

Oliver Owens

04/04/25

Thesis: Tometoiled

Zach Rau

Oral Defence Script

Hello everyone. My name is Oliver Owens or better known as Stinky Wizard, I am an illustration major and this is my Tabletop Roleplaying Game project Tometoiled. I stand before you today looking like a deranged ghoul because this fashionable look is that of my art persona Stinky Wizard. It is a representation of the fantastic and horrific themes I play with in my work. I am also a practitioner of ritual magic, my artwork is an expression of this hence the Wizard in Stinky Wizard. My work deals a lot with immersion and becoming a character of myself is one of the many ways I am able to channel that. Beyond being a freak, I am also a huge nerd. My love for art and magic are weighed equally with my love of board games. This project is a combination of these key elements of my life.

I. Introduction / 5 minutes

We all engage in the ritual of gameplay. Some are social , some are spiritual, some are financial, and some are so abstract that it defies category. For the majority of our lives our freedom is seldom expressed outside of childhood. Where the games we played didn't need to involve stakes to be interesting. We didn't use our imaginations to satisfy our wallet or for reward, we did it because we wanted to or more specifically because we needed to. I, like so many artists, cherish that freedom and in many ways yearn for that joy. Through the ritual of gameplay, we can not just relive those moments but create new ones.

Gameplay and ritual are essential aspects of life. Every culture across the planet has engaged in gameplay and ritual in one form or another. I say essential aspects of "life" because these practices are not exclusive to humans, animals play and/or compete as well as hold ritual ceremonies such as courtship rituals or funeral gatherings. There is a certain mystique to these practices which often defy their functional purposes. This mystique fuels the question of "why do we play games"? This topic has been thoroughly studied and in that quest for truth we have yielded some powerful conclusions.

Beyond entertainment, gameplay and play in general has been used for communal bonding such as in team sports and their fan bases, emotional expression through humorous party games, as well as being a tool for non aggressive conflict resolution. Games act as a microcosm of human experience outside the bounds of capital productivity. Gameplay has also been shown to increase cognitive function in relation to skills related to memory and learning. The versatile use of gameplay can be traced back to its origins with The Royal Game of Ur. The Mesopotamian board game had been used for entertainment as well as ritual, where certain moves and gameplay outcomes would be used for divination purposes, going so far as to influence political decisions. From its very beginnings gameplay has always been ritual.

Today games have become highly commodified for profit, and have been distanced from their spiritual and sacred homes. As an avid cultist of gameplay, I strive to re-stoke that connection both on and beyond the table. I wish to craft that game, one which reconnects us to our imagination, curiosity and adventurous nature. The game I want to play for my life. And my hope is to share it with anyone who wants to join.

In the 26 years of my life, I have found two ways back into that world of imagination and creativity.

The first pillar on this voyage can be found in my practice of ritual magic and tarot. The magic I had felt from learning tarot went beyond my suspicions of the supernatural I had when I first learned about it. I soon realized that the cards weren't telling me my future, I was seeing patterns in the cards' symbolism which had reflected my own subconscious patterns I was consciously unaware of, and the fortune it told was just an estimated prediction based on these patterns. This is a much more analytical approach to viewing tarot. However even in seeing tarot's more technical side, the fact that by merely viewing these symbols and patterns allowed me to gain new perspectives on events in my life was weird and beautiful.

I have learned that our perceptions of reality are mutable, that we actively choose to either see the magic in things or not. The magic of wonder is still available to us, we can choose to see the magic in turning random ingredients into cuisine or the life saving miracles of medical advancements, and through ritual we make those experiences stronger.

The second pillar is gameplay. Its accessibility allows players a way to shed reality and embrace another. In this space we are able to have fun for the sake of

fun. You can let go of your defined role in society, and for a couple hours you and your friends don't have to be productive, you just get to be. Where the only rules to follow are the ones of the game and you are free to fail without any serious consequence.

Ritual magic and gameplay have more in common than what meets the eye. They can be cooperative such as Dungeons and Dragons or pagan harvest festivals. They can be competitive like monopoly or the mayan ceremonial ball game of Pitz. Both harness the powers of imagination and creativity. Repetition, pattern, boundaries, symbolism, and intent find their way into these practices. Playing card games like poker are great examples of this. There is repetition in the card numbers, patterns in making pairs/straights/and flushes, symbols appear in the characterization of the face cards and suit symbols. These practices serve as the two pillars because of their significant ability to impact our perceptions, both consciously and unconsciously.

