Well Played

a journal on video games, value and meaning

A Special Issue on The Sporting Mindset

EDITED BY JOHN SHARP

EXPLORING THE SPORTING METAGAMES OF COMPETITIVE ANDROID: NETRUNNER

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It is increasingly difficult to separate discussions of games from sports. In early 2019, we are in the midst of an "esports" gold rush, where countless video games have now morphed into or been designed to work as competitive esports (from *Starcraft* and *Dota 2* to *Hearthstone* all the way to *Clash Royale* and even *Farming Simulator 19*). Given that games scholarship has often focused on the cultural practices around playful media, we are led to consider the communal and competitive activities that players create around gaming, including organized sports. Whether we are discussing on one hand an *Overwatch* friendly tournament or a *Hearthstone* national championship, or historical antecedents such as *Street Fighter's* Daigo's Official Evo Moment #37 or even *Chess's* Fischer/Spassky showdown, the context of competitive play provides us a window into the connection between individual play and competitive structures, as well as organized circuits, leagues, and rewards.

At the same time, the conception of "sports" in game studies has broadened in recent years to include sports videogames (Consalvo, Mitgutsch, & Stein, 2013) and even, in some popular discourses, the play of non-digital card and board games (e.g., Titus Chalk's 2017 revealing autobiography of involvement with competitive *Magic: the Gathering* card game tournaments). Perhaps, then, it is worth considering the ways that "sports" are wrestled with by the fans and players of things we more often think of as "games." In their introduction to a discussion of sports videogames, Consalvo, Mitgutsch, and Stein state that "even if a videogame does not itself simulate a physical sport, the act of playing a game and competing seriously might constitute a sport for some people" (2013, p. 3). While this issue's theme — "the sporting mindset" — provides us with a potentially useful

phrase that, on the face of it, seems to describe how individuals embody the term "sports," we are still left considering what the boundaries are of "sports," and how the term reflects considerations of games as platforms for social and cultural practices.

A discussion of "sporting mindsets" may potentially yield a better understanding of the ways "games" are considered by individuals as more than just "simply" games. However, in a similar vein, Boluk & LeMieux (2017) have recently provoked games scholarship to consider the ways that the plethora of socially- and culturally-situated "metagames" that sit atop games provide cultures and communities of players not only with new understandings of games, but also connection to institutions outside of gaming. Boluk & LeMieux state that their concept of "metagaming" takes on "renewed importance and political urgency in a media landscape in which videogames not only colonize and enclose the very concept of games, play, and leisure but ideologically conflate the creativity, criticality, and craft of play with the act of consumption" (2017). If so, and if we make the leap that a framing of games as "sports" constitutes an engagement with a form of "metagame," then perhaps an investigation of individual "sporting mindsets" might provide us with ways of understanding the social "sporting metagames" that may challenge predominant, popular, consumerist models of games.

In this paper, then, I focus on "sporting metagames" as the adoption of a form of critical "metagame" or series of "metagames" utilizing elements of sports in fan-created, player-organized, competitive play atop a game. Many digital and analog gaming communities could serve as potential sites within which to address these kinds of "sporting metagames"; for this piece, I explore how it has taken hold in a small, customizable, largely-analog card game community. Since 2013, I have been a casual player, competitive tournament player, blogger, and critic

within the community for the card game *Android: Netrunner* (most recently published by Fantasy Flight Games). My previous and ongoing work on this game and its play communities (Duncan, 2016; Garcia and Duncan, 2019) has been based on a five years' worth of ethnographic field notes, supplemented by interviews with players.

This paper focuses in particular on two cases drawn from moments in the history of the game's community, both of which address the strange and interesting position that *Android: Netrunner* has taken in the space between "game" and "sport," as well as how fan-created and player-managed "sporting metagames" help to explicate community relationships with rewards and money. I track tensions between interpretations of the game in player communities and ultimately player ownership of the game to some degree, as the game has moved from a published product of Fantasy Flight Games to a murkier, fan-managed model (known as "NISEI"). As a consequence, we will find that the influence of various forms of reward (monetary, subcultural fame, or otherwise) may play a role, and point us back toward the ways that some fan-created "sporting metagames" may address the critical project that Boluk and LeMieux have laid out for us.

In the following sections, I will begin by describing how competitive *Android: Netrunner* arises from an interplay between design concerns, production concerns, and community goals. By first detailing the game and its history, I next discuss ways the community has overtly played with the tensions around "sporting" in the game's past, and will finally describe some of the current efforts to build a new, fan-created "sporting" structure to support the game after Fantasy Flight Games shuttered the game in October, 2018.

WHY ANDROID: NETRUNNER?

