

Mandatory Upgrades

The Evolving Mechanics and Theme of Android: Netrunner

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Android: Netrunner (2012) is the update of Richard Garfield and Wizards of the Coast's (WotC) cult classic *Netrunner* (Garfield, 1996). Like its collectible card game (CCG) predecessor, *Android: Netrunner* is an asymmetrical, dystopian cyberpunk card game in which one player acts as a "Runner," attempting to hack another player's (the "Corporation's") servers, to steal agendas before the corporation can advance them. Redesigned primarily by Lukas Litzinger and released by Fantasy Flight Games, *Android: Netrunner* has become popular among game developers, designers, academics, and critics,¹ and is the current centerpiece of an expanding new intellectual property (IP).²

I look at the game not just as a competitive environment or a set of mechanical interactions, but as an evolving IP. I examine the impact of its production/release model, the evolution of the game's mechanics, and the development of the game's narrative/theme. Though analyzing games involves deconstructing multiple vectors of

1. For a personal account of one's deep involvement and learning within the game and its social communities, see Leigh Alexander and Quinns Smith. "Life Hacks: A Netrunner story." Shut Up & Sit Down, 2014. <http://www.shutupandsitdown.com/blog/post/test/>
2. The "Android: Netrunner universe," covering multiple games, narrative media, and upcoming digital games.

analysis,³ rarely has the evolution of a game series' narrative world been explored in board and card game formats. Ironically, as stated by the original *Netrunner's* creator, Richard Garfield, some believe that “games are not the best format in which to get people to like a new IP — something else had to get you to like *Battlestar Galactica* before you bought the boardgame. Books, movies, and television are all much better, probably because they are better at telling stories, and stories are what make people love IPs.”⁴ This piece offers a useful counterpoint: I argue the development of this IP and its paratexts⁵ reveals ways that narrative worlds have been effectively developed in conjunction with an evolving set of game mechanics.

A “LIVING CARD GAME”

Android: Netrunner is considered a “Living Card Game” (LCG), distinguished from collectible card games on account of its ongoing, updated release schedule organized into cycles of expansions and “datapacks.” Such a distinction proves interesting in several respects. Unlike the original *Netrunner's* (and many other CCGs') randomized booster packs, cards are released in non-randomized packs. For instance, if one wants the pack with the powerful card “Faust” in it, one simply needs to go out and buy the datapack *The Underway* rather than buy many randomized booster packs or explore a secondary card market.

At first blush, this seems a potentially more equitable position for the player — one does not need to purchase nearly as many randomized packs in order to find the key cards they need to play. Additionally, there is a lack of a secondary card market, unlike the

3. Casey O'Donnell. “Inhabiting games well (if not uncomfortably...)” *Well Played* 2(2). Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2013, pp. 5-20.

4. George Skaff Elias, Richard Garfield and K. Robert Gutschera. *Characteristics of Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, p. 217.

5. Paul Booth. *Game play: paratextuality in contemporary board games*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

well-established market for collectible card games such as *Magic: the Gathering*. With the release of a sizable 252-card core set and regular, consistent datapacks organized in thematic “cycles” (see Figure 1, below), *Android: Netrunner* provides players with consistent but periodic releases that have deprecated some forms of play dependent upon randomness and the contingencies of booster pack draws.⁶

This periodic-but-consistent release of cards has created a system in which any player can enter into deckbuilding with the very same resources as any other who has purchased the same number and kind of datapacks.⁷ Participating in the game at the most competitive levels requires players to consistently purchase the latest cards, as well as ancillary expenses: card sleeves, participation fees for tournaments, etc. These costs quickly become barriers to entry for new players, as well as impediments for lapsed players who are interested in rejoining the game. To take an analogy from digital games, it’s as if players who decide to take a several-month break from *World of Warcraft* (2004) would be expected to pay the subscription fees for each of their months away from the game when they rejoined. While an intertwining of the game’s release model and its mechanical evolution speaks to the ways that *Android: Netrunner* requires a different sort of engagement from its dedicated players than in similar games, and than in the earlier version of *Netrunner*, the regular release of cards is not solely a mechanical evolution, and has parallels in the development of a narrative world for the game. Theorycrafting⁸ players are, potentially, guided in their practice of mechanical optimization through engagement with the IP’s expanding storyworld.