Tometoiled intends to explore the connection between ritual magic and gameplay, along with themes of nostalgia, horror, dreams, the five senses, really fucking crazy monsters, shape wizards, sentient teapot people, and so much more. Because while I am serious about my beliefs and respect the tradition of magic, it is also my belief that we are masters of our own destinies and we get to

play our own game. And if I want to make something weird and whimsical I get to do that.

Chaos Magic is a term used to describe the contemporary “tradition” of magic which centers itself around the perceptions of the practitioner. Focusing on creating new rituals that hold personal meaning instead of adopting another’s belief system. Sigilism is a common chaos magic ritual of breaking down words into their letter characters, rearranging into an illustrated symbol. The symbol then becomes a subconscious trigger for that word, helping you access the meaning you put into it. This is at the heart of my spiritual practice, and its fingerprints can be found all throughout Tometoiled

Tometoiled is a culmination of the various aspects of myself as an artist, board game nerd, and magic practitioner. It’s an embodiment of my persona as The Stinky Wizard. Tometoiled is a passion project, with its origins stretching as far back as 10 years ago. Over this period of time it has changed and grown alongside myself, taking many different forms. It is a mirror, reflecting my view on how reality could be.

II. Overview / 10 minutes

In the introduction page the audience/players learn that the book is the journal of an unnamed wizard whose entries detail a storytelling ritual with the aim of transporting the user to the place beyond space and time, where myth and legend come from and return to, a place known only as the phantasm. It tells us that in order to get to the Phantasm one must travel through The Gates of Dust, a liminal plane between our world and the one of dreams. This wizard speaks of the Tometoiled ritual, which binds a user to their tome, harnessing their imagination to embody a character that can exist within the Gates of Dust. When the players or Tometoiled ritualists use the cards they are able to enhance their connection with their character, with the ultimate goal of shedding their corporeal forms, fusing their consciousness with their character, and becoming a being capable of turning myth into reality.

Tometoiled is many things. A game, a book, and a divination deck. It is a set of functional tarot inspired oracle cards, featuring five suits based on the original five senses—touch, sight, smell, taste, hearing. It is a rulebook, designed to look and feel like the mad wizard's lost grimoire. It is a game which uses the book and cards to create a tabletop roleplaying game. Where instead of rolling dice you pull cards from your deck to understand what your character is experiencing through their five senses. Where cards are then played from the players in certain

patterns and sequences to cast spells and perform unique abilities, similar to how tarot will use different card layouts to tell different fortunes.

In my original proposal I had a bit of restraint, I knew there was no way I could complete all of the 50 cards illustrations, entire rulebook, playmat, and game mechanics in four months, so I shot for a midway point. Wanting to have everything that I made used to make a kickstarter for Tometoiled. But that proved to be unrealistic, I completed only a fraction of what I wanted to but had learned an amazing amount for moving forward, and have already gained so many different assets to put into the final project. And while I won't be publishing the kickstarter campaign today or next week, In the next couple of months it will be ready to start.

On average, it can take an artist one to two years to develop their own oracle or tarot deck. While Tometoiled is not tarot, each card is fully illustrated containing both visual and conceptual complexities mirroring the intricate multilayered symbolism found in tarot. Both Tarot and Tometoiled cards have illustrations acting as a visual representation for the cards' meaning, which depending on the situation certain aspects of the illustrations can be interpreted differently. The cards connect to each other, be it in repeated character and

symbol usage as seen in my chaotic card map. These connections link the cards' stories, settings, and characters together, a quality also shared with tarot. Arguably, Tometoiled cards hold more complexity than tarot due to the card's compositional structures and game mechanics being baked into the design. These connections need to be thoughtfully handled and require lots of time to develop.