Android: Netrunner (*ANR)* is an unusual case that bears some justification. *ANR* is neither the first nor most popular collectible/customizable card game (that distinction typically goes to *Magic: the Gathering*). However, it has a fervent player base and one that has treaded that line between "game" and "sport" in interesting ways due to the game's production history, its position as a mechanically distinct game from many other customizable card games, and through attention to diversity within the game's theme.

Android: Netrunner is a competitive, two-player card game, set in a futuristic, "cybernoir" world. As with many customizable card games, players select cards from a collection of several hundred available cards, designing their "decks" (sets of cards of typically 40 to 54 cards in *ANR*) which are then played against another player's complementary decks. During its redesign, helmed by by Lukas Litzsinger for Fantasy Flight Games in 2012, *Android: Netrunner* adapted the mechanics and updated the theme of the 1995 collectible, customizable card game *Netrunner* by Richard Garfield (creator of *Magic: the Gathering,* and the genre of collectible card games). The original *Netrunner,* while a cult classic, was an unsuccessful attempt at making a collectible, customizable card game featuring radically different mechanics from Garfield's original *Magic: the Gathering* systems. Both games are asymmetrical — *ANR* and *Netrunner* players both play a "Runner" (a computer hacker) and a "Corp" (the megacorporation the Runner is trying to hack) — leading to, essentially, players needing to learn two simultaneous games at the same time. These mechanical differences are some of the game's appeal for its adherents, but also the complexity and unfamiliarity of these mechanics compared to standard *Magic: the Gathering*-style combat likely hampered it in the competitive card game market.

Sometimes pejoratively labeled a "dudebasher" within *ANR* play communities, *Magic: the Gathering's* core combat systems involve playing characters ("dudes") that can attack or defend, with the ultimate goal of reducing ("bashing") your opponent's hit points to zero. These mechanics stand in stark contrast to *Netrunner's* and *ANR's* game of hidden information, bluffing, and interaction with simulated computer servers through the complex and unique set of mechanics of a conducting a "run" on that server. Although many in the *Android: Netrunner* player community cut their teeth on *Magic: the Gathering* or similar games and still view *ANR* from the lens of the constructed card game genre that *Magic: the Gathering* began, the "feel" of *ANR* is distinct, and has been an acquired taste for many.

These mechanical distinctions were largely my initial draw to the game, and why I fell in love with it so quickly. Unlike many other collectible card games, I found myself immersed in a set of game systems that played fast, rewarded risk and bluffing, but also seemed to have a high degree of verisimilitude with a form of fiction it was modeling. William Gibson's classic "Burning Chrome" short story and his later *Sprawl* novels clearly served as a basis for *ANR*'s mechanical differences from other collectible card games, and I had never experienced a game that had such a deep "feel" for the fiction it was modeling. The actions of the Runner felt *invasive*, like you were risking your safety to steal something from a Corp's well-hidden servers. Playing as a Corp felt vulnerable but also powerful, often just a few cards away from a game-changing agenda score or a punitive retribution on a sloppy Runner. Most importantly, playing them across the same table felt oddly like a *conversation*, one where two sets of perspectives and two sets of game mechanics intertwined in one, taut contest.

As such, game designer Naomi Clark described one of the appeals of *ANR* as being its "competitive intimacy" (Rubeck, 2015), with its asymmetry leading to an interesting form of

"yomi" (Sirlin, 2005) wherein players were not just trying to keep in mind what other players were strategizing, but also how other players were strategizing within a completely different network of game mechanics. This rise of public game designer discourse around the game was a key driver for my involvement, and, I suspect for others. I first became enamored with the game when *ANR* became a critical darling in game design circles around 2013, several months after the game's initial release. Partially due to these mechanics, and bolstered by the vocal support of game designers on social media (including members of the NYU Game Center), positive discussions of the game, its novel thematic updates to cyberpunk fiction (Purdom, 2015), and its challenges in learning (Alexander & Smith, 2014) became popular public interpretations of game.

Additionally, I should note that Fantasy Flight's dedication to diversity in the world of the game held appeal for me, but was even more significant for many others who had felt marginalized by other customizable card games, which are often aimed more at heteronormative, white, male, and American players. *ANR* was lauded for presenting a particularly diverse vision of the future, including creating a "cybernoir" world centered in Ecuador rather than Japan or North America (with cycles of cards set in futuristic India and Africa), playable trans* (Nero Severn) and transhuman (Quetzal) characters, as well as a dedication to representation of characters ranging widely in race, gender, sexuality, and age (e.g., the teen wünderkind Olivia Ortiz aka "Chaos Theory" and the elderly conspiracy theorist Omar Keung).

