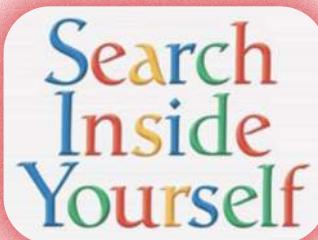


# Memesis of an AI Oracle



A hermeneutic investigation into memes, intuition and the algorithm

# Algorithmic Folklore

Researcher Gabriele de Seta tells the story of the 'Crungus', an imaginary brainchild of comedian Guy Kelly and the Dall-e image generator, Craiyon. Further investigation revealed that 'Crungus' was a made-up word that somehow resulted in the generation of many similar-looking cryptids.



Eventually, 'Crungus' took on a life of its own. With each new generation of the creature, the creature became more real, generating visions of a life well-lived.



Gabriele defines 'algorithmic folklore' as the repertoire of genres and practices resulting from the encounter between vernacular creativity and everyday automation'. Indeed, the mythological 'Crungus' is yet another manifestation of humanity's old-world metaphysical longings for myth-creation, and a confirmation that that is something AI can provide.

With each new medium of information technology – talking drums, scrolls, printed books, computers – we find new ways of meaning-making, creating new opportunities for thought, perception and social experience<sup>1</sup>.



Crystal Ball  
(Scrying)



Magic 8-Ball  
(Randomness based  
on set answers)



Amazon Alexa  
(All-knowing)

However, new technologies are not created in a vacuum, as Balsamo posits, "designs are historically constituted"<sup>2</sup>. It is then imperative that we look towards the past to find out how our ancestral instincts (stemming from the metaphysical) affect the way we interact with technology in current times.

In a world where progress finds itself in the industrial image of technology, each new iteration of product finds itself embedded with ways to remove "irrational" decision-making from its predecessor.

<sup>1</sup>'Techgnosis' by Erik Davis

<sup>2</sup>'Designing Technoculture' by Anne Balsamo

## // THE MYTH OF OBJECTIVE AI

In the age of Generative AI, algorithms continue to make sense of the world through its machine learning.

If I asked for an image of a fish:



ChatGPT 4o, Prompt: "Create an image of a fish."

Of course, we now know that these images of fish are nothing without the images that came before it, labelled "fish". If we traced back the source material for each newly generated image of a fish, it would be one labelled by a human - through an image title, a tag, a caption.

Now I pose the question: Are these fish?

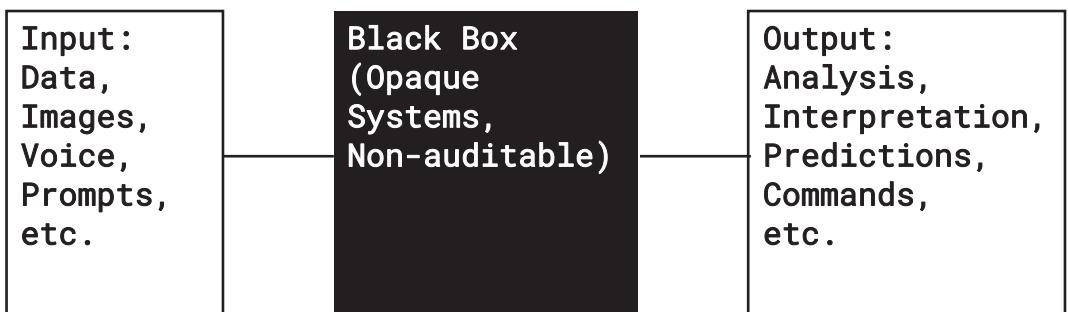


Well, no! Neither of them are fish, despite having the word 'fish' in its name (starfish), or the general appearance of a fish (orca whale). To the uninformed, however, they might be mislabelled as 'fish'.

Now, depending on how many mislabelled 'fish' images there are, the accuracy of the prompt "Create an iamge of a fish" may starts dwindling.

