (AI-Generated)

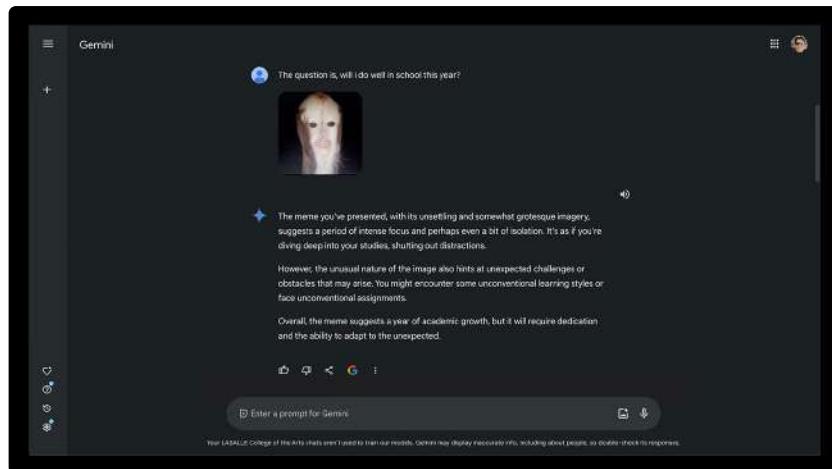
The Fool represents new beginnings, having faith in the future, being inexperienced, not knowing what to expect, having beginner's luck, improvisation and believing in the universe. It does not have to look like either of these versions of the card, but the cards often carry similar symbolism. (Sun, mountains, waves, etc.) In fact, the AI-generated one (right) is titled ‘The Foot’.



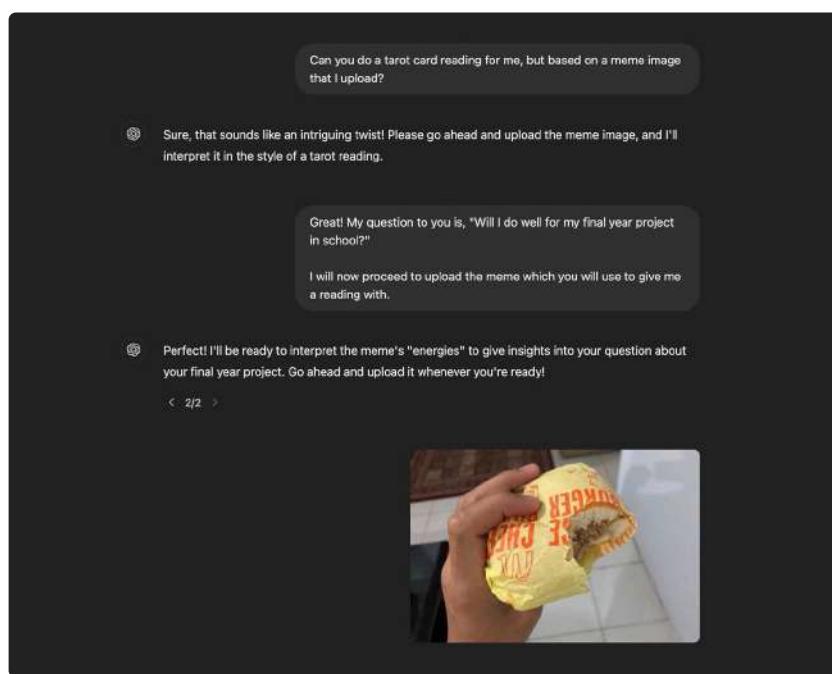
This oracle is thus fulfills the curiosity over AI's ability for symbolic interpretation, as well as an exercise in using the intuition in response to AI as a form of identity construction and meaning-making.

## 1. ChatGPT Testing

My first step was an investigation to test out the interpretation capabilities of ChatGPT and Gemini. Ultimately, ChatGPT was able to provide more interesting responses.