I suspect that attention to refining novel game mechanics and dedication to a diverse theme contributed to *ANR* becoming a "golf for game designers" as Clark put it (Purdom, 2014). As game designers and game scholars began to take a deeper look at the world and systems of the game, *ANR* has appeared in at least one instructional game design text (Macklin & Sharp,

2016) and *ANR's* designer (Lukas Litzsinger, then an employee of Fantasy Flight Games) presented a detailed analysis of the game's redesign at NYU's PRACTICE conference (Litzsinger, 2014). *ANR* became the inspiration for at least one well-publicized game design experiment (i.e., Clark's *Lacerunner,* which re-invisioned the game as a set in the world of 19th century manners; Purdom, 2015). *ANR* soon found itself cultivating a different, quite rabid player base than many other competitive card games. In terms of the community, the game spawned the central fan site Stimhack (http://stimhack.com; named after a core *ANR* card, and founded by Anthony Giovanetti, who would later develop the popular digital deckbuilder *Slay the Spire*). Additionally, the game spawned multiple podcasts from both fans and game professionals alike (e.g., *Terminal 7*, from former Campo Santo and current Caledonia developer Nels Anderson and Klei artist Jesse Turner).

Also notable was the economic model of the card game itself. For many consumers, one of the central appeals was that *ANR* was no longer a *collectible* card game. Fantasy Flight's "Living Card Game" (LCG) model for the game was an economic factor for many (this author included). In it, Fantasy Flight eschewed "boosters" of randomized cards for "datapacks" containing, typically, three cards apiece of twenty different cards, each unique to that datapack. The LCG model allowed for sequential narrative exploration across multiple packs and cycles of packs (see Duncan, 2016), and also provided players with an appealingly simple way to acquire the cards one needed for competitive play. If a player wanted the card "Rashida Jaheem," they would simply purchase a copy of the *The Devil and the Dragon* datapack (along with copies of around 19 other cards). If one was interested in using the card "I've Had Worse," one would purchase the *Order & Chaos* deluxe expansion for it (along with several hundred other cards). The game abandoned randomness for an ostensibly much more consumer-friendly approach; as

a consequence, purchasing an entire collection of *ANR* cards typically ranged on the order of $300-$500, and was a fraction of the cost of a single competitive *deck* for *Magic: the Gathering*.

This hints that the LCG model itself is an intriguing one to consider from the perspective of the creation "sporting metagames." While the original, collectible *Netrunner* game was tied to a card game model that was originally designed for competitive, organized play (the *Netrunner* mechanics licensed from Wizards of the Coast), Fantasy Flight's LCG approach seem to have been intended to cater to the *hobby board game market*. *ANR* required the purchase of a "core set" (see Figure 1 below) which could be played as a standalone game, with deluxe "expansions" following the nomenclature and smaller-box presentation of many traditional board game expansions. Their approach seemed intended to serve as a bridge between hobbyist board games (a domain that Fantasy Flight had succeeded at for several decades with games such as *Twilight Imperium* and *Cosmic Encounter*) and the competitive, organized world of collectible/customizable card games.

Ostensibly, the LCG model provided opportunities for anyone to dive into the game's competitive play at whatever rate they wanted — adopting a "sporting mindset," but only if one wished to. And, without any randomness in the collections of cards one would purchase, there was no secondary financial market for the game (as found in *Magic: the Gathering* and similar CCG games), meaning players could affordably adopt specific levels of competitiveness as they desired. The LCG model could afford levels or degrees of "sporting," according to the player's desires and level of economic commitment.

Figure 1. A promotional image of the Android: Netrunner Revised Core Set, with a display of the game's asymmetrical gameplay.

However, perhaps due to the lack of a secondary card market and without any real financial incentives to continue to collect cards and play, the excitement of the game's initial release began to dwindle over time. Fantasy Flight Games' Organized Play rewarded players for participating in tournament through promotional cards (alternate art cards), playmats, and sundry other material goods (trophies, "click trackers," deck boxes, acrylic tokens, and so on). The top prize for winning the top-level tournaments — the North American Championships, European Championships, and World Championships — was the opportunity to work with the game's design team in creating new cards which, typically, would take at least two years to see publication. Described as "the best prize in gaming" by Fantasy Flight, this was often seen cynically by *ANR's* community: as a means for game development labor to be passed on to successful members of the competitive community, and, alternately, as simply a reward that had no clear monetary value (unlike

alternate art cards and playmats, which could be resold by players).

At the final World Championship in September, 2018, a backlog of many of these "greatest prizes in gaming" was rapidly dumped on the *ANR* community, without significant playtesting, and using art that was not commissioned for these specific cards. Due to the ending of the production of the game in October, 2018, there was finally an end to new card releases and to the official design of the game's formal, organized play systems. With no more official Game Night Kits/Critical Run Kits, Store Championships, Regional Championships, National Championships, North American Championship and European Championships, not to mention World Championships, the future of the formal game was at least initially unclear.