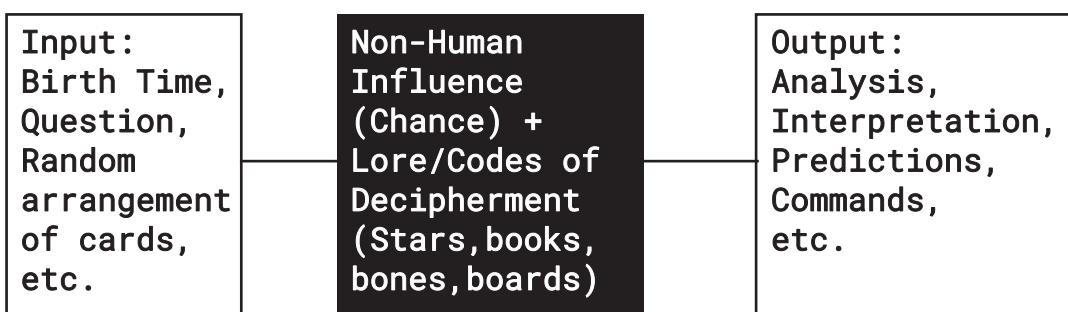
## // THE BLACK BOX AS DIVINATION

Pasquale's framing of opaque AI models as a 'black box<sup>3</sup>' paints a good picture of why this is a problem.



The black box represents AI model's opacity and unaccountability, highlighting the implications of data-driven decision making. The lack of transparency behind the algorithms that generate our outputs renders this very system as a modern form of divination. The definition of divination varies across cultures, but most refer to the practice of seeking meaning, truth, or direction from non-human sources.

Most systems of divination rely on the same formula.



This brings up a few questions...

- How 'rational' can our algorithms really be?
- Is there a future in which we build an infallible belief in AI, mirroring other divinatory practices?
- What role does our divinatory instinct have to play in this trajectory?
- Will we lose our agency over our decision-making and meaning-making abilities?

Of the many implications of such AI agents, this research concerns itself with **passive consumption** and **lack of diversity in information**.

## // NOETIC FUTURE

In the article 'The Noetic Future of Culture and Brands', Zach Lamb documents a cultural trend of 'intuitive decision making'. He introduces the notion of the 'Noetic era' - an era guided by 'inner wisdom, direct knowing, intuition, or implicit understanding.' - one that exists between the scientific and religious.

He theorises that this comes as a response to AI's rapid development. As we approach a possible future where AI becomes as intelligent, if not more, than humans (a sentiment echoed by Ray Kurzweil in 'The Singularity is Near'), we are faced with the question of what makes us human.

The same way we can't explain what the colour red looks like to us, or they subjective experience of tasting an oyster, intuition is something that is often ineffable.

ANCIENT	RELIGIOUS	SCIENTIFIC	NOETIC
<i>Description:</i> Awe Knowledge locally situated and rooted in humanity's subordination to nature. Natural world is seen as the source of divine truth. Passed down orally with minor changes through time.	<i>Description:</i> Authority Knowledge from divine decree. Authority from a strong hierarchy, with God's will at the top and everything else below. One to many transmissions that are not questioned.	<i>Description:</i> Intelligence Knowledge derived via empiricism and the scientific method. Observation, measurement, quantification, classification. Created by groups and shared with society.	<i>Description:</i> Intuition Knowledge felt to be true intuitively and emotionally. It has an ineffable quality that makes it hard to explain, you just know you know, e.g. "vibes." Individual and non-hierarchical.
<i>Feeling:</i> Awe, wonder, reverence, fear.	<i>Feeling:</i> Order, discipline, subservience.	<i>Feeling:</i> Control, anxiety, autonomy, superiority.	<i>Feeling:</i> Vibes, interconnection, disorientation, <u>anomie</u> .
<i>Narratives / Mythologies:</i> Natural equality: Humans are allied in devotion to the forces of nature. Polytheistic myths, magics and religions rooted in the natural world. Mysticism. <u>Animism</u> <sup>4</sup> . <u>Totemic family lineages</u> <sup>5</sup> . Rise of "the story" as the dominant means of communication.	<i>Narratives / Mythologies:</i> Original sin: Humans are flawed creatures in need of salvation. <u>The Protestant Ethic</u> <sup>4</sup> : Hard work and labor in a calling is key to divine salvation (workism). <u>Hierarchy</u> : God is about man, man is above woman. Duality: Good and evil.	<i>Narratives / Mythologies:</i> Humanity as masters of the universe: Nature is ours to control, dominate and exploit. Consecration of the self: Individual autonomy. <u>Homo Economicus</u> <sup>6</sup> : Capitalism and democracy. End of History: Enlightenment and the inevitability of human progress.	<i>Narratives / Mythologies:</i> Interconnection: Humans are not special, but part of something larger. Planetary Intelligence: There are many intelligences in the universe. Self = God: The path to God is internal, not external. Not in sacred texts or practices.
<i>Institutions:</i> Tribes, Friendship, Communes.	<i>Institutions:</i> Military, Police, Education.	<i>Institutions:</i> Medicine, Law, Tech, Bureaucracy.	<i>Institutions:</i> Therapy, Arts, Design.
<i>Modern Expressions:</i> Paleo, carnivore and natural, "clean" diets. "Craft" movement. Decentralized Autonomous Networks (DAOs), Crypto.	<i>Modern Expressions:</i> Intense, devotional fitness systems and practices. Mental and discipline platforms. Warring tribes of belief.	<i>Modern Expressions:</i> Atheism. <u>Effective Altruism</u> <sup>6</sup> . Longevity and biohacking. <u>The Anthropocene</u> <sup>7</sup> .	<i>Modern Expressions:</i> Psychedelic movement. <u>Panspsychism</u> <sup>8</sup> . Trauma discourse. "Therapy-speak." Chosen family.

