eview: Virtual Tarot

by Bill Jahnel

Type: CD-ROM Tarot Card Explorer
Publisher: Virtual Media Works
Retail Price:$49.95.   (The Virtual Tarot Bundle, containing the CD and a Rider-Waite tarot deck, is $64.95.)
Street Price: $35.00
Requires: Macintosh LC or better; System 7 and Quicktime 1.5; 13-inch, 256-color monitor; CD-ROM Drive; 5MB of memory.
Protection: None

D-ROM titles often are a mixed bag; true "game" software on CD (with some notable exceptions, such as Myst) has as often as not been characterized by lush multimedia movies with minimal player interaction and horrendous wait times. More successful have been the "Edutainment" products, whose formats are better geared for the limitations and possibilities of a CD-ROM title. Admittedly, the term "Edutainment" is bandied about rather indiscriminately by software catalogue companies, just as television producers once labeled the Flintstones   as "Historical educational programming." Foreign language teachers and children's games worked very well in this format. But when a new product appeared called "Virtual Tarot," I felt excitement mixed with deep suspicion. Excitement, because a CD-ROM's storage capacity could hold vast amounts of graphical information, and divination/psychological exploration tools would take a pace that would capitalize on the strengths of the CD format. However, as a Tarot reader myself, I feel that such readings are an extremely organic process; with the possible exception of the I Ching   (whose random casts of hexagrams leading to contemplative poems seemed almost designed to work on a computer), I could not imagine how a computer program could successfully cast a divination. The answer, of course, was that it can't. But Virtual Media Works proved to be much craftier in their approach than trying straightforward divinations.

Rather than being a "fortune telling" device, Virtual Tarot follows in the hole left by Synchronicity (now out of print and unusable on newer machines) as the premier self-contemplative psychological tool available for the Macintosh. I would term it a "Tarot explorer" rather than a fortune-telling program; Virtual Tarot is designed to allow both novices and experienced card readers to explore the fascinating inner world opened up by

the use of tarot cards. The program is lushly designed to place you in a contemplative, reflective mood -- the graphics are otherworldly and yet have a quiet reverence, and the superb music which provides background to the experience is always appropriate, inspiring, and unobtrusive. (Of course, this is to be expected of Adam Rossi, who just scored another hit with Rock, Rap, and Roll for the Mac.)

How it Works. After a visually arresting opening sequence that sets the stage for your Virtual Tarot exploration, you are presented with a series of five cards that hang suspended in space. This is to provide a method to find your "significator" card, which will bear emphasis on the readings that are to follow. If you select the card that the computer has randomly chosen as the significator, a Key will whiz through space, unlocking the gateway to the world of Virtual Tarot. Any of the other four activates an animation sequence representing one of the four major trump suits, and then you choose again. The cards continue to randomly change as time passes, so the possible significator may change from moment to moment. Like many functions of Virtual Tarot, you may speed up the process or bypass this section altogether.

After the significator is selected, you are presented with a gateway; entering your name "personalizes" this set of readings to you and allows a name to be attached to personal diaries, as will be explained later. Then, with great solemness, a portal opens and the world of Virtual Tarot is opened to you.

he Main Menu Screen offers a dazzling array of choices; however, the options can effectively be placed into three categories: Instructional, The Casting of the Cards, and the Personal Diary.   First, allow me to give a quick overview of each of these sections; after revealing the mechanics, we'll examine in more depth what you can take away from -- and bring into -- the Virtual Tarot experience.

Instructional. Besides the Colphon/Credits, Virtual Tarot has three areas of instruction. Two are "Talking Head" QuickTime tutorials. In the INSTRUCTION section, movies are made available of a somber gentleman (well, not so somber -- wave hello to Jeff Manning, president of VMW) who gives short histories of the Tarot, Virtual Tarot's uses, and a few of its shortcuts. The PHILOSOPHY section, with a thoughtful young woman (Catherine Manning -- nepotism at its best) functions similarly, discussing issues of personal exploration and

responsibility. Finally, there is a section of CARD REVIEW, where each individual tarot card's meanings can be examined.

The Casting of the Cards. The heart and soul of Virtual Tarot is here; the Divination Menu offers a variety of card layouts, from specific concerns (such as Health, Money, or Career) to a variation of that standard classic, the Celtic Cross card reading. (For those new to tarot, the Celtic Cross is the most popular and widely-used card tarot layout; it tends to be the first any new reader learns/develops.) Each divination layout brings you into a new world; you seem to stand before a plain, as temple-like columns form about you. The geography and music tend to match the forms of reading called for, creating a properly contemplative atmosphere. The Rider-Waite Deck emerges before you, waiting for you to select a card.