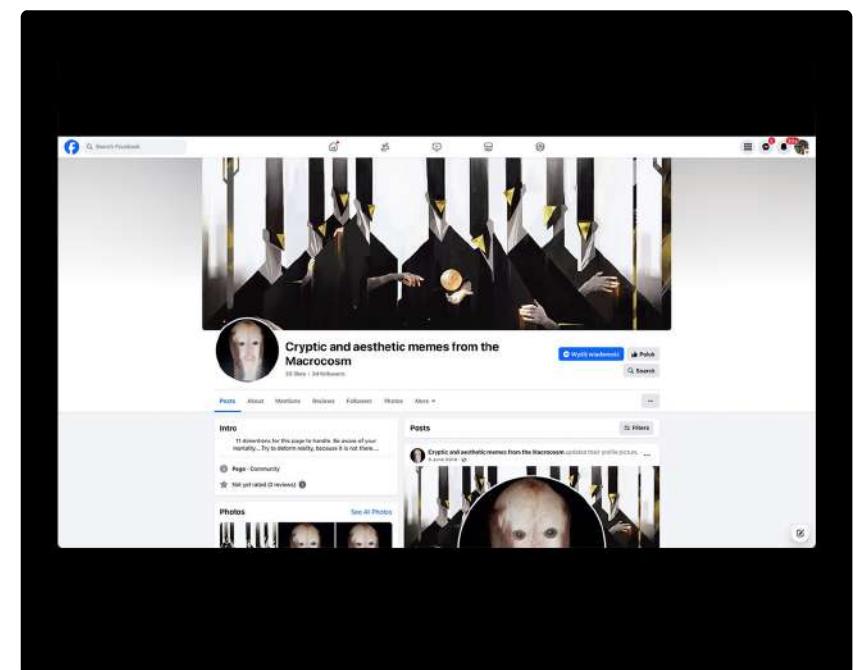
Gemini Testing



ChatGPT Testing

## 2. Gather Library of Memes

Inspired by internet artist Everest Pipkin's "default filename tv", this project also positions memes as potential lost media, some more recent, others posted ages ago in inactive facebook pages or other social media sites.



Obscure Facebook pages as archives

My search for memes thus brought me to the corners of obscure facebook pages, pinterest, or other sites.

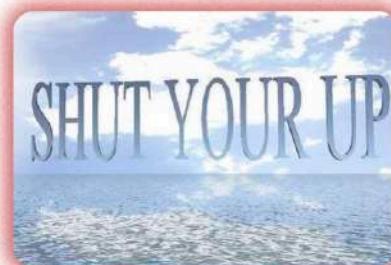
16/46 memes archived



alien-eating.jpg



alien-dance.jpg



shut-up.jpg



shrek-tattoo.jpg



bike-done.jpg



cockroach-meeting.jpg



bert-ernie.jpg



shrek-naruto.jpg



i am leg.jpg



fish-nails.jpg



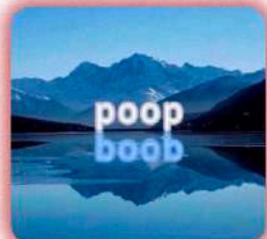
rabbit-cigarette.jpg



bird-spiral.jpg

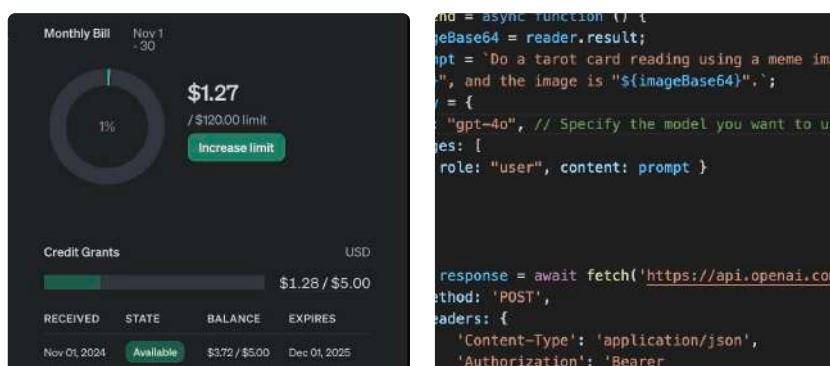
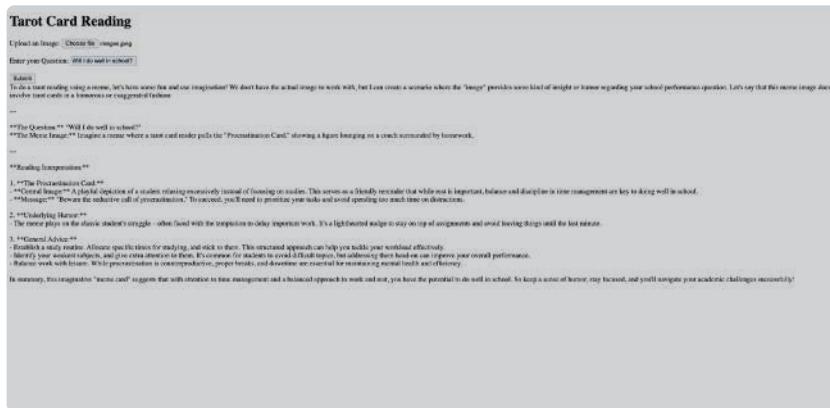


