Tracing the Tracks of Greeting Cards: Genre History Versus Trajectory

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Greeting cards act as lifesavers for many people drowning in a confusing cluster of words and emotions. In this article, Jarema investigates the history of greeting cards from their origins to their current state to determine whether greeting cards have always served as a relationship rescuer or if there's something more to their history. By exploring the origins of greeting cards and how they have progressed through time, Jarema identifies the important differences between genre "history" and "trajectory." While these two terms intertwine at points, they have distinct qualities that, when understood correctly, can illustrate how writing often travels beyond its expected course.

For generations, when people have struggled to find the perfect words, greeting cards have come to the rescue and aided them in articulating their emotions. Whether a boyfriend cannot find a way to effectively express his feelings to his girlfriend, or an employee is having trouble deciding what words would be appropriate to wish her boss a happy birthday, a greeting card portraying the exact message a sender wishes to convey seems to be available for any occasion. For example, I found myself struggling for months to find the exact words to use when trying to write my mom a note after moving out of my parents' house. After spending some time trying to form a coherent message with the words rattling around in my brain, I realized that I could not put together the perfect note without being wordy and cliché. It was at this point that I decided to head to Hallmark to search for a "Thinking of You" card that could assist me. While roaming up and down the aisles of the store, I suddenly came across a card that had a small child on the front with her two hands covering her eyes as she was counting to ten. I opened the card to find that it said, "I'm pretending we're playing hide & seek and you're just really good at hiding." Immediately, I realized that this picture and these few short lines were the perfect way to put a smile on my mother's face while still

letting her know how much I cared about her, which I could not have done nearly as well by myself.

While many of us are relieved that today greeting cards seem to exist for every possible occasion, was this always the case? How did people manage to express their emotions to loved ones before paper, printing, and the greeting cards we recognize today were created? The truth is that people used greeting cards as early as the sixth century BCE, but these greetings were very different from the ones we now purchase. The timeline provided in this article will allow you to uncover how greeting cards have evolved and transformed throughout history. If you spend some time reviewing the timeline, which begins on the bottom of this page, you will have the opportunity to discover the complex and rich history of the greeting card genre. While reading through the timeline, consider what changes occur during each time period and how these changes affect the genre of greeting cards (especially pay attention to the bolded words). After reading through this timeline and learning about the history of greeting cards, you can use your newly acquired knowledge later in this article to understand the differences between "history" and "trajectory" by comparing the *history* of the greeting card genre to the *trajectory* of specific greeting cards. So go ahead: take a look at the timeline!

The History of Greeting Cards

Fortunately for the many individuals, like me, who have struggled to find the perfect words, greeting cards have been around for quite some time. Actually, the greeting card has been a part of society for such a long period of time that researchers are still not positive of its origins. While concrete

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6th Century BCE

Researchers have inferred that the hand-written messages historians uncovered in Egyptian tombs from the sixth century BCE represent the first form of greeting cards. Egyptians would send messages as part of their tradition of giving gifts for the New Year, which included a message that, "whether **written as a note or delivered verbally**, . . . was a greeting–the forerunner or our present-day gift cards" (Chase 10). These cards obviously held an important place in Egyptian society as they were valued enough to be stored in the tombs that Egyptians believed would accompany them to their next lives.

evidence is not available to pinpoint the first greeting card in history, many researchers have made inferences about the earliest greeting cards based on available historical evidence. After reviewing the timeline, it may seem fairly obvious that the greeting cards found in society today do not much resemble the Roman medals and Egyptian messages preserved in tombs, or even have the same style as Horsley and Prang's cards. However, the greeting card's purpose of communicating with various people remains the same, despite many other changes as the genre progressed from their origins to their current position in society. The initial messages of greeting cards seem to have been much simpler due to social expectations and technological limitations. Unlike the many options I sorted through when choosing a "Thinking of You" card, Romans were given, without choice, the message on the medal for their Emperor. Similarly, people in England in the mid-1800s chose from Christmas greeting cards that reflected warm, sentimental wishes and images only, since others, like Horsley's cards, were unacceptable on the market.