For some competitive players, this end of an "official" game was literally the end of the game, and yet, this is also perhaps one of the most interesting moments in which to think about "sporting" with this particular game. As the official game ended — while the game was in the midst of a creative and sales resurgence, to boot — players were left to make decisions on how best to continue the game's organized play structures, and how to consider the roles of rewards and money in the design of any new "sporting metagames."

In the next sections, I will unpack two evocative cases from the history of *ANR* involving the organization of competitive, "sporting metagames." First, I revisit a moment from the early stages of the game's community that reveals tensions between the competitive view of the game and assumptions from the hobbyist board game player community regarding rewards. Then, I move to a discussion of the post-October, 2018 future of the competitive game, and how players have wrestled with the tensions of what an unofficial future of *ANR* should be, vis-a-vis competition, community, and money.

In April of 2015, the *"Android: Netrunner* Pro Circuit" or *ANRPC* was announced. Organized by prominent competitive players, the ANRPC was originally intended to provide a series of player-run tournaments with a series of feeder tournaments of competitive play that would lead to participation in the official, Fantasy Flight Games World Championship weekend. Structured into multiple sub-circuits based, originally, in American regions such as the Great Lakes Circuit (the "GLC" in the Midwestern United States) or the Southern Megacity Circuit (the "SMC," based in Atlanta, Georgia), organizers created punny acronyms for each circuit based around commonly used abbreviations for cards the game (e.g., SMC is also a common abbreviation for the card Self-Modifying Code). The ANRPC's initial attempts to organize, led by Scott Pagliaroni (a prominent and successful American competitive player from Wisconsin) was an eager attempt to connect multiple, smaller playgroups into a larger, organized system of play, with the goal of supporting players where Fantasy Flight's support was lacking.

As the Fantasy Flight World Championship weekend registration had historically been open to any potential, interested participant, the ANRPC was organized originally to attempt to facilitate bringing more successful, competitive players to Worlds with guaranteed tickets. An arrangement with Fantasy Flight to guarantee a World Championship seat for ANRPC tournaments was unfeasible, however, and so the ANRPC shifted to providing simple monetary rewards (e.g., $300 in cash rather than a hotel reservation and guaranteed ticket). Smaller "qualifier" tournaments were organized within each sub-circuit, leading to a "finals" for each of the larger circuits where the top prize was a pool of money intended to support the winner's registration, travel, and lodging to the World Championships in Roseville, Minnesota. The amount of money awarded at each tournament was still rather small, but it was the first concerted

effort by players of the game to organize tournaments with monetary rewards, and, as such, was an early small controversy regarding prizes.

For a game that was marketed as different from collectible card games, and which followed a very different release/production model than randomized booster packs (the LCG model), some players found it difficult to understand how money was now being used as overt rewards for play. In an announcement thread on *ANR*'s BoardGameGeek forums — a key, early affinity space (Duncan, 2013) for hobbyist board games — a discussion between concerned players and the ANRPC organizers (primarily Pagliaroni) arose about the use of monetary rewards. While many were encouraging of the ANRPC's efforts, some critical comments included:

> *"Adding cash prizes and creating 'pros' can't add anything good to ANR."*

> *"I generally agree that adding cash prizes will degrade the friendliness of Netrunner tournaments. I like the fact that Netrunner tournaments are different than [Magic: the Gathering] tournaments."*

> *"I won't make a blanket statement of 'this is bad for Netrunner', but I worry that putting cash on the line will have a negative impact on the competitive players."*

These yielded several responses from Pagliaroni, who stated: "[T]he idea is not just the money. It is to focus on the players, which currently is not done. Interviews, streaming, bios, commentary… these are all things we want to accentuate… And, if you think money isn't involved in the game, you're wrong. Check eBay any time. People are constantly selling their prizes. *FFG doesn't support a cash tourney scene, but they are already fueling… a grey market, whether you believe it or not*" (emphasis added by

author). The "problem" of overt monetary rewards in the game became one that, at least initially, was used by critics to demarcate how *ANR* was "not like *Magic: the Gathering*," but for organizers and proponents, this was a non-issue, as money was seen as already a key part of the competitive game (the "grey market").

Tackling first the criticisms and then the response, we can see here that some of the critics seemed to be motivated by concern for what money might do to the community: Degrading the "friendliness" of *ANR*, and creating levels of perhaps more-legitimate play ("pro", which was part of the initial ANRPC acronym). But, beyond this, the call to avoid *Magic: the Gathering* ("I like the fact that Netrunner tournaments are different than [Magic: the Gathering] tournaments") was intriguing. As the original and most dominant organized "sport" for competitive, collectible card games, the specter of *Magic: the Gathering* and its monetary prizes seems to have loomed large for some of these critics, and was also an early concern for this author. With its secondary card market, its organization into a "Pro Tour" with monetary rewards and its often combative competitive player base, some of us were concerned that the ANRPC was beginning a first step into a troubling shift from a gaming community toward something that seemed more like a competitive community. The rise of a "sporting metagame" through the ANRPC had too many associations with troubling, established "sporting metagames" where money had shown itself to warp the player community in unsavory ways.