poop-boop.jpg



## 3. Website Prototyping

With the help of ChatGPT, I started figuring out how to create this website that would allow me to send a selected meme to ChatGPT for a reading, in response to the client's question. (This process made me wish ChatGPT was superintelligent because it really was not that helpful.) Ultimately, it was a 3-day long process of sitting down with the code and figuring out exactly how to make it work like I intended.



I also started realising the cost of running an API for image-reading.

## 4. Finetuning the Tone

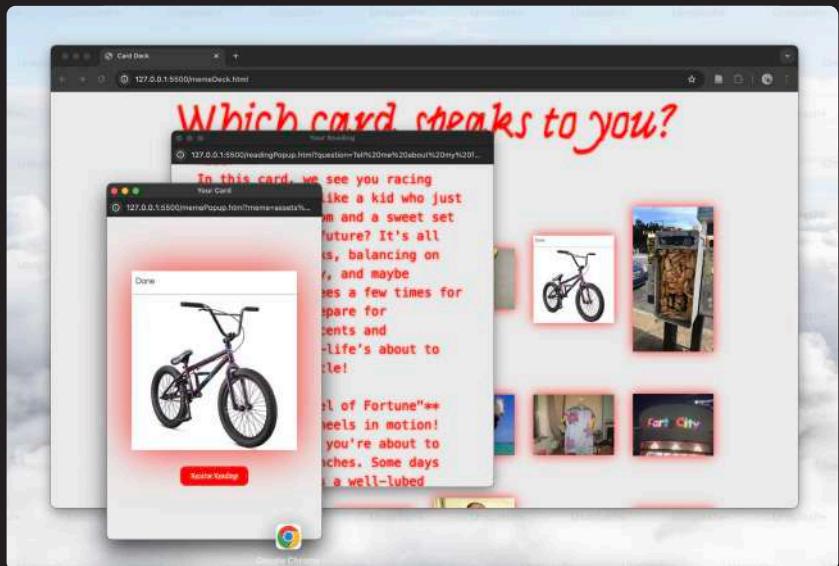
I tried a bunch of preprompts to adjust the tone of the responses. I tested for humour, absurdity, friendliness, emotional, but ultimately decided I wanted the tone to be serious so that I could elicit an emotional response from the participant.

```

body: JSON.stringify({
  model: "gpt-4o-mini",
  messages: [
    {
      role: "system",
      content: "Please do a reading in the style of tarot or astrology (but do not mention tarot in the response), but based on a meme image that I upload. Be specific with the readings based on details in the image. Give the card and individual detail a title. Tone should be serious, almost like a real tarot reading."
    },
    {
      role: "user",
      content: [
        { type: "text", text: `My question to you is, ${question}.` },
        { type: "image_url", image_url: { url: `data:image/jpeg;base64,${base64Image}` } }
      ]
    ]
}
  
```

Specific Tone Adjustments for ChatGPT

# Interactive Outcome



Consulting the oracle...

\*\*\*

\*\*\*

Your Reading  
127.0.0.1:5500/readingPopup.html?question=Tell%20me%20about%20my%20future&...