Where Greeting Cards are Today

The occasions for cards have grown tremendously since the original greeting cards that were distributed mainly to celebrate the New Year or Christmas. Now cards for Birthdays, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, Grandparent's Day, Anniversaries, New Babies, Thinking of You, and numerous other occasions can be found in greeting card aisles. A wide variety of card types and messages have flooded the industry to ensure that the perfect card can be found for each occasion. And when a greeting card cannot be found that is

120 CE

The Romans distributed greeting cards around 120 CE in the form of **medals** that contained an image of Roman Emperor Hadrian on one side and a message on the other side that stated, "The Senate and People of Rome wish a Happy and Prosperous New Year to Hadrianus Augustus, the father of the country" (Chase 11). Since many citizens of the Roman Empire would have purchased these medals as a symbol of unity and appreciation to Hadrian, they represent the first type of mass-produced greeting card.

Figure 1. Castel Sant'Angelo, the ancient Hadrian Mausoleum (image taken by Laurenn Jarema in Rome, Italy).

Figure 2. Greeting card aisle at Walmart (image taken by Laurenn Jarema).

quite specific and heartfelt enough for an occasion, people have, at times, chosen to handcraft their own cards. Many grade school children still craft homemade Valentine's Day cards in school, for example. Other individuals choose to create a unique type of homemade card, such as the post-it greeting card found in the 21st Century section of the timeline, which includes several post-it notes with personalized comments from the sender that can be repurposed and displayed in the recipient's home. Among these many choices, three types of greeting cards are currently available to consumers: print cards, e-cards, and homemade cards. Yet this myriad of card choices can be overwhelming for people who will need to develop the skills to sort through masses of cards in order to find their desired greeting.

During several interviews with students from Illinois State University, I was able to evaluate the specific skills individuals use when attempting to choose the right greeting card. Each individual who was interviewed agreed that the thought process they utilize when choosing greeting cards mainly revolves around their perceptions of the recipient of the card. ISU undergraduate Caroline Rodak states that she chooses a card based on

1450

The cards crafted in Germany in the 15th century, called "Andachtsbilder," continued the Egyptian and Roman tradition of exchanging New Year greetings, but it also propelled the greeting card genre forward by creating cards that were **pre-made** for individuals to send without having to construct a message or format themselves. These pre-made German cards focused on representing religious beliefs as they were, "adorned with an image of a cross-bearing Christ Child, inscribed with wishes for 'ein gut selig jar' ('a good and blessed year')" ("Just An Old Christmas Card").

1843

Figure 3. The Christmas card Horsley created for Sir Henry Cole (image courtesy of Bridwell Library at Southern Methodist University).

"the type of person who will be receiving the card and the relationship I would have with that person. If I have a close relationship with the person receiving the card, I would feel that I could send a funny card that other people might think is inappropriate. If I was sending a card to someone I wasn't very close with, I would probably just send a generic 'Happy Birthday' card." In addition to assessing the recipient and sender's personal relationship, ISU undergraduate Celynn Mayfield explains that she "would decide what type of card to send based on the recipient's age. The elderly and young children may not understand very sarcastic jokes in cards, so it wouldn't be appropriate to send these types of cards." ISU Master's student Lisa Lindenfelser agrees that "audience is the first thing I consider. How well I know the person is important as well as the context of the situation. Audience and context go together."