On top of the cards the book needs the same attention to detail. I had crunched the numbers and found out that the core rulebook's total page count would end up somewhere between 215-240 pages. Each page contains some unique design element and/or illustrations, making Tometoiled a behemoth of a project. In game design typically you would start out with creating the rules, after which moving into a prototype/playtest stage, then into refinement and finally an art/production stage. Tometoiled couldn't follow this path as its visual aesthetics are intimately linked with the games design and mechanics. Working on the art in tandem with the mechanical side of the games development has led to many great discoveries in book, game, and product design. This is all to say you cannot rush a project like Tometoiled.

There are certain visual codes and illustrative techniques which give the book its occult tone/themes. Tometoiled is supposed to feel ancient, lost and

forbidden, lending its visual style to feel serious. However I want to convey that even things that are serious or “well-crafted” don’t always mean good. My style pulls from many sources, some of which are old masters such as Bosch or Dore, focusing on detail and complexity, others are more comical and absurd such as animator Felix Colegrave or Pendleton Ward creator of Adventure Time. It is my belief that balancing the quality of Hi and Lo-Fidelity in art or aesthetic makes for a bizarre and delightful experience which keeps you on your toes. Tomatoiled is able to branch multiple different genres be it gothic horror, art house psychedelia, pulp fantasy, multicultural folklore, or combination of all. This mutability inherent in its design allows its players to experience anything their imagination can conjure up.

III. Project Description + Process of Making / 15 minutes (4-5 paragraphs)

I started the process of designing these cards by crafting their suits. Each one was based on one of the five primary sensory organs.

- Fingers : The symbol of tactility. Representing physicality, craftsmanship, and matter. Its connection to the physical world grants it the element of earth.
- Eyes: The symbol of sight. Representing truth, aesthetics, and discovery. Its connection to light grants it the element of fire.
- Noses : The symbol of scent. Representing guidance, discernment, and the subconscious. Its connection to airborne vapors grants it the element of air.
- Tongues : The symbol of taste. Representing expression, desire, and cultivation. Its connection to saliva grants it the element of water.
- :Ears : The symbol of sound. Representing understanding, communication, and spirituality. Its connection to vibration grants it the element of aether or spirit.

Each suit was designed to feel distinct beyond simple color schemes, visual vocabulary, and symbolism. I unified them each suit with different shape-based compositional components. For example, the Eyes are based on triangular compositions of one, two, or three interlocking triangles to create sharp and unforgiving tones. Triangles in ritual magic also relate to the third eye and the element of fire, thus connecting to the suit's description.

Developing the illustrations for the cards I had to delve deeper into the meaning of these suits and senses. Sight is one of our more logical senses, it helps us determine where and what things are objectively. Thus the cards under the suit of eyes were related to things like knowledge or accuracy. Along with the expanded meanings of the suits the numerical values also played an important role, derived from numerology . The number one for example represents a start or beginning.

That all being said the ace of eyes had to be something which represented a point of new knowledge, the lighting of a fire. In this card we see a godlike cyclops figure looming over a sprawling grassy field from its biblical cloudy perch. A trine of lightning sparks from its finger setting this field a blaze. From the central fire an engulfed arm holding a sword reaches up to meet the bolt. This depiction

represents the controlled start of a fire, where we can see that it has the potential to spread and claim the field for ash, but for now it is only a theory. The lighting represents the chaotic nature of gaining new ideas. One minute there's nothing, then in an instant an idea forms seemingly out of midair. We cannot tell if the fire is creating the figure or destroying it, however we can discern that it is important and speaks to something we don't fully understand yet.

The Two of Ears shows a decapitated bronze figure holding a giant ornate bell, its disembodied head pendulously striking the walls sending out waves of sound with each crash. Around this figure two birds can be seen harmonizing in the wakes of vibration. These two vibration circles are the two circular compositions of the card. Its pattern mimics the structure of how sound waves are compressed in a sonic boom. The number two is a number of dualities, thus I focused on aspects of sound which relate to communication, fluctuations, harmony, balance, as well as dissonance. The balance is struck between the discomfort of the figure sacrificing its personal comfort so the birds can sing along joyfully.

The book is where the game really comes together. It establishes each card's description and their importance, as well as how to use them when play begins. The book is designed to look and read like a mad mage's journal from eons past. My guiding light when designing the book was to focus on a heavy

level of conceptual immersion into the world and stories of *Tometoiled*. The book had to grip the player and draw them into this familiar yet strange universe while also explaining the mechanics of the game play. I want each player to feel like they are reading a tome detailing the rituals of gameplay to the players and not a rulebook. Since this book is so important to *Tometoiled* I created a sample of what this book might look like. Inside are some sample spreads along with some illustrations that will be worked into future designs.