Consulting the oracle...

\*\*\*

\*\*\*

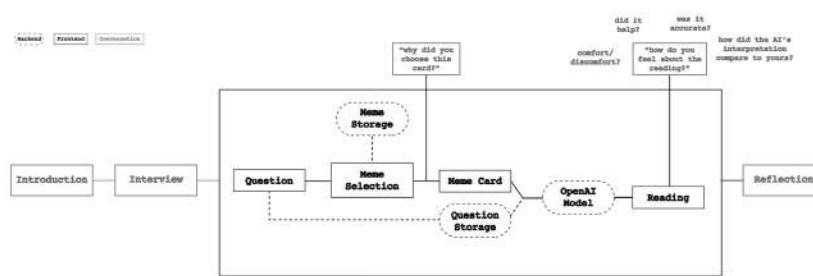
### The Alien Feast of Your Future

\*\*Card Title: Intergalactic Indigestion\*\*  
In the not-so-distant future, expect to find yourself at a table laden with the bizarre and grotesque. While others may aim for the stars, your culinary adventure seems to be a questionable buffet of oddities. It's a reminder that sometimes, embracing the unexpected can lead to... interesting experiences. Just make sure to bring antacids.

\*\*Detail Title: Brainy Choices\*\*  
There's a distinct hint of creativity hovering over your decisions—like selecting brain matter as a delicacy. Sure, it's bold and unconventional, but think twice before diving in. Your ideas might be revolutionary or utterly ridiculous. Nevertheless, don't shy away from exploring the bizarre, as it might just be the key to something extraordinary. Or at least memorable.

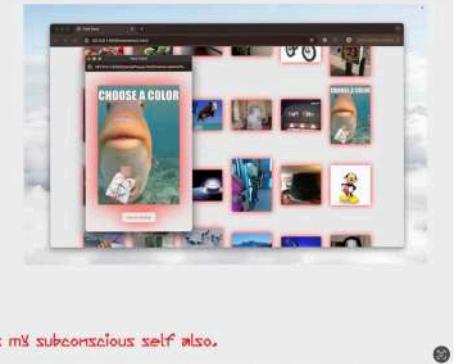


## Staging the Reading

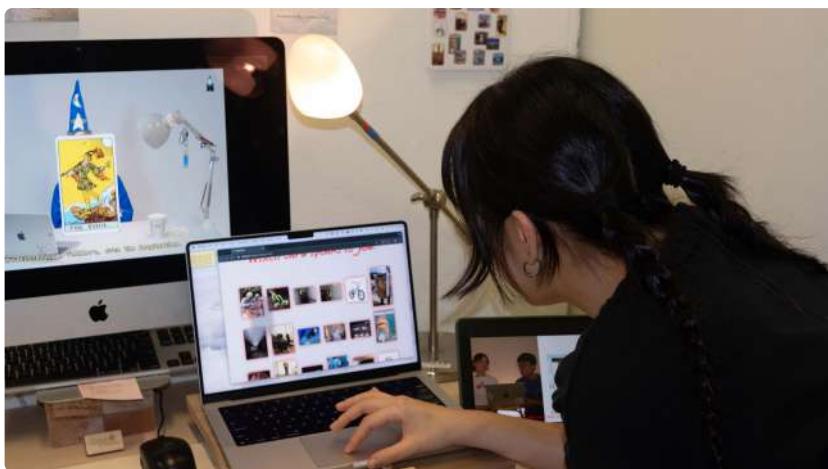


Particularly for a project that challenges traditional perceptions of AI interaction, a mediator between participant and AI would aid the participant in having a more reflective interaction while engaging in meaningful conversation. Another benefit to the conversational aspect is personalisation of the message. The exercise thus starts off with an interview to set the tone and understand the participant's relationship with technology better. The activity then acts as a catalyst for conversation about interpretation, intuition, memes and the algorithm, before ending off with a reflection.