Insight into the complex knowledge one must assess before purchasing a card demonstrates that while greeting cards have come a long way throughout history, it seems that they are an entirely different type of genre now. This seems especially true with the development of e-cards, or electronic cards, which are currently in competition with print cards. In 1999, card companies began noticing a drastic decline in sales due to "the Internet, new technology and changing demographics. While older consumers are still actively purchasing greeting cards, younger shoppers—especially those under the age of 25—have turned to e-mail and other high-tech solutions, including making greeting cards online, as practical alternatives" (Mendelson). Both ISU undergraduate students that I interviewed confirmed that younger people are more likely to send e-cards; Rodak acknowledged using e-cards herself, especially "to communicate

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1843

England introduced the concept of Christmas greeting cards in 1843 when Sir Henry Cole hired John Calcott Horsley to create cards for his family and friends. Once Cole distributed Horsley's cards to his loved ones, the remaining cards were made available for the public to purchase for one shilling apiece. Yet, the Victorian culture was appalled by the cards, "not for their depictions of the starving and the unclothed, but because one of the figures shown sipping wine in the central panel was a child [which led to criticism] for 'fostering the moral corruption of children,' and the cards were quickly withdrawn from the market; today, only about a dozen remain" ("Just An Old Christmas Card"). Even though Horsley's card images were not accepted by Victorian society, the concept of **Christmas greeting cards** was embraced, and the market grew quickly during the mid-eighteenth century in England.

with relatives overseas." Mayfield expressed a reliance on Facebook to not only "remember others' birthdays," but also to "send friends birthday cards through the app on Facebook." As younger generations have had more access to online technologies than previous generations, they prove to be utilizing the skills they have developed in order to send greetings in electronic forms, whether through social media sites or by creating an actual e-card.

In an attempt to confront the decline in sales that e-cards have caused, many print card companies have lowered the prices of cards and begun mass marketing their greeting cards to businesses that they would not have sold to before. Even though e-cards have drastically changed the card industry, the top executives from print card companies have expressed their enthusiasm with card sales in 2012, since they believe that technology has only drawn people closer and strengthened relationships. These executives recognize that "while [consumers] appreciate the convenience that new technologies offer, they continue to deeply value how the greeting card category helps them to express their feelings in a creative way that is also authentic and heartfelt" (Krassner). For this reason, card companies continue to produce greeting cards that are more individualized and occasion-specific, something e-cards sometimes cannot provide. While numerous birthday or thank you e-cards may be available to consumers, a person wanting to purchase a graduation card that is specifically written for a godchild might be more likely to purchase a print card since e-cards do not typically provide such occasion-specific greetings.

In addition to the differences between the specific occasions that e-cards and print cards offer, several other factors differentiate these two types of

1875

Figure 4. Louis Prang, the "Father of the American Christmas card," used a variety of colors in his Christmas cards (image from the collection of the New-York Historical Society).

Louis Prang's transformation of the chromo-lithography printing technique allowed him to create a cheaper method of color printing that brought Christmas cards to the United States in 1875. The public quickly desired his **colorful and reasonably priced** cards that depicted "cherubs, children, illustrations of beautiful women, and lush floral arrangements," and "by the 1880s, Prang's firm was producing nearly five million cards annually" ("Just An Old Christmas Card").

greetings, which seems to allow both formats to maintain a place on the market. The actual message space permitted in e-cards and print cards differs vastly and targets different groups of purchasers. Since e-cards typically have a limited space for senders to compose their messages, such as a maximum of a 200 word/character count, people who want to include a lengthy message to the recipient might prefer to purchase a print card instead of an e-card. On the other hand, if a person wanted to send off a quick birthday message to a coworker, he or she may decide that an e-card is the best option, not desiring to include a drawn-out message. Rodak agrees that e-cards are very practical when sending a card to a general acquaintance for a nonspecific occasion, as she explains that "e-cards do not always allow me to insert a message and when they do, I just usually write 'Happy Birthday' and sign my name." E-cards also become very useful whenever someone accidently forgets about an occasion and no longer has time to purchase a print card; instead of becoming the jerk that forgets a roommate's birthday, a person can now quickly send off an e-card in a few clicks.