But, as Pagliaroni also pointed out, the concern over money ignored the role that money had *already* played in competitive *ANR*. Though the ANRPC's prizes made the monetary rewards for the game overt and readily apparent, he was correct that there was already a "grey market" for the prizes awarded from official Fantasy Flight tournaments. Rare alternate art cards, playmats, and sundry other prizes that could only be acquired through

participation in and success at competitive tournaments were finding their way onto ebay and similar sites. The prizes were not *cash*, of course, but they were convertible into money, and thus served, if Pagliaroni's argument is to be believed, as an existing incentive for top players to perform in the game's tournament scene. In Boluk & LeMieux's terms, the labor of these competitive players to contribute to and drive the official competitive scene of *ANR* was an "undercurrency" which had a rare opportunity to be "cashed out" into material rewards.

Clearly, critics of the *ANRPC*'s monetary rewards seemed to value a specific kind of tournament play and community "feel" — one in which distal rewards were not in play, and where the perceived "friendliness" of the tournament scene was not sullied by "playing for money." Thus we might interpret these critical comments as a framing of *ANR* as away from that of a "sport," favoring the "game" framing of these play spaces that dominate much of BoardGameGeek. The creation and advertisement of a new "sporting metagame" as well as Pagliaroni's reactions both highlight the "board gamer's" concern about monetary rewards while extolling the potential benefits of more of a "sporting" type framing for the game ("Interviews, streaming, bios, commentary"). Shortly after this small controversy, the ANRPC altered its acronym to the *"Android: Netrunner* Players Circuit" (dropping "Pro"), perhaps to better communicate these goals.

This incident became well-known within the *ANR* community, and morphed into a recurring in-joke in online *ANR* discussions. As many *ANR* players began to seek out ongoing spaces to chat about the game, a Slack (http://slack.com) for the game's most prominent fan-run site, *Stimhack*, was organized in 2016. Akin to an ongoing IRC channel accessible via computer or mobile device, Slack discussions of the game continued through a generally unmoderated #general channel, as well as dozens of other channels focusing on designing decks for *ANR* (#deckbuilding, #maxxclub, #adamlounge), specific events

(#gencon, #worlds, #regionals_2018), channels for regional subcommunities (#uk, #new-england, #louisville), and numerous other topics of interest to *ANR* players (#pokemon, #esports, #fantasy-bachelor). Slack's numerous means of interacting and multiple avenues for accessing it (e.g., computer or phone) provided the community with new opportunities to comment in real time on any number of topics related to *ANR*, sharing files, tagging in other community members in public and private conversations, and adding emojis to individual posts. Perhaps unsurprising in any gaming community, this further gave rise to the community developing and sharing its own own in-joke memes (Milner, 2016) with new and simple means of easily being inserted into a conversation.

One of the most persistent memes within the Slack community was "!ruined," named after the command one types within this Slack to pull from a randomized set of images of money "ruining" *ANR*. !ruined was a direct continuation of the earlier conversations about the ANRPC's monetary rewards, illustrating exactly how little money was provided as rewards for these tournaments. Within many of the public channels on Stimhack Slack, one simply needed to type "!ruined" to summon a bot that inserts in a picture taken from one of the *ANR* events since 2015 that included a monetary reward (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Two "!ruined" results from Stimhack Slack. In both, meager monetary rewards (three $20 bills, and a small pile of $1 and $5 bills) are presented.

Thus, a small contingent of very committed *ANR* players began to play *with* the very idea of money being controversial in the game, converting it to a community meme. The creation of a "sporting metagame" drove a persistent in-joke, often raised within Stimhack Slack when discussions turned to rewards, prizes, or tensions between the competitive *ANR* community and "casuals" who decried monetary rewards. As !ruined became ingrained within Stimhack Slack, and as Stimhack Slack overtook the Stimhack website as the central hub for discussions about the game, the meme looped back from an online meme referencing a (largely online) critique of fan-organized play, to become a physical card (created by Pagliaroni) which was distributed at ANRPC and later even at official Fantasy Flight events (see Figure 3, below).

Figure 3. A !ruined fan-made promo card. Featuring Pagliaroni sorting money from a King of Servers tournament, the card is a functional proxy for an existing card within the game.