As each card is drawn (which the computer, apparently "shuffles" from moment to moment -- making the moment that you click on the deck alter the card, so no reading is "preordained from the moment of choosing a layout) the computer automatically places it into the proper layout. A voice explains the significance of the position, and gives a brief description of the meaning of the card. These short synopses are either of Waite's original interpretations, or of Margaret L. Foster, a psychic guide and authoress of Tarot Today and the soon to be published Chakra guide, Those Spinning Wheels. If the card is from the Major Arcana, (Major Arcana -- the big trumps like Death, The World, The Lovers; you know, the kind that heavy metal bands like to rip off for T-shirt designs) Virtual Tarot will also display a sound and colour which correspond to the card's Kabbalistic resonance. (The Kabbalah is a very complex series of philosophies which derive from ancient Hebrew mysticism, and is represented by the Tree of Life. Now you have at least one Final Jeopardy answer if you ever land on the program!) To elucidate further the meanings of the cards, you can go to the Interpretation screen, which gives long descriptions of the cards; you may toggle between Waite's and Foster's meanings here in order to seek the similarities and differences between approaches.

Finally, when done with a reading, you may record it into a personal diary (the SELECT button turns into a DIARY option). You may give a reading three database-like keywords to aid in lookup, and type a short description of personal reactions to your most recent divination.

The Diary. One of Virtual Tarot's strengths is that it anticipates that the process of card exploration is not just a series of moment-to-moment events, but a continuing thread of readings, selections, questions, and contemplations. The diary records the question you asked (if you chose to type in one before a divination), the name of the questioner and the date the divination was cast, and records comments made by the diarist. From this, you can lookup older readings and re-examine them for reference, and can receive a short printed text summary of the diary and the reading.

Criticisms / Comments. First and foremost, I am extremely impressed with Virtual Tarot.   It provides an unparalleled organic learning environment for tarot card exploration. However, Virtual Tarot still has some room for improvement. My comments can best be divided into two categories: mechanical and substantive.

VT Mechanics: For the most part, Virtual Tarot is a remarkably well-thought out program. The consistency in command structure, the availability of help wherever you need it, and the ability to shortcut through a number of areas show a great deal of foresight and attention to usability. Similarly, the program has worked hard to keep wait times minimal.   This said, there are a few baffling design glitches that need improvement. Luckily, Virtual Media Works has anticipated most of them.

First, the significator card is under-utilized as a concept and over-implemented. By that, I mean that the trouble to get the significator at the beginning -- if you don't cheat with a key combination -- can be considerable. However, the only time it comes up during your readings is if it is drawn during the reading -- and then, only a voiceover adds, "This is your significator." It is not re-emphasized in the instructions, nor is the significator recorded in your diary. I think it would behoove Virtual Tarot to de-emphasize this feature or to expand on it in the readings section -- but otherwise, there's a lot of work going into getting small results.

In the Instructions and Philosophy sections, you are often presented with sequences of QuickTime movies. These tend to be segmented into "parts," and little arrow keys appear below them in order to scroll into the next or preceding segment. However, their obvious keyboard equivalents are not enabled, an oversight which VMW plans to correct in an update.

nother point about the Instruction section was that sometimes I felt that some explanations were too cursory. I recognize that not everything may be added (and that much, for access time's sake, ended up on the cutting room floor), but certain important areas should be covered. In the history of the tarot, for example, it is mentioned that the Minor Arcana suits (wands, pentacles, swords, and cups) transformed into our modern-day suits of clubs, diamonds, spades, and hearts. But I think it is much more cognitively instructional to mention HOW these suits transformed -- for example, the transformation of Cups into Hearts would seem unfathomable unless you were aware that cups signify spiritual or emotional

matters, making the reason for the transformation obvious. (Count that as Jeopardy answer number two.   See how good reading IMG is for you?)

Much worse is the Diary Section. While the diary performs well its most critical task, the storing of older layouts, it has numerous shortcomings that need enhancement.   Most glaring amongst these is the personal comments section: Not only is the field too short, but the comment field itself in the entry stages is larger than Virtual Tarot can recall when you pull it back up at a later time; any text after a certain character is unreadable. To make matters more perplexing, the fields were programmed in comma-deliminated form -- meaning that you are restricted from putting commas in your comments.   (And when you write like I do, commas are a big necessity. Try reading this review without them!)   Other "things I'd like to see" in the diary would include enhanced printing (which VMW is already working on) and even a text export, so that the diary information could be edited or enhanced in Teachtext or other word processing programs. As it stands, all diary information can only be accessed through Virtual tarot itself.

Another point that VMW realized after release was that the extended card definitions were only available through the INTERPRETATION button in the divinations or in the DocMaker-like supplement that is available on the CD-ROM. I was most pleased to hear that the upgrade version plans to make these resources more easily available more often to the querant.

Beyond these criticisms, I would also like to add a suggestion to VMW for their future upgrades on Virtual Tarot. For one, it would nice to have a part of the CARD REVIEW dedicated to symbologies of the suits, perhaps tying them in to their elemental meanings as well. The importance of what wands or cups means a whole suit can be hard to grasp for the novice, and even experienced readers almost always are assessing and re-assessing what each minor arcana suit means to them as a whole.

Further, one of the most important parts of tarot exploration is forming one's own meanings for each of the cards. I think a third field for each card, which could be entered and modified, would greatly enhance the versatility and usefulness of Virtual Tarot. Instead of just switching between Waite and Foster in the Interpretation screen, a third button could open this new field that would more personalize readings as people contemplated the cards. Being able to access the interpretations and fields in the CARD REVIEW section would further enhance the program's utility.