Initially, during the proposal phase, my design of these pages was centered around large full-page or two page illustrated pages similar to an illuminated manuscript. The issue is that these books, while impressive, are notoriously difficult to read due to their ornate text and loud imagery, ultimately this is too overstimulating for a practical rulebook. While achieving *Tometoiled*'s occult vibe through aesthetics is a primary focus, balancing function and flavor is equally important. Finding this balance between the elements which immerse the player and give them clear instructions, was not an easy task.

Given the fact that each page needed to be fully designed and balanced, that 200+ page count I had mentioned earlier really started to feel quite daunting. I knew I had to do something different or else I could be spending the next 10 years hand illustrating each page.

My mentor and I had noticed how other similar TTRPG had utilized copyright free illustrations to fill out their book. The curation and design in these projects made their use of clip art and public domain assets made them not feel tacky. This was a revelation.

Instead of spending hours on filigree which the player might take a couple of seconds to appreciate. (point to card borders) Over here you can see some of the filigree I had worked on, these borders took so long, luckily I was able to reuse them, but for the book doing each page would be insane. Instead, I could use, edit and alter pre-existing assets to expedite the production process. (Point to Draco Vomitus) These borders are made from scanned victorian clip art books, I am then able to edit and blend them with my own style so they feel stylistically synced. Along with speeding up the production process, the assets I found come from Victorian era clip art, which enhances the historial aesthetics found in Tometoiled. This frees up so much time which can be spent on giving the more important illustrations like character design, maps, and atmospheric landscapes the attention they need while not making sacrifices to the book's occult qualities. In addition it echoes the repeated usage of ornamentation found in printing press practices. We are so used to art and illustration only holding value if it is

purely original. However all art has an element of remixing involved in it, and these earlier practices of print show this directly.

The tertiary element of Tometoiled is the playmats. Building these directly influenced decisions made for game mechanics and vice versa. I have always wanted to make games which could be played by anyone anywhere. That is why I had made many mockups using Magic the Gathering cards and other playing cards to make sure the entire game setup would be playable even on a small table. Ultimately, the goal is to have this screen printed on cloth playmats, giving it the look of a pagan altar. Among all the other time restraints this had fallen by the wayside. However the playmats you see before you give an idea of what these will look like in their final form.

The game's mechanics are currently still being worked out. I have drafted many different iterations of the rulebook but with new design components and restraints, alterations had to be made.

The characters of Tometoiled are anthropomorphized sensory experiences and go beyond traditional fantasy character tropes. I wanted Tometoiled to be a unique gameplay experience which allowed players to play cards to perform different abilities in many different ways. These characters explore this unique

nature from both their aesthetic/conceptual design and gameplay style. The base game is supposed to come with 20 different character classes, each focus on using the cards slightly differently.

Some classes such as the shape wizards known as The Sculptors of Animos seen in the 3 of fingers, are rewarded for making different patterns with their cards similar to a tarot spread. This class and character are all about harnessing the mystical powers of shapes. The patterns they are able to build with their cards on their player mat work similarly to the minecraft crafting system. Allowing players to be able to cast blocks which they can hop on top of or build various weapons, tools and structures to help them out along their journey.

Other classes such as the monks of musk are able to combine one card's imagery with another card's emotional descriptions for powerful spells. The monks of musk are sleep wizards, they utilize aromatherapy, smokable herbs and incense to put themselves into deep sleep states where they are able to blend their dreams with the reality around them.

Unlike many complex board games which can over burden new players with all of the rules right off the bat. Tometoiled's mechanics are geared to a wide audience allowing you to grow with the game. As you play the game you will

encounter new characters, and through doing their quests they teach you new ways to use your own cards. Because of this in Tometoiled you never arbitrarily level up, you just learn new and more sophisticated ways to interact with the game, lending itself to the Tometoiled's explorative quality.