It should also be noted that the !ruined card was an *economic* card (a functional proxy for the common Runner card "Sure Gamble"). The !ruined card served both as a commentary on the tensions between players in the overall *ANR* community as well as serving a playable role with economic impact in any game played with it. It was given to players to play with in place of another card, one that was most typically acquired by purchasing an additional core set of cards (thus, in a way, becoming a way for players to actually save some money). The card referenced an online Slack meme that referenced moments of physical card play, which was commentary on a (mostly) online discussion over monetary rewards. The tensions over monetary rewards and what they revealed about assumptions about the game became *playable*, to an extent.

And it's this playability that is most interesting insofar as this represents the material elements of a "sporting metagame." As the !ruined cards were also only legally playable within limited context (ANRPC events and Fantasy Flight events below a certain tier of competition, they were created by a subset of the community to comment on a particular tension within the community. Ostensibly a bit of a mockery of those who would claim that the game was ruined by money, the !ruined cards presented a case where its role as a *reaction* illustrated multiple levels of interaction by the community over these tensions. For !ruined served a complex set of purposes within the community — to simultaneously defuse differing perspectives of competitive and casual play as well as bring together like-minded players through humor and play. In both mocking critics of the fan-created "sporting metagames" around *ANR* while also providing new tools for social cohesion within it (memes as well as playable cards), !ruined illustrated that the differences in focus between multiple communities (board gamers and competitive card players) could be leveraged to support an evolving competitive community while acknowledging the history of the tensions that gave rise to it.

As the number of players shrank between 2016 and 2018, many of the game's most committed, competitive players began to shift efforts from primarily face-to-face tournament play to play online via the unofficial play site jinteki.net (as recently presented in Duncan, 2018). The game's competitive community organized events within the online space, and online tournaments became a regular staple of the site. As the game has changed, the organization and play of "sporting metagames" has also increasingly moved online. In the next section, I will present a different case from the end of the formal game and beyond, which presents a new set of tensions between game, sport, and financial rewards.

As stated earlier, Fantasy Flight officially ceased production and sales of *ANR* on October 22, 2018. While this had been rumored for several months, the abrupt announcement of the game's "end" on June 8th, 2018 took many by surprise, since *ANR* seemed to be on an upswing in some play communities. A revised version of the core set had been released at the end of 2017, and card rotation (the expiry of hundreds of cards from the competitive game) was enacted as well, reducing some barriers to entry for new players. While the game seemed to be poised for a potential renaissance and its final box set (*Reign & Reverie,* released in summer, 2018) provided a new creative direction for the game, it was "over" for many by the end of 2018. No new additional cards, no reprints of product, and no new organized play events (or prize support) would occur past October, 2018, based on decisions by Fantasy Flight and Wizards of the Coast which had not been made public at the time of this paper's writing.

This left the *ANR* community facing a new challenge over how to proceed. What does a play community do, if it has focused primarily on owner-supported competitive tournament structures? While many competitive players saw this as the end (see Garcia & Duncan, 2019), some began to work towards creating a fan-supported, player-managed future, and the crafting of new "sporting metagames." Stimhack Slack again became the locus of new discussions about the community, with, initially, a new channel (#future) for open discussion of the future of the game. Within a week, players had contributed over 120,000 words toward proposals for *ANR*'s post-Fantasy Flight future. Even with the common understanding that fan efforts to "save" the game would likely be in violation of Fantasy Flight Games and Wizards of the Coasts' intellectual property rights, a new effort began to design an *organization* for the continuing of *Android: Netrunner* in some form.

The channel was open to participation from anyone on Stimhack Slack, was advertised in relevant *Android: Netrunner* Facebook groups and the /r/netrunner subreddit, and utilized multiple working documents (via Google Drive), ranging from sheets of interested participants, to an ongoing, often-revised FAQ, to tentative announcement text for when the project would be announced to the playing public at large. Early, active members of the #future channel began by attempting to lay down a structure for organization, and, very quickly, the discussion began to turn to roles that might be needed within such a group (organized play, promotion, new card design, etc). Additionally, within each of these groups, domains began to become carved out; see Figure 4 below, for a discussion of the ways organized play regions were discussed by early participants in the channel.

Figure 4. Mobile view of a discussion in Stimhack Slack's #future channel on ways to organize the initial selection committee for the Netrunner Expanded Universe (later NISEI). (Stimhack Slack usernames obscured on request).

