Mandatory Upgrades: The Evolving Mechanics and Theme of Android: Netrunner

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Android: Netrunner 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 by Lukas Litzinger and released by Fantasy Flight Games in 2012, Android: Netrunner has become the “game of the moment” for many game developers, designers, academics, and critics (see Alexander & Smith, 2014, for a recent personal account of deep involvement with the game). In this paper, I attempt to triangulate the “Well Play” of this game through the intersections of three key factors: The impact of its release model, changes to the game’s mechanics, and the evolution of the game’s theme. Building on the deconstructive emphasis to many “Well Played” analyses (see O’Donnell, 2013), I wish to assess the interactions of pairs of these factors in turn (release model + mechanics; mechanics + theme; theme + release model), toward the goal of understanding how the interactions of multiple factors influence the meaning and experience of a game.

First, “release model + mechanics”: I describe how Android: Netrunner works as a "Living Card Game" (or LCG), distinguished from CCGs by featuring an ongoing, updated release schedule organized into cycles of "datapacks" containing the same cards, as opposed to the original Netrunner’s (and many other CCGs’) randomized booster packs. This change has implications for fostering a different kind of “meta” around the game, as involvement is less probabilistic with regards to their consumer activity with datapack releases, and is potentially more equitable with the lack of a secondary card market that promotes a wide range of expenses to become competitive (see Magic: The Gathering). With the release of a sizeable 252-card core set and regular, consistent datapacks, 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 (e.g., draft play has only become a recent addition to the game, nearly two years after release), which is on par with the monthly cost of a subscription-based massively-multiplayer online game.

This periodic but also 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 (which potentially leads to a different form of financial inequity for players). I suggest, however, that the ability of players to easily acquire needed cards may foster new forms of “theorycrafting” (Paul, 2011) that require a different understanding of the development and change of mechanics over the span of a release cycle, and that the game’s “influence” mechanic (limiting the choices of out of faction cards that can be put into a deck) is a means of providing players with further challenges in a system in which players with financial means may more easily acquire every potential card. Thus, this intertwining of the game’s release model and its mechanical evolution speaks to the ways that Android: Netrunner may involve a different sort of engagement from its dedicated players than in similar games, and than in the earlier version of Netrunner.
Next, to “mechanics + theme”: The game’s mechanics, while still largely the same as the Garfield/WotC game, have been altered to fit Fantasy Flight’s LCG model and to capitalize on thematic changes that place Android: Netrunner within the ongoing “Android universe” promoted by Fantasy Flight across multiple games and novels. Whereas the original game had only two roles (runner and corporation), Android: Netrunner features multiple factions within each of the two roles, and multiple “identities” (with special abilities unique to each identity) within each faction. While 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), the loose narrative world of Android: Netrunner provides both flavor and inspires mechanical constraints that further develop tensions in the Android universe’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 Professor,” reflects a Shaper runner who, in the game’s narrative world, is an academic who has been discredited due to corporate retribution.

Though loose concepts such as “ludonarrative dissonance” (Hocking, 2009) often come into play in making sense of narrative-based digital games, such discussions are unusual with these forms of tabletop games. While the mechanics of Android: Netrunner are complex and typically require a great deal of time and effort to master, I argue that the synchronicities of theme and mechanic in Android: Netrunner provide an unusually strong impetus for the player to investigate the game further and to dive into the most tedious of CCG/LCG tasks — learning what all of the cards are and do. 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, I suggest that the evolving narrative of Android: Netrunner serves a role to draw the player into this task much more effectively than other CCGs that do not feature a significantly changing sense of theme.

That is, while players of other LCGs can rely upon their understanding of narrative worlds drawn from literary source material (Fantasy Flight’s Lord of the Rings LCG, Call of Cthulhu LCG, and Game of Thrones LCG) or filmic/transmedia source material (their Star Wars LCG), Android: Netrunner and the Android universe reflect works in progress. Some of the pleasure of Android: Netrunner is in watching the relationships and characters change, diving into the “upgrading” story world of the Android universe with each new datapack or expansion. 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, or “Caprice Nisei,” a Jinteki Upgrade card in Android: Netrunner and a playable character in Android). 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? Where exactly is “ChiLo City”? Is Thomas Haas a bioroid? Does Jackson Howard really exist? A consistent theme imbues Android: Netrunner in ways that the original Netrunner did not have, but it is a theme with appealing gaps that give the inquisitive player 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.
And finally, to “theme + release model”: I speculate on the consequence this release model has upon the game’s evolving theme and its broader transmedia implications. The cyberpunk theme of the Android narrative universe has changed over several games (originating with Daniel Clark and Kevin Wilson’s Android board game and further with Infiltration) as well as through a number of novels set in the Android universe (e.g., Android: Free Fall or Mel Odom’s “The Identity Trilogy”). And, as Android: Netrunner’s release schedule drives the further release of cards, I see shifts in the “stories” told between evocative cards taking large leaps with the release of the game’s “big box” expansions. Focusing on one runner faction and one corporation faction per expansion (Shaper and Haas-Bioroid for Creation and Control, Criminal and Jinteki for Honor and Profit), Fantasy Flight has used these opportunities to introduce several new characters of significance to the game. While each runner identity is tied to a specific character (e.g., Iain Stirling, “Kit” Peddler, or Reina Roja), the big box expansions are opportunities for Fantasy Flight to begin to flesh out faceless corporations with additional individuals in the corporate structure, such as Haas-Bioroid’s Director Haas and Jinteki’s Chairman Hiro. Ultimately, Android: Netrunner’s LCG release model helps us to understand how Fantasy Flight is continually “upgrading” both the game’s mechanics and story world within a framework of a new transmedia franchise (Jenkins, 2006) that stretches over time, over multiple paratexts (Gray 2010), and over several, mechanically-distinct games.

And finally, while this analysis has focused primarily on the game’s structure and the implications of Fantasy Flight’s economic/release model for the game, the communities of interest around Android: Netrunner are clearly consequential for its discussion at this moment, within this specific community. Why Android: Netrunner and not the original game? Quite simply, because Android: Netrunner is “hot,” featuring prominently in several game design communities in recent months (from NYU Game Center’s regular “The Local Meta” play to the game industry-centric Idle Thumbs podcast’s “Terminal 7” Android: Netrunner podcast).

The game is an updated version of nearly two-decade old analog card game that has taken a surprising hold within communities that ostensibly focus primarily on digital games. As Android: Netrunner serves as a “game of the moment” for digital game enthusiasts, designers, and scholars, I suggest that it should also serve as a touchstone for new community-level questions about game studies: Why have so many members of these communities found themselves drawn to this particular game? In what ways can we see Android: Netrunner player activity and designer interest as reminiscent of other digital game communities (e.g., MMORPGs or e-Sports)? In what ways does the game capitalize on and extend revivalist thematic trends in gaming (e.g. the resurgence of cyberpunk, also seen in the recent Deus Ex: Human Evolution and Remember Me)? And how might the growing interest in this game reflect a further shift in the focus of “digital game studies” practitioners and scholars toward a broader conception of “game”? If understanding “Well Play” is at least, in part, an aesthetic task (Sharp, 2013), we cannot shy away from addressing the influence of these community-level factors in guiding our aesthetic choices, and I suggest we turn our eyes to games such as this to better understand how critics, academics, and designers value particular kinds of games at particular historical moments.
References