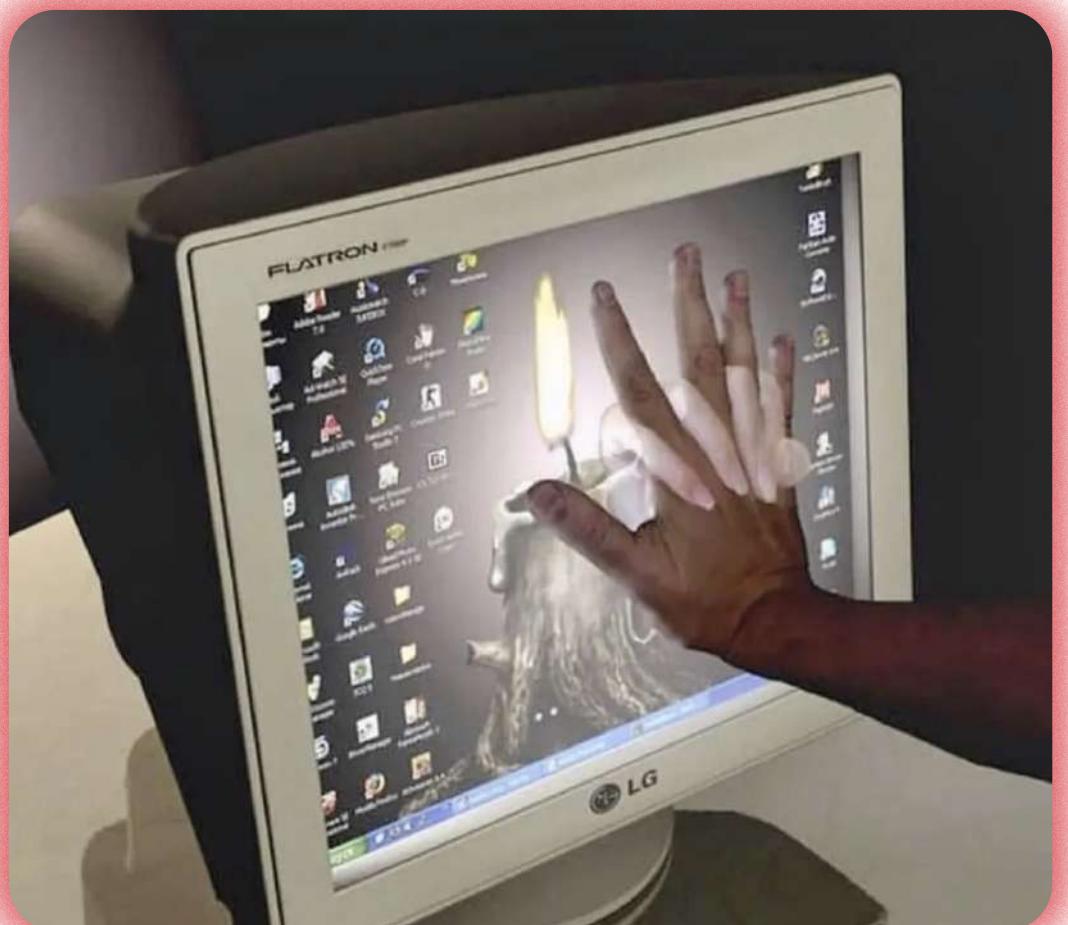
Analysis of Eras  
Zach Lamb

## // INTUITION AS AN ACT OF 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.

<sup>4</sup> Zach Lamb, 'The Noetic Future of Culture and Brands'  
<sup>5</sup> Alexi Gunner, 're-enchanted decision-making'

# Memesis of an AI Oracle



Communication scholar Klaus Krippendorff (1995: 156) describes the fundamental paradox of the designing process as an oscillation between "the aim of making something new and different from what was there before, and the desire to have it make sense, to be recognizable and understandable." As he rightly points out, innovation cannot be so novel that it makes no sense at all. To be comprehended, an innovation must draw on understandings that are already in circulation within the particular technocultures of users, consumers, and participants; at the same time it must perform novelty through the creation of new possibilities, expressed in the language, desires, dreams, and phantasms of needs.

## // Tarot as a Hermeneutic Encounter

In an attempt to answer the questions, I created a process inspired by the likes of tarot card reading. 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.

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?"