One of the most obvious differences that separate e-cards from print cards is their actual format. While e-cards must be sent electronically, they are received only through e-mail or are posted on a social media site. However, print cards must be hand-delivered or mailed. Consequently, when a person is attending an event, such as a birthday or graduation party, they are more likely to purchase a print greeting card to attach to their gift instead of emailing the recipient an e-card that he or she would not be able to view until after the event. Yet, if a person was unable to attend an event, then he or she might choose to send an e-card so it is received by the recipient quicker. Or, the person might still send a print card through the mail so that the recipient can physically open the card as a gift. Sending a print card through the mail

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1900s

While many card manufacturers imitated Prang in the early 20th century, other artists continued with their own styles. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Kate Greenaway, a popular English children's author and illustrator, crafted lavish cards with beautiful fringe and satin that were available in a **variety of formats** in America. Greenaway's cards could be shaped as bells, candles, fans, or crescents; they could be puzzles, pop-ups, or map cards; and they could even include squeaking noisemakers ("Just An Old Christmas Card").
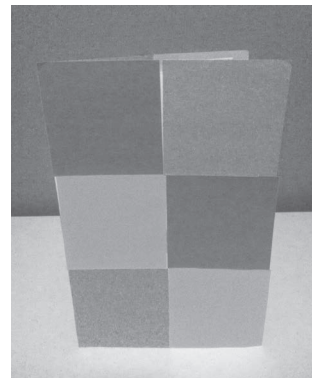
21st Century

Figure 5. Lisa Lindenfelser's handmade post-it card (image taken by Laurenn Jarema).

in this situation would also give the sender the option of including a monetary gift in the card as well so that they are still able to provide a gift despite their lack of attendance.

Due to the drastic differences between print and e-cards in terms of format, style, and cost, significant attitudes about the two genres also exist. Although not always the case, e-cards are usually viewed as a more informal type of greeting card, since many e-cards are often free and easy to send with a few clicks on the computer. When a person sends his or her coworker an e-card while the rest of the office took the time to purchase print cards, the recipient might assume that the e-card was sent because the person forgot about the recipient's birthday or did not want to take the time to compose a meaningful message. Consequently, even though the e-card may "save" the person—as in the previous example of the person who forgot about his or her roommate's birthday—the recipient is also likely to be aware of this oversight and possibly frown upon the roommate's decision to send an e-card versus purchasing a print card. Thus, print cards are typically labeled as the more formal greeting card genre; when they are purchased and sent, the sender must spend more time and money while choosing the card, and the recipient is usually conscious and appreciative of this gesture.

Genre History versus Trajectory

By examining the timeline and information regarding the current state of greeting cards, it becomes clear that the history of the greeting card has transformed from verbal messages, to medal greetings, to pre-made cards, to elaborate pop-up and musical cards, to e-cards that can be sent in a couple clicks of a mouse. Each one of these transformations has occurred as production and distribution capabilities expanded within society. The knowledge that individuals gained from previous formats and styles of greeting cards has also tremendously shaped the next genre of cards produced. Without one of these genres of greeting cards, the other genres may have appeared very different or may never have even existed at all. This is true for the modern print cards that are attempting to survive the accessibility, ease, and affordability that e-cards provide by lowering prices and becoming even more personalized. If e-cards had not been developed, these very specific cards might never have been created. Even though the original greeting cards are vastly different from the kinds people purchase today, the history of the genre has proven that greeting cards have expanded and transformed rather than risking extinction by refusing to adapt to changing cultures.