## First Readings



## Open Studios



## Final Readings



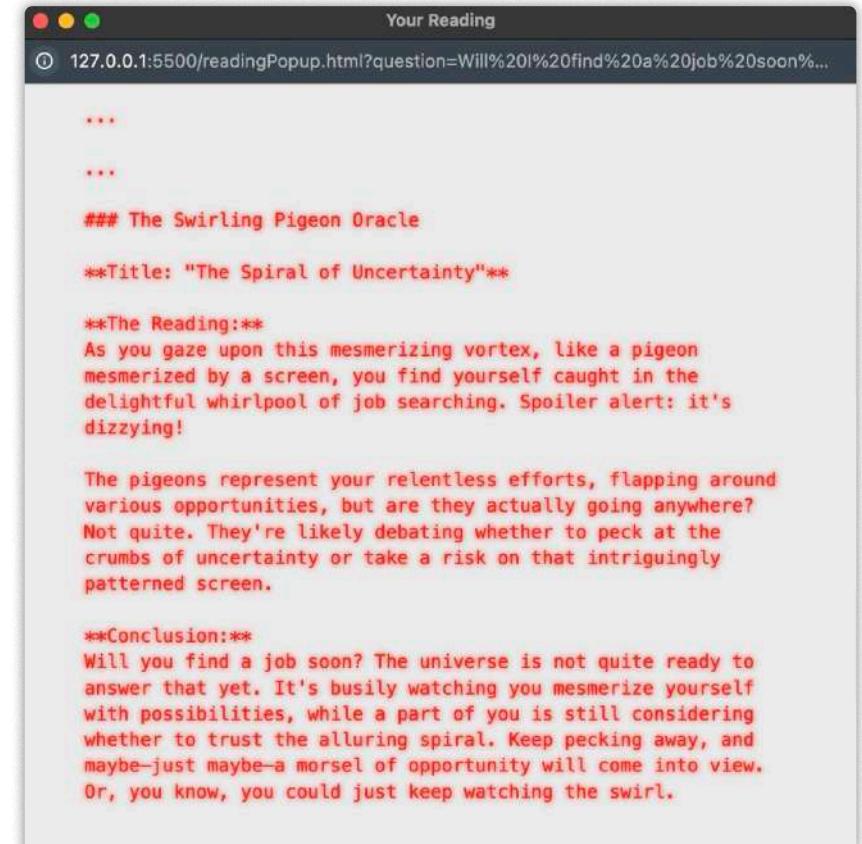
# Reading Outcomes

Question

"Will I find a job soon?"

Card

The Swirling Pigeon Oracle



Question

Will I get a boyfriend?

Card

The Eccentric Seeker



Your Reading

127.0.0.1:5500/readingPopup.html?question=will%20i%20get%20a%20boyfriend%20t...

...

**### The Eccentric Seeker**

**\*\*Position: Standing Tall in Unlikely Heels\*\***  
You might just find yourself in a situation that defies expectations. This character, with a questionable fashion choice, symbolizes the unpredictability of love. Get ready for surprises—perhaps not all of them will be size-related.

**\*\*The Outlook: Heightened Standards\*\***  
Your request for a partner who is at least 5'7" and has "six inches" (whatever that may symbolize...) suggests you have some precise criteria. Keep in mind that the people you meet may not fit the mold you're envisioning. Sometimes, a little height doesn't hurt—just keep your expectations grounded!

**\*\*Advice: Embrace the Unexpected\*\***  
Much like this gentleman, true attraction can come from the most unexpected places. Instead of focusing solely on measurements, consider the personality that truly elevates someone. Remember, a tall order might lead you to shorter connections that are worth your time!