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'.



Evidently, the basis of tarot reading is human intuition. The card acts as a mirror from which we draw meaning from, a catalyst for introspection and healing. To a non-believer, this process could be deemed "irrational". After all, there is no scientific basis to believing a card more for its selection by chance. The foundation for its effectiveness is belief. Belief in its ability to:

1. Be impartial
2. Be a source of more-than-human knowledge
3. Be a tool for healing

## // Memes as a Hermeneutic Encounter

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.

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 and opinions. 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? Is this person's sense of humour offensive? What does that say about them?

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.

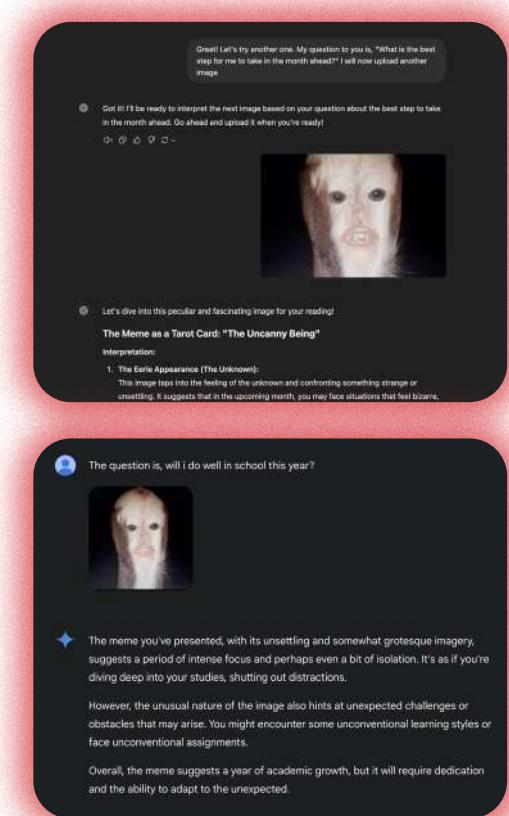
The questions this prototype asks is therefore:

- How does an AI interpret memes?
- How might an AI use memes to understand a person's identity?
- How does the user feel about an AI's analysis of a meme?
- Can memes be a tool for resistance in regaining agency over meaning-making and decision-making?