As the history of greeting cards has shown, each card creation has influenced the next, prompting the logical progression of greeting cards. It is interesting to compare the history of greeting cards to the implications of their trajectory. A *history* of a genre allows individuals to examine the progression and expansion the genre has experienced over time, such as by viewing its development in a timeline. However, a *trajectory* allows people to examine the "life" of a specific text, such as a specific greeting card, during its creation, distribution, and use. The trajectory of the Egyptian greeting cards remains intricate in itself, with the sender likely composing a message that could have been mistakenly altered by the messenger or interpreted by the receiver in an unintended way. It is interesting to wonder if the Egyptians envisioned their text continuing its life in the tomb of the receiver only to be discovered by modern historians and put on display in a museum. All of these greetings from the early Egyptians have complex and rich lives through their production, distribution, and use.
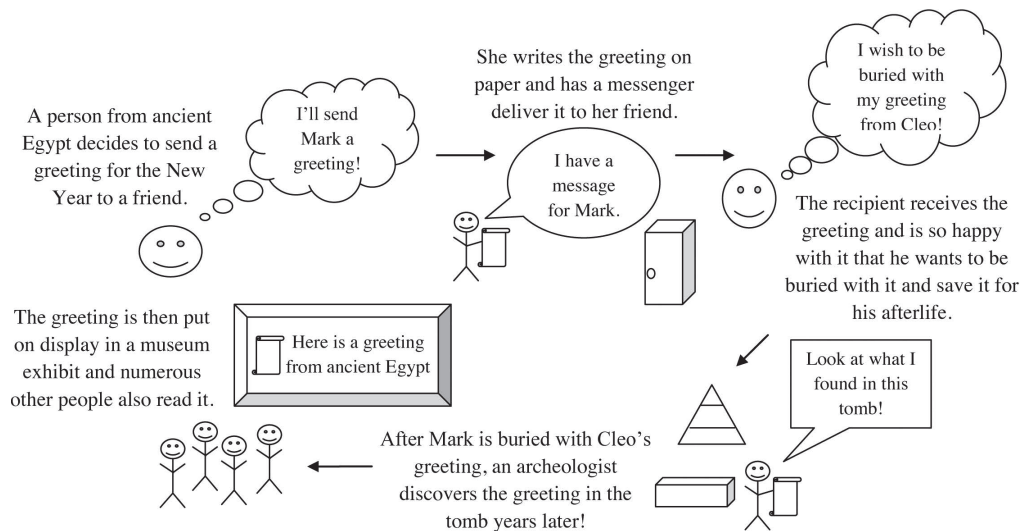
Figure 6. Trajectory of an ancient Egyptian greeting card.

The examination of the trajectory of the entire history of the greeting card genre seems uncomprehendingly complex in comparison to just one greeting from the Egyptian time period. Consequently, while history and trajectory work together and perform similar tasks, they still remain separate entities. History helps inform people of where a certain text's trajectory may have originated, or even how a text's trajectory may have differed from the overall history of the genre. Likewise, as trajectory provides an exact history or lifespan of a specific text, it also explores how writing reaches out to numerous and sometimes unexpected and unpredictable places in the world. A specific example of trajectory can be seen in Figure 6, above. In the example of the trajectory of an ancient Egyptian greeting card, the text's production, distribution, and use are explored. The text's trajectory includes:

- The creator conceiving the idea to make the text (a greeting).

- The creator writing the text.

- The creator giving the text to a messenger.

- The messenger taking the text and delivering it to the recipient.

- The recipient receiving and reading the text.

- The recipient deciding to be buried with the text.

- An archeologist discovering the text in a burial tomb in Egypt.

- The archeologist giving the text to a museum.

- Individuals viewing the text at the museum.

As cards have become more complex and creative, thanks to the progression of technology, it seems even more difficult to predict or trace the trajectory of greeting cards today. Computers, cell phones, cameras, and other electronic devices have not only affected how cards can be created, but also how they are dispersed and even preserved. Instead of having a basic sender and receiver trajectory that could be altered and affected in multiple ways, the technology of today adds many other factors into the equation. A computer glitch could have a greeting card accidently sent to the wrong recipient, while the Internet also expands the amount of people who receive cards since e-cards are cheaper and easier to send than print cards. Yet, even with the uncertainty of the future trajectory of print cards, e-cards, and the greeting card genre as a whole, it still seems fair to say that the production, distribution, and use of greeting cards will continue in society. Thus, the history of greeting cards will continue to grow as well. As greeting cards continue to be produced, distributed, and used, they will still reach unforeseen audiences and impact society in ways that we might never be able to predict.

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