After a week of multiple proposals, the group morphed from the "Netrunner Extended Universe" project into "The Black File" (the name of an *ANR* card that forestalls the end of a game) to the acronym NISEI, which stood for "Nextrunner International Support & Expansion Initiative" (as well as being a not-unproblematic repurposing of a Japanese term for "second generation," used for several characters in the *Android* universe). By June 15th, 2018, the organizers of NISEI had released an

official announcement indicating that they were planning new initiatives to keep the game going (emphases added):

> The Nextrunner International Support & Expansion Initiative (NISEI) is a fan-run organization to keep the game alive and thriving by establishing a new, non-FFG, means of supporting the player-base and creating content: Rules updates, ban list updates, tournaments, prizes, and more. Basically, everything is on the table — provided we can get the hands and brains together for it. And we'd love your help... At this stage of the project we need people to volunteer, help select, curate, and build a sustainable framework for continued efforts. This starts with an initial on-boarding of the following roles: **President, Lead Designer, Lead Developer, Rules Manager, Creative Director, Community Manager, and OP Manager**. We'll be on the lookout for people interested in taking on an unpaid passion project and willing to dedicate their free time. Application details coming soon![1]

The definition of roles and of structures that could provide a framework for further efforts was clearly important for NISEI and its initial interim, founding President, Jacob Morris (of the fan-created Android Netrunner Comprehensive Unofficial Rules project; a fan effort to document the game's rules which was later given a formal role and status with the Fantasy Flight design team). NISEI's recruitment announcement mirrored the language of Fantasy Flight's previous structures to support tournament engagement ("OP" or "organized play"), and set into motion the planning of potential, new competitive tournament play. All of these roles, to some extent, were predicated on the idea that NISEI would serve to continue organized, competitive play — adopting the structures of Fantasy Flight's existing

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1. *In the spirit of full disclosure, I note that I contributed minor copy-editing to this announcement before its release, and later joined NISEI for several months (after initial submission of this paper, leaving NISEI before final revisions of this paper). As such, my involvement with NISEI is a complex influence on this paper: NISEI was initially an object of study, later a group I was eager to help, and I was later removed from the project in January, 2019.*

"sporting metagame." While the end of the Fantasy Flight game seems to have shrunk the community further, those remaining reacted positively to this effort, even given the understanding that such efforts run counter to the intellectual property rights of the game's multiple owners.

After initial recruitment of leadership positions, NISEI quickly grew to several dozen volunteers, organized in clusters related to design, development, organized play, creative (art and narrative) design, rules management, and community management. Much of these early days for NISEI involved determination of what forms the game would take in the NISEI-managed future, as well as setting the groundwork for the further development of the game. Key to these changes were establishing supported play formats (including an updated, "Standard" format, central to most of the official tournament play for the game) as well as solidifying its status as a non-profit organization. As NISEI became a sort of playable fan fiction (a la, Johnson, 2009), it began to wrestle with what changes it might enact to the game's systems, lore, community, and organized play.

The organized play of the game is where the most interesting relationships to money, rewards, and the "sporting metagame" of *ANR* would proceed. In September, 2018, before I became officially involved with NISEI, I interviewed Austin Mills, the newly-appointed organized play manager for NISEI. Our conversation covered organized play formats, general goals for NISEI, and the differences Austin saw between Fantasy Flight's previous approach to fostering *ANR* as a "sport" versus NISEI approaches. Austin stated:

> [The] primary differences from [Fantasy Flight Games], I think, are going to be *accessibility instead of profit*. (Emphasis mine). FFG charges a lot of money for certain events, especially ones that they host like [the final Fantasy Flight World Championships] at the FFG Center.

And we're trying to move away from that. [We] want to obviously cover our costs but being a non-profit organization, we're not interested in making money from this. We are interested in appealing to the largest player base possible. So another thing that we'll be doing kind of in that vein is rotating where the World Championship happens.

Austin continued to describe a variety of other concerns, reframing the goals of NISEI from profit to accessibility. Implying that impediments to competitive play limited participation in the game's evolving community, Austin stated that "I really hate the casual versus competitive element of card games and card game communities. I wanted to remove as much of that as possible. I don't want to keep casual players from attending the World Championship for *Netrunner* because they think they're going to do poorly or because they've done poorly in other tournaments and just can't attend. I just don't want that." As the Fantasy Flight game was "dead," Austin's goals seem to have been about restarting it as not a profit-making venture, but as an open community of players.

It is interesting, then, that in contrast to the ANRPC case, the NISEI management of the game privileges its position as a non-profit organization, partially out of necessity (as they are presumably contravening Fantasy Flight and Wizards of the Coast copyright), but also for the intent of creating this more accessible play community. If the creation of a "sporting metagame" of the ANRPC case led to quick controversy around financial rewards (and a socially-cohesive use of memes about those rewards), NISEI seemed to be interested in avoiding those same issues. The framing of "accessibility" was presented as an off-hand comment, but one that seemed to reflect Austin's desire to create a new vision for the organized play of the game (e.g., other claims, such as "Really, I think that the end of Netrunner is

actually a good thing, this is opening a lot of doors for Netrunner that I don't think existed in the past").