## // Conjuring the Oracle

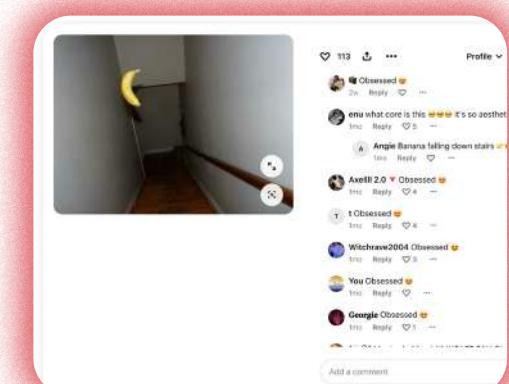
### 1. ChatGPT Testing

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.



### 2. Gather Library of Memes

I collected cryptic images from a few sources like Facebook, Pinterest, etc.



I intentionally picked the ones that were strange and abstract so that I would challenge both the chatbot and the client's interpretive imagination.

Just like a tarot card, the goal was to find mirrors in the symbolism of the image.

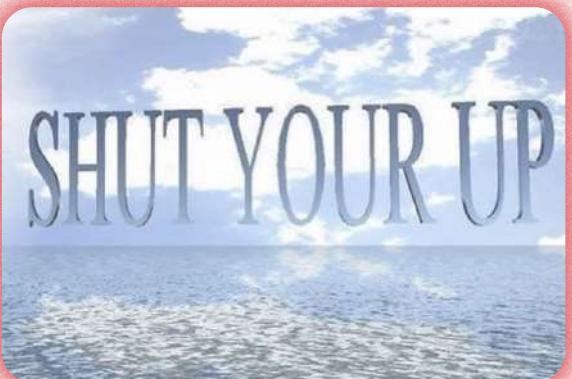




alien-eating.jpg



alien-dance.jpg



shut-up.jpg

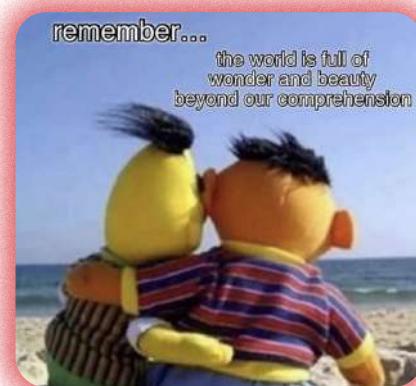


shrek-tattoo.jpg

shrek-naruto.jpg



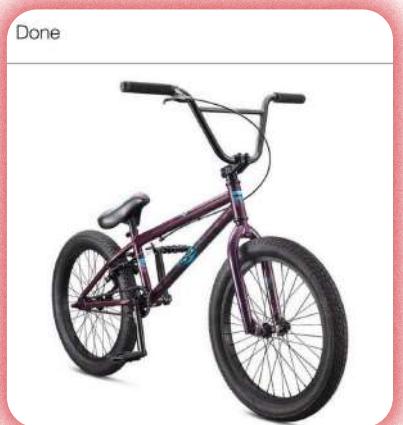
cockroach-meeting.jpg



bert-ernie.jpg



rabbit-cigarette.jpg



bike-done.jpg

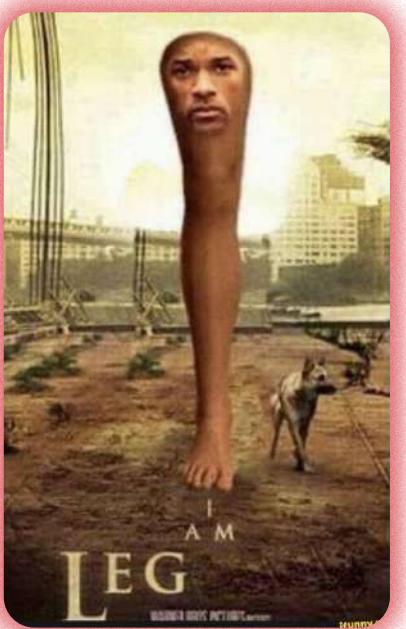
fish-color.jpg



choose-a-color.jpg



fish-nails.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

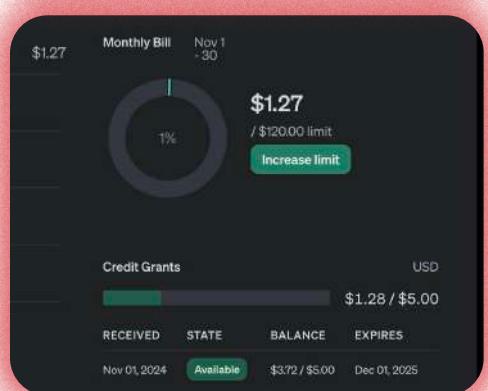