6. Draft play has only become a relatively recent addition to the game, several years after release.

7. This potentially leads to financial inequity for players of a different kind than that of traditional CCGs.

8. Christopher A. Paul. “Optimizing play: How theorycraft changes gameplay and design.” *Game Studies*, 11(2). (2011). <http://gamestudies.org/1102/articles/paul>

THE *ANDROID* UNIVERSE

Android: Netrunner's mechanics, while still largely the same as the original Garfield/WotC game, have been altered to fit Fantasy Flight's LCG model and to capitalize on thematic changes that place it within a pre-existing "Android universe" promoted by Fantasy Flight across multiple games, novels, and novellas. Whereas the original game had only two roles — Runner and Corporation — *Android: Netrunner* features multiple factions within each of these two roles, and multiple "identities" (with special abilities unique to each identity) within each faction. The original game relied upon the aforementioned random booster packs to provide a degree of depth and complexity, as well as ensure consistent income for WotC. This loose narrative world of the "Android universe" provides both Fantasy Flight opportunities for transmedia⁹ exploration while inspiring mechanical constraints that further develop tensions in the game's narrative space.

For example, the "Custom Biotics" Haas-Bioroid Corporation identity disallows any corporation cards from Jinteki, a competing Corporation, and the severely limited influence of 1 for the Runner "The Professor," reflects a Shaper Runner who, in the game's narrative world, is an academic who has been discredited due to corporate retribution. Card mechanics are directly inspired by narrative effects, and the *implementation* of both frequently intertwines the two. As the game's world expands into multiple gaming properties, we can see thematic elements driving mechanical design. For instance, in the recent *Android: Mainframe* (2016) board game, developed by Damon Stone from mechanics originally designed by Jordi Gené and Gregorio Morales, Fantasy Flight has

9. Henry Jenkins. *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.

Mandatory Upgrades

repurposed art from *Android: Netrunner*, taking underplayed, mechanically “weak” cards (such as “Leviathan,” see Figure 2 below) and revived them into useful, interesting drivers of gameplay in a narratively-identical but mechanically-distant game space.



Figure 2. The card “Leviathan” as seen across two Android games (*Android: Netrunner*, and *Android: Mainframe*, respectively).

Though loose and occasionally maligned concepts such as “ludonarrative dissonance”¹⁰, or the ludic disconnect between game mechanics and game content, often come into play in making sense of narrative-based digital games, such discussions are unusual with these forms of tabletop games. Moreover, they are relatively unexplored *across multiple games*, as Fantasy Flight’s expanding *Android* universe demonstrates. The synchronicities and disconnects between theme and mechanic in *Android: Netrunner* provide an

10. Clint Hocking. “Ludonarrative dissonance in Bioshock: the problem of what the game is about.” Well Played 1. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2009, pp. 114–117.

unusually strong impetus for the player to investigate the game further and to dive into the most tedious of CCG/LCG tasks. As tactical advantage in the game is often reliant upon knowing what the range of an opponent's potential cards are, as well as what the likely cards are to arise with a certain style of play, perhaps the evolving narrative of *Android: Netrunner* serves a *pedagogical* role: To draw the player into the necessary task of learning the range of cards more effectively than other CCGs that do not feature a novel, developing theme.

Although players of other LCGs can rely upon their understanding of narrative worlds drawn from literary source material¹¹ or filmic source material,¹² *Android: Netrunner* and the *Android* universe reflect a new IP, and thus a developing set of works in progress. Some of the pleasure of *Android: Netrunner* is in watching the relationships and characters change across generations of cards. One dives into the “upgrading” story world of the *Android* universe with each new datapack or expansion, as well as witnessing dissonances between new novels, novellas, and games. This can involve identifying how loose story threads cut across multiple card sets (e.g., Haas-Bioroid's Director Haas and the apparent tension with her layabout son, Thomas) or multiple games in the *Android* universe (e.g., “Gabriel Santiago,” a Criminal identity in *Android: Netrunner* and a character in Donald Vaccarino's *Infiltration* [2012], or “Caprice Nisei,” a Jinteki Upgrade card in *Android: Netrunner* and a playable character in *Android*).