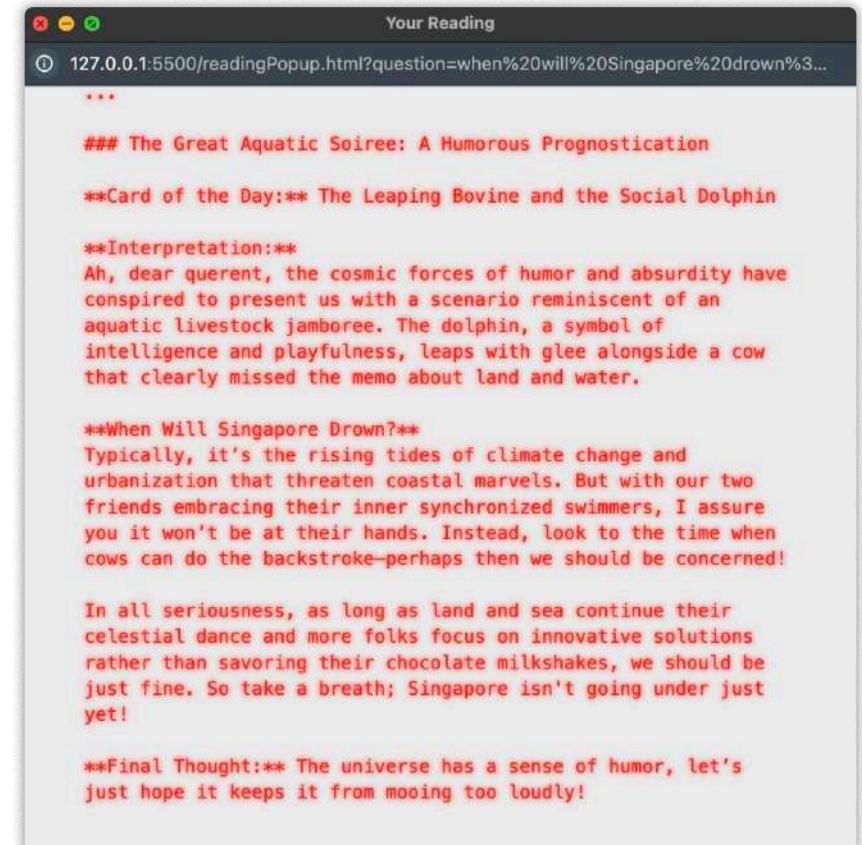
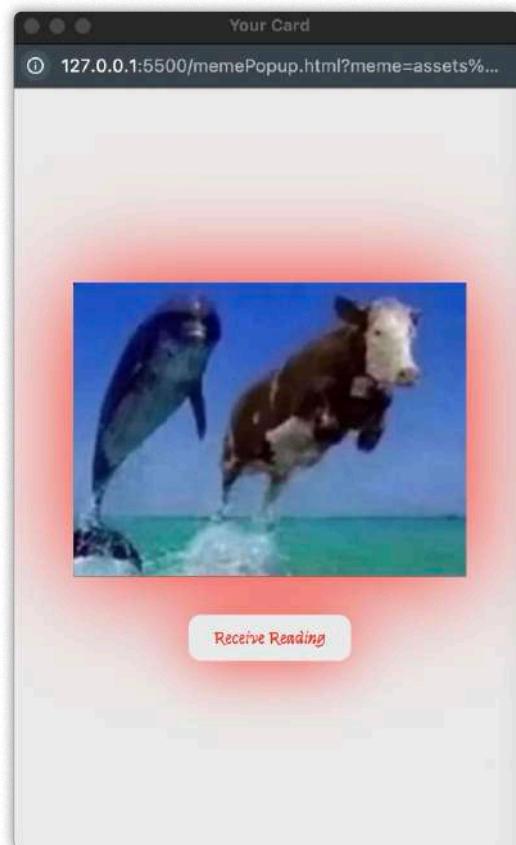
So, will you get that boyfriend? Possibly, but keep your heart and mind open to the wild and weird world of love—you never know what may just spring up in those unexpected heels!

Question

Will Singapore  
drown?

Card

The Great  
Aquatic Soiree



In his comparison of memes to dreams, Knapp suggests that meaning-making through their often abstract imagery requires complex subconscious processes, or the intuition.

Just like tarot cards and readers, chatbots often act as mirrors. They reflect your language, refine our logic, and structure your symbolic world. They can be a powerful tool for healing if used right.

Having done this reading with numerous participants, I have seen the conversations that come with it, and seen it for its potential to bring out reflection and thought within people. It is also interesting to see how people of different belief systems interact with it. I get genuinely deep questions sometimes, and other times, absolute nonsense.

That's all right, because that's exactly how we interact with new technology sometimes. We're all figuring out how it works, how much to believe, how much to let in.

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