I tried a bunch of pre-prompts to adjust the tone of the responses. I tested for humour, absurdity, friendliness, emotional, but ultimately decided I wanted the tone to be serious so that I could elicit an emotional response from the participant.



```

<script>
  document.getElementById('tarotForm').addEventListener('submit', (e) => {
    if (imageUpload) {
      const reader = new FileReader();
      reader.onloadend = async function () {
        const imageBase64 = reader.result;
        const prompt = `Do a tarot card reading using a meme image: ${imageBase64}.`;
        const body = {
          model: "gpt-4o", // Specify the model you want
          messages: [
            { role: "user", content: prompt }
          ]
        };
        try {
          const response = await fetch('https://api.openai.com/v1/completions', {
            method: 'POST',
            headers: {
              'Content-Type': 'application/json',
              'Authorization': `Bearer ${process.env.OPENAI_API_KEY}`
            },
            body: JSON.stringify(body)
          });
          const data = await response.json();
          const message = data.choices[0].text;
          const element = document.createElement('div');
          element.innerHTML = message;
          document.querySelector('#readingOutput').appendChild(element);
        } catch (error) {
          console.error(error);
        }
      };
    }
  });

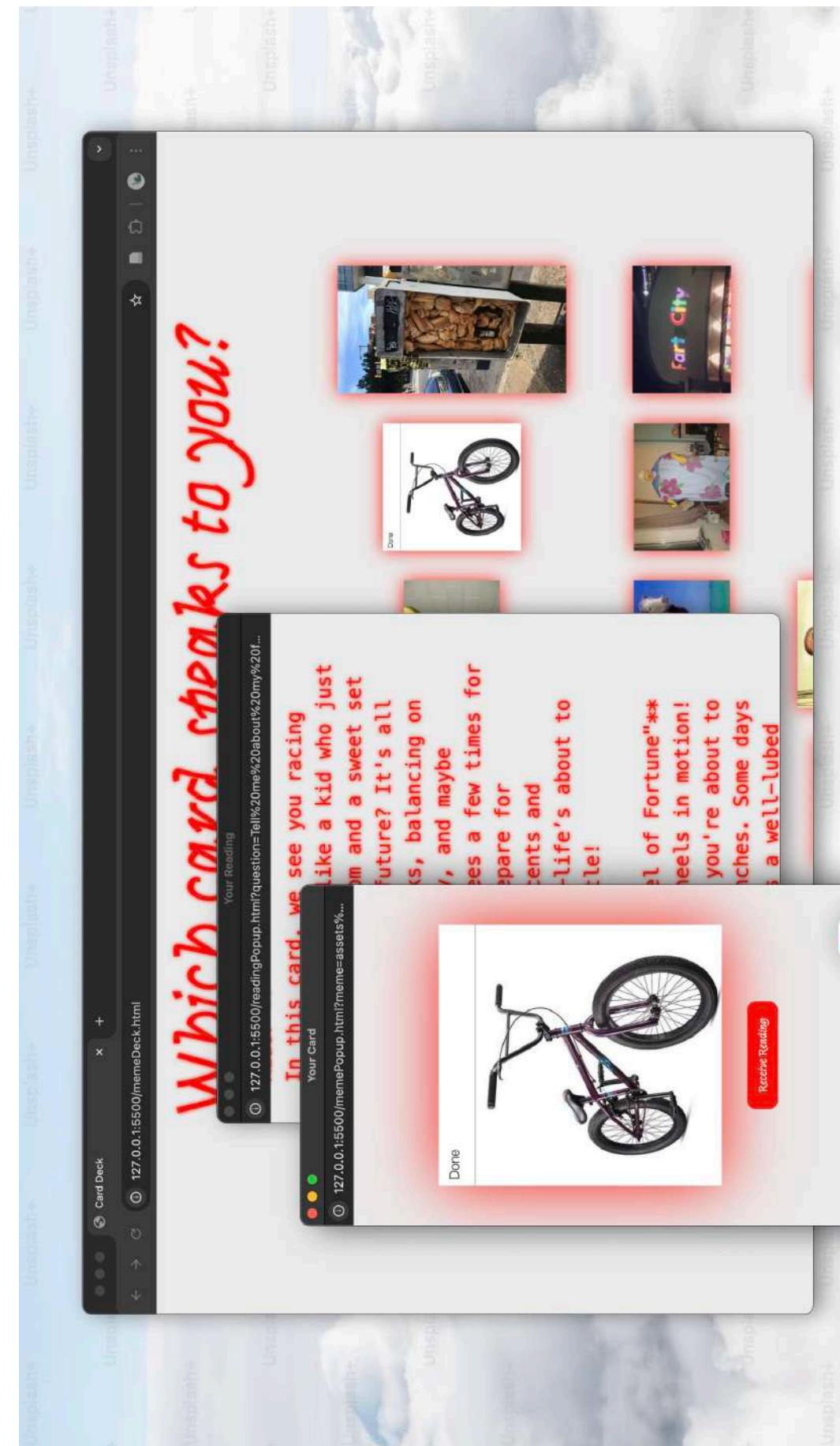
```



```

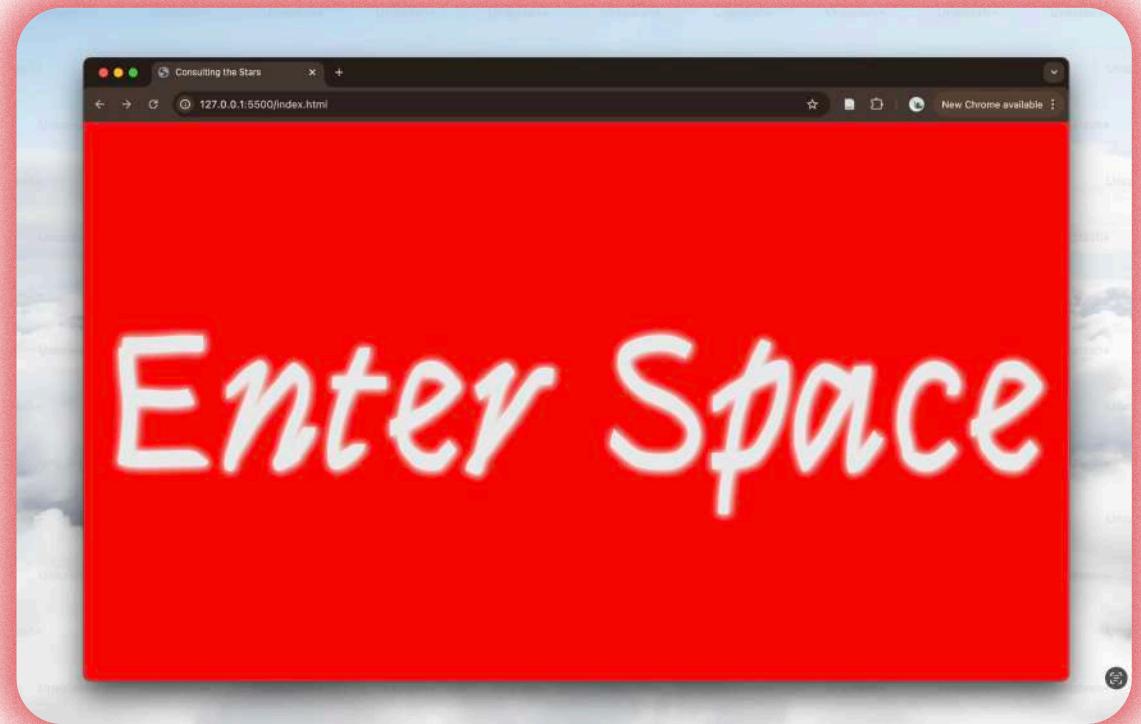
body: JSON.stringify({
  model: "gpt-4o-mini",
  messages: [
    {
      role: "system",
      content: "Please do a reading in the style of tarot or astrology (but do not mention tarot in the response), but based on a meme image that I upload. Be specific with the readings based on details in the image. 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: f url: imageUpload }
      ]
    }
  ]
});