In addition, some rules and pieces of lore are intentionally left out of the book. This forces players to use their imaginations to come up with new creative solutions to develop their own stories and even rules to support them. There is a sense of ambiguity seen in the multiple meanings inherent in the cards for the same purpose. The cards act as a tool for the GM or Game Master to interpret what is happening in the story. They can use any part of the card and/or book to decipher what the cards mean for that moment in the story. Players are prompted by the defined meanings of the cards and keywords printed on their borders to discern what their characters are experiencing either emotionally or physically. Along with definitions, players and GM's are guided by the cards illustrated properties, being able to pull certain items, characters, actions, and/or settings from the cards themselves into the game. While GM's and Players have plenty of guides and rules on how to interpret the cards and play the game there is no wrong way to play Tometoiled.

IV. Influences / 5 minutes (1-2 paragraphs)

Vermis and Mork Borg

Tometoiled was profoundly inspired by the art book Vermis by the artist Plastiboo. Vermis is a game guide to a video game which never existed. In it's pages, Plastiboo illustrates characters, levels, game mechanics and lore but never fully explains them. It assumes that the players of Vermis would already know how these things relate to the game but we as the audience are left wondering how this game works. Vermis balances giving the reader lots of information about very specific details of the game and the absence of crucial story and gameplay elements. Almost like if you were to watch the extras of a movie without watching any of the actual film itself. When reading Vermis your mind begins to piece together this puzzle and solve the mystery that is the book. I wanted to bring that same mystique into Tometoiled but unlike Vermis I wanted you the players to be able to take it to the next level and actually play the game you imagine.

Another game I had been very influenced by was Mork Borg. It is far more modern and black metal inspired than Tometoiled however its design quality and use of public domain assets are next level. Besides Mork Borg's strong layout, its mechanics are fun and simple to understand. Its use of illustration makes the rulebook feel so much more enjoyable to read through and understand.

Utilizing the layout and design components from these other projects coupled with the artistic influences of Gustave Dore, Goya, Rider Waite Tarot, and other occult and alchemical manuscripts give Tometoiled its unique tonal mix between the ancient and contemporary.

V. The Project in Culture / 5 minutes (1-2 paragraphs)

I came into PNCA with the goal of becoming a comic artist, and while I still create comics and other narrative illustrations, game design has stolen my heart.

Through the process of making Tometoiled, I have also developed many different portfolio pieces which showcase my product design, illustration, game design, book making, and multimedia art skills. I have grown a lot as an artist through this process and will continue to do so as I keep on developing it. In the meantime it has given me plenty of portfolio pieces to help get other illustration work.

The future of Tometoiled is just beginning. This thesis was never intended to be the end of a project but rather the first milestone for something much greater. I am excited to announce that Tometoiled will be launching its kickstarter campaign within the near future. Using funding to help aid development and production. While I am open to the idea of partnering with an established game

development company, it is my goal to start my own game development studio centered around unique and art centric projects which redefine the world of tabletop games. Making Tometoiled is its first ever project.

VI. Conclusion / Closing Remarks / 5 minutes (1-2 paragraphs)

Throughout life we experience success and failure. Strategizing an optimal move through torrent chances, stacked upon impossible obstacles. At times it can feel as if we write our story with another's pen, that our moves are forced out of our hands. I believe we can reclaim that thing once lost. That the ritual of gameplay is more than just rolling dice for fun, it's a means to reclaim our freedom and start our own adventure.

I wanted to take some time to give some shoutouts and thank you's. Thank you to everyone who was able to make it today, your presence here means a lot to me and i'm so grateful for letting me ramble at you. Thank you to my family, who have always encouraged my artistic pursuits, and taught me the value of creativity and being unapologetically weird. Thank you to my panel and professors who had taken the time from their extremely busy schedules to be here. Your guidance, support and encouragement are what makes this school

special. Finally a very special thank you to Zach Rau who has gone beyond being a mentor and becoming a partner in developing this game. Your ability to inspire, push, and support has made me a better artist than I ever thought I could be. Choosing you as my mentor was one of the best decisions I have made in my time at PNCA, I couldn't have done this without you.

Beyond the Bind,

From Cover to Cover

Covers to Tomes

And

Tomes to Toil

Thank you.

45 Minutes Total

Q + A / Approximately 30 minutes.