Most recently, we have seen the development of the first datapack cycle entirely designed under Damon Stone's direction, which features even more interplay between *Android: Netrunner* and the

11. Examples include Fantasy Flight's Lord of the Rings LCG, Call of Cthulhu LCG, and Game of Thrones LCG.

12. E.g., the Star Wars LCG

evolving *Android* IP. The current Flashpoint cycle of *Android: Netrunner* datapacks details the narrative fallout from a moment players can play through in *Android: Mainframe* (a hack of a key financial institution). As a consequence of the actions in this stand-alone game, the *Android* Universe's Corporations are sent into chaos, which is shown through each Flashpoint cycle datapack, and has led to the overt conflict found in the stand-alone game, *New Angeles* (2016).

As characters pique fan interests, new novellas have been commissioned addressing these characters' backstories, such as the *Monster Slayer* (2016) novella by Daniel Clark, addressing character Reina Roja's backstory, and narrative evolution has found its way into the design of card cycles themselves (e.g., the Mumbad Cycle's storyline involving an election cycle in a future Indian Union). Many questions about connections between characters, spaces, and embedded storylines remain intriguingly unanswered: Whose picture is the runner Exile wistfully considering on the "Motivation" card? Is Thomas Haas actually 'Director Haas's Pet Project' and thus a bioroid? What *is* the "virtual" runner Apex, anyway? The changes in theme supported by the LCG model imbues *Android: Netrunner* in ways that the original *Netrunner* did not have, and also provides inquisitive players a theme with appealing *gaps* that give them further reason to familiarize one's self with the litany of cards, and to begin to associate card actions with the game's evolving narrative world. The LCG model, in this case at least, promotes continued purchasing of cards not solely for tactical advantage, but potentially to encourage player engagement with the game on a narrative level that might

also reap rewards on better understanding the game's mechanical systems.¹³

DATAPACKS AND NARRATIVE

The LCG model promotes narrative development in ways perhaps unique to this form of game. The cyberpunk theme of the Android narrative universe has changed over several games¹⁴ as well as through a number of novels and novellas set in the *Android* universe, such as William H. Keith's *Android: Free Fall* (2011) or Mel Odom's "The Identity Trilogy" (2011-2014). And, as *Android: Netrunner*'s release schedule drives the further release of cards, we have seen the recent release of a large and detailed sourcebook, *The Worlds of Android* (2015), edited by Katrina Ostrander, which explicitly elaborates the *Android* transmedia project's world and history (see Figure 3, below).

13. For more on this topic, see Jonathan Gray. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.

14. It originated with Daniel Clark and Kevin Wilson's *Android* (2008) board game and was further developed with Vaccarino's *Infiltration* and now Gené and Morales's *Mainframe*.

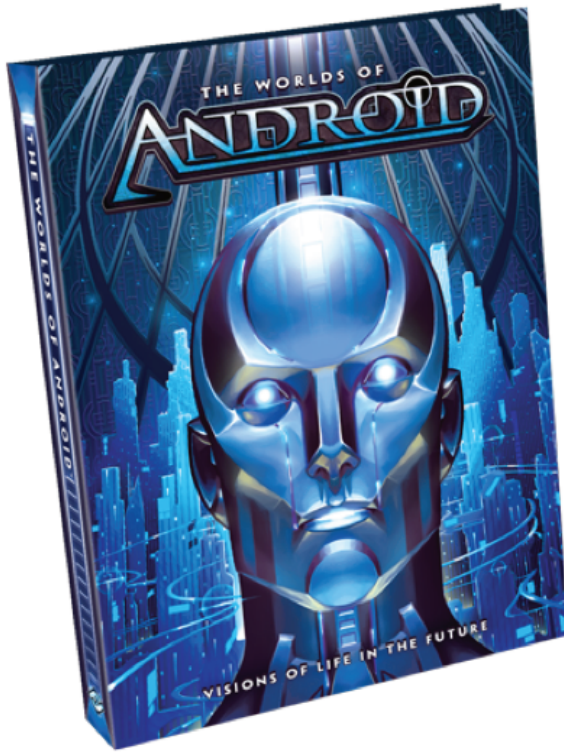


Figure 3. The Worlds of Android sourcebook, not tied to a specific game.