VT Philosophy: Virtual Tarot's strengths lie not just in its usability and elegant and breathtaking presentation. Quite frankly, Virtual Tarot's greatest contribution is in recognizing and iterating issues of personal responsibility and personal exploration.   VMW quite rightly finds that the core of divinations is not found in external forces but in internal contemplation. They have tailored their product to most usefully allow people to open their minds to new pathways of thought, whether the user subscribes to Jungian archetypes, external forces guiding readings, or simply finds the mystery of the tarot compelling but has no set personal philosophy. In this sense, Catherine Manning of VMW came up with the most useful description of what Virtual Tarot does: It is "Multimedia for the Mind.™" And yep, that's got a big TM that's following it, but it is more important as a concept than a catchy advertising soundbite. VMW's early inclusion of multiple reading interpretation choices (Foster and Waite) emphasizes that no one set of meanings is "correct," and even discounting liability concerns, their insistence on personal responsibility rings true as their personal heartfelt belief.

I was most intrigued, of course, by the substance of Foster's interpretations. These were new to me, since I am not familiar with her body of work. Consistently, I found her insightful,

thoughtful, and interesting in the description of the cards.   Of course, I don't always agree with her meanings, but if I did I hardly would be interacting with Virtual Tarot.

In the readings themselves, Virtual Tarot was very wise to include options to allow readings to remove ill-dignified cards ("Reversed Cards") from selections. Many tarot readers, like myself, feel that the cards in and of themselves offer both the dignified and ill-dignified possibilities. (Further, while in actual life ill-dignified cards usually seem to make up about only a third or quarter of a reading, Virtual Tarot makes it an actual 50%. This, of course, depends on the style of the card reader and the cut of the deck)   Control-clicking on the deck removes the upside-down drawings. Some readers prefer to deal with Major Arcana cards only, and this is also supported though control-option clicking.

One final note is a personal preference of mine, but I do not fault Virtual Tarot in any way for excluding it. In the history of tarot, most often left out of readings is "the ghost card." As the modern pack of playing cards reflects the structure of the tarot, so too is the ghost card still with us   Nowadays, in normal packs, there is a blank card which is supposed to be used in case one card is lost, missing, or damaged; however, when tarot cards were used for divining, the blank card had an occasional different purpose: it was the Ghost, the unnumbered twenty-third trump. It was a signifier of the Unknown, the unseeable, of all influences unexpected and unable to be accounted for. I hope that Virtual Tarot might find a way to include this card, but that is simply more of a personal concern and hope, not in the least bit a criticism of this fine program.

Where Virtual Media Works is Going. This tantalazing program will fortunately be only the first in a hopefully long line of self-explorative tools by VMW. Expect to see an IBM release of this product very soon as well as an update to correct and expand the program, some of which have been previously noted. They also have the rights to the Alistaire Crowley deck and one other, so it may be soon that some add-on or future product will offer an expanded deck selection. In the meantime, VMW is very hush-hush about their next project, excepting to note that they are assembling a design team for their next Macintosh media marvel. Such possible directions as an I Ching or runic guide are rumoured; IMG will try and keep its ear to the ground for further details.

In Summary. If at times this review has seemed critical of small points, it should be recognized that they are here because only small points of Virtual Tarot deserve any negative criticism. This product well deserves its four and a half joystick rating. Virtual Tarot is a superb learning tool, tarot exploration, and a contemplative and thoughtful exercise guide for personal enhancement.   Virtual Media works has done itself proud with its first entry into the Macintosh market. They deserve only the highest praise for releasing a visually, conceptually, and cognitively challenging and stimulating first-class piece of software. May many more follow.

Pros
• Breathtaking Sounds and Graphics (repeat twelve times)
• Game lends itself to contemplative atmosphere
• Rider-Waite deck is most familiar to novices
• Easy interface to learn
• Good variety of card layouts
• Has more than one interpretation available (Foster and Waite)
• Allows individual examination of cards
• Contains good tutorials
• Allows readings to be done manually and entered into the computer
• Takes advantage of CD-ROM's strengths as a storage medium

• Has many keystroke shortcuts
• Has variations such as no Ill-Dignified cards, or select only trumps
• Can save & retrieve layouts
• Trumps cause Kabbalistic Tone & colour to appear for additional mediation
• Application on hard disk takes under 500k
• Lack of long wait times, even under Director
• Good Customer Service Support
• Well thought out concept & implementation
• Philosophy emphasizes exploration & personal responsibility
• ReadMe DOCMaker Document on disk includes all card meanings, layout explanations, and an extensive bibliography
• Update to be released which will fix some problems with diary and printing

Cons
• Personal Diary Comments section buggy, too short
• Diary cannot be exported to text file
• Printing capacities limited
• Some history/tutorial sections overbrief
• Significator underutilized; seems to be of little to no use in a reading
• No place to store personal notes on card meanings of your own for individual cards
• Can only access long descriptions in the Interpretation subsection of the divinations
• Keyboard arrows not enabled for scrolling arrows in Instruction/Philosophy section