```



Final Screen Setup

# Performing the Ritual



## // Format of Activity

The exercise starts off with a interview/conversation to set the tone and understand the participant better. Questions include those about rituals/habits with technology, level of spirituality, sentiments towards algorithms, relationship with memes.

The activity then acts as a catalyst for conversation about interpretation, intuition, mames and the algorithm.

At the end, a reflection will be done to see if the prototype was effective, and if not, why?

<!-- SCRIPT -->

/\* CONTEXT OF PROJECT \*/

Briefly, my research aims to study how the algorithm affects us through the lens of divination - as in, meaning making through chance encounter or randomness (old ways are tarot cards, astrology, palm reading). I'm positioning online content (feed, ads, etc.) as the source of randomness, and the algorithm as the mediator of randomness. I am also trying to understand the role of human intuition (vibes) in the process.

• What are some rituals/habits you have with your devices? (maybe run through your day and how you interact with it)

• Are you someone who sees signs in your everyday life?

• Have you had moments online, through ads, content, or even music where you felt like something you encountered was 'meant to be' or oddly fitting?

• How do you feel knowing your content is being curated for you by an algorithm? Is it a problem for you?

• When you are on the internet, how conscious are you that the content that you receive is being curated? Do you question it?

• What kind of effects do you think curated content has on your behaviours and worldview?

• What do you think are the long-term effects of AI (i.e. chatbots), algorithms (curated content) have on our intuition.

• What is the role of memes in your everyday life? (conversation, expressing emotions, genuine meaning-making)

• How do you think memes have changed the way you think or communicate on a daily basis?

/\* ACTIVITY \*/

• At any point, did you relate or feel validated by the chatbot's response?

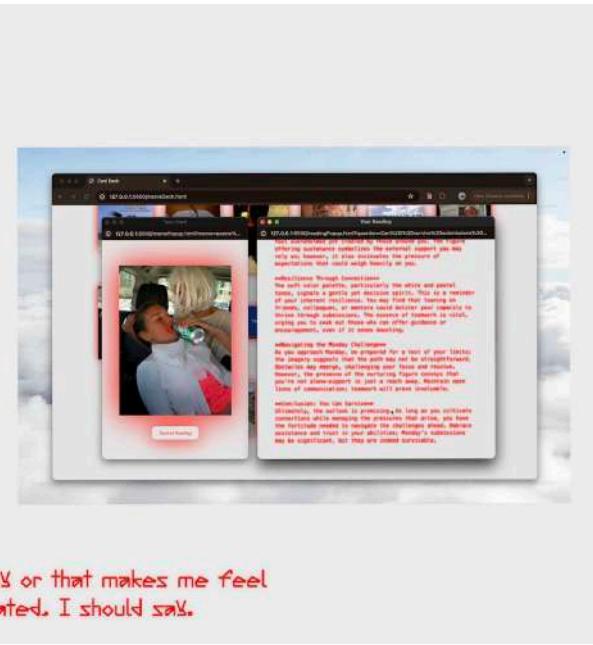
• Did this activity change the way you think about memes, algorithms, or everyday meaning-making? If so, how?



Like I subconsciously think about it, but it is surprisingly accurate.



I feel like this joy or that makes me feel very motivated. I should say.



but I do like to choose my outfit based on my lucky color.



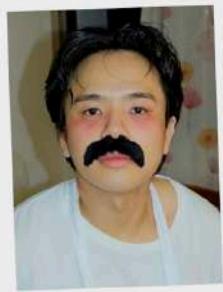
And now and every day I will be using again I think I'm using Google Instagram.



that sets up emotion just gets so high that I see it as a higher, higher.



We tapped so much the camera died so here's our faces  
(Please skip to 44:12 for the reading session)



thing that I can rely on was when I had my intention and motivation.

**<ANG JUN LIANG>**  
**<FOR>**  
**<MAGIC IN THE MACHINE>**

**<Prototype Documentation>**

**<Lasalle College of the Arts>**  
**<Computation in Design AY24/25>**  
**<Supervised by Andreas Schlegel>**