The LCG model permits Fantasy Flight to stagger the description of the world, as well as significant events within it. The most recent three completed datapack ‘cycles,’ the Lunar Cycle, the SanSan Cycle, and the Mumbad Cycle) have all been focused on specific locales in the world of *Android*: The space elevator known as the “Beanstalk” and the path to the Lunar colony, the megalopolis of “SanSan” (San Francisco to San Diego) that covers a chunk of the West coast of North America, and “Mumbad,” the megalopolis extending from present-day Mumbai to Ahmedabad, in India. Unlike the current larger, deluxe expansions, the game’s creators have taken

the opportunity to use the staggered release of datapacks as a means of exploring different parts of the game’s narrative world.

With the Mumbad Cycle specifically, the designers have been intent on helping a story evolve through the release of datapacks. With a storyline spread over the cycle involving a contested Indian Union election, we have seen *character* dynamics play out over the release of cards. For instance, in Figure 4 below, we see three cards organized chronologically — “Jesminder Sareen,” a “Runner” (playable character within the game, released in the first pack), her sister “Akshara Sareen” (a political leader, and “resource” for a player to rely on, released in the third pack), and “The Price of Freedom” (an event, released in the final pack of the cycle). The interaction of these cards presents the player with both the staggered release of options (the mid-cycle release of Akshara mirroring her rise to prominence in Indian politics), as well as a moral quandary (“The Price of Freedom”’s mechanical implications and card art implying Jesminder’s sacrifice of her own sister to achieve her anti-Corporate goals).



Figure 4. The evolution of story through Android: Netrunner’s Mumbad Cycle.

The development of the Sareen family drama is a peculiar-but-

interesting moment in the evolution of the game. Previous story overtures have been synonymous with *theme* and *location* in the game — while, say, Nasir Meidan’s travels to the Lunar colonies to uncover the mythical “Source protocols” was a featured story in the flavor text that accompanied datapacks in the Lunar Cycle, the Sareen case appears to be different. In the Mumbad Cycle, Fantasy Flight has staggered narrative elements through the datapacks, using temporal ordering of the release of packs to further a specific storyline. It would make little sense to release either “Akshara Sareen” or “Jesminder Sareen” after “The Price of Freedom,” with the Event card capturing a potentially-tragic moment in the lives of the characters. As the current cycle, Flashpoint, develops, we see similar play between mechanics and narrative evolving — the aftermath of a serious financial hack has seen datapacks bounce between cards that provide powerful new strategies to the Corp followed by datapacks that provide powerful new Runner counterstrategies. The mechanical changes are couched in a conflict that maps directly onto the IP’s ongoing story development.

The sense of “story” here is admittedly thin and largely limited to card art and the “flavor text” seen at the bottom of some cards. But while datapacks have been seen primarily as collections of cards to change one’s play, recent design developments illustrate the ways that their sequential release is used to further a storyline. As datapacks in *Android: Netrunner* were initially presented as an alternative to the randomized boosters of collectible card games, their thematic focus has been sidelined in favor of mechanical innovations (e.g., the Lunar Cycle’s inclusion of “currents”). As Fantasy Flight refines its LCG model, it also provides the opportunity for researchers and designers to better consider *temporality* in the release of gaming products (and

transmedia products released in parallel, such as *Android: Mainframe* and the upcoming game *New Angeles*).

CONCLUSIONS

Android: Netrunner is a rich and evolving updated version of a nearly two-decade old analog card game that has developed a number of interesting innovations in how its release model has affected both the mechanical development of the game, as well as its evolution as a transmedia property. In particular, Elias, Garfield, and Gutschera's statement on the design of gaming intellectual properties seems to be directly challenged by the continued evolution and development of the *Android* universe. *Android: Netrunner* and the *Android* universe provoke us to consider the ways that narrative interplays with mechanical and commercial concerns over multiple intellectual properties.

I also suggest that LCGs such as this should also serve as an impetus for new community-level questions about analog game studies: How do we understand the interrelations of games as sets of mechanics and evolving storyworlds? How do we understand how game models such as the LCG provide new and interesting approaches to the development of narrative in analog games? Through this cursory analysis, I have hoped to raise the possibility that deeper investigations of game release models (as well as their interactions with larger transmedia enterprises) may provide insights on how nascent fandoms are created through mechanics and business strategies.