Will this succeed in the long term? That is, of course, unclear at this point, but the act of attempting to develop a complex fan organization gives us some sense of this branch of the *ANR* community's immediate priorities. Their structures imply that they are setting the groundwork for a long involvement with the design and management of the game, or, at least, are hoping to long-term change perspectives of the organized play community for the game. While initially adopting the organized play structures of the Fantasy Flight game, and building off of the previous work of the ANRPC, the current approach taken by NISEI seems to be one aimed at sidelining monetary rewards for physical prizes, such as new alternate art cards and new playmats (see Figure 5, below).

Figure 5. The 2019 NISEI Store Championship kit, with custom art playmats, alternate art cards, and a first-round "bye" for a 2019 NISEI Regionals tournament.

While NISEI can be seen as a continuation or extension of earlier ANRPC efforts, Austin's comments reinforce that they also desire to prevent *ANR* from reverting to becoming yet another "dead game in a box." While new card design and new rules interpretations seem to be further on down the road, multiple players and tournament organizers have expressed interest in continuing the game's tournament play as a means of continuing community engagement, and not letting monetary prizes interfere with this goal. Tournament events have historically been the centerpiece of *Android: Netrunner* for NISEI's interim organizers and many other players of the game, and so it should be no surprise that the first efforts to organize a future for the game has focused on continuing these activities in ways that keep

the dwindling player base from further eroding in an era when stores no longer carry it as a product.

SPORTING METAGAMES AS OPPOSITIONAL

We've seen then, that in this particular niche card game, there are interesting roles that tensions around incentives (money) have played as well as potential for new organizations inspired by existing competitive, "sporting" play groups to reify existing emphases within a game's community. But, what does all of this mean? If these controversies over financial rewards and fan organized efforts to keep a game's tournament scene alive are meaningful, exactly how can they help us to understand play and sport beyond this particular case? In what ways do "sporting metagames" reveal *critical* perspectives on gaming as financially and economically situated?

First, I wish to return to the idea of Boluk and Lemieux's (2016) "metagames" and the related concept of an "undercurrency." In their work, player labor was seen through a particularly cynical lens as a reduction to a logic of productivity. This may be accurate for certain esports, and there are certainly some similarities with the organized "sports" around *ANR*, but both the !ruined and NISEI cases illustrate a different relationship between player labor, incentives, and community. Perhaps due to the niche that *ANR* resides within — a much smaller community of players within a more marginalized hobby — player labor seems to be in opposition to the organizational structures of the formal game. First, with the ANRPC's focus on monetary rewards and the design of the ANRPC circuits, then with the new NISEI initiative, fan labor around *ANR* has been overtly in service of the "sport" (tournament play) to supplement or replace efforts made by the legal stakeholders of the game.

The pathway illustrated here, then, seems to be one where monetary rewards were used for multiple purposes by the

original ANRPC efforts: To demarcate the competitive "sport" from the casual game of *ANR*, while also as a tool to build the game's community. As Pagliaroni stated, the creation of the ANRPC was to promote the ancillary media that surround actual play, such as interviews, streaming, "bios" and more. !ruined illustrates that players were cognizant of these tensions and openly incorporated the irony of creating "sporting metagames." Beyond "metagames," the ANRPC's monetary rewards seem intended to build a *sporting community* that was different from the one supported by Fantasy Flight, which could foster media and subcultural celebrity of a sort around the game.

To some extent, !ruined illustrates that it succeeded (at least at the level of celebrity, memes, and productive in-jokes), and that these forms of engagement had utility in maintaining the game's community through the latter years of Fantasy Flight's official game. The model of the ANRPC circuits themselves were ultimately not sustainable due to a number of factors, but the impact seems clear: By building a sport around the game, a community of players and audiences evolved into one which perpetuated the game *regardless* of what Fantasy Flight contributed further, and which was interested in moving forward beyond the game's "death." NISEI, like the ANRPC, continued to center its activities around the structure of the tournament as a starting point, but with the goal of changing the accessibility and, perhaps, the future player base of the game. That is, in contrast to the ANRPC case where monetary rewards were used to build a sporting community, NISEI appears interested in leveraging the existing sporting community toward the *potential continued evolution of the game itself*. With the design of future cards and revisions of the game's rules within the (intellectual property violating) purview of the players, NISEI's seems to wish to change the "sporting metagame" beyond just organized play, and toward the design evolution and card design

tasks that Fantasy Flight would otherwise be responsible for, were the game to have continued under their guidance.

In both cases, "sporting metagames" serve interesting mediating roles between the "game" and the "community." With a population of players who have a great deal of gaming expertise and gaming literacy, perhaps this is unsurprising. But, it does point us toward a provocative, potentially generalizable conclusion: Organized sports can serve as vehicles for some games to develop oppositional practices to the goals and actions of the official stakeholders of a game. Both the ANRPC and NISEI have utilized the organization and incentives of sports to build alternate communities to those fostered by Fantasy Flight, and seem to have the potential to drive the future design of *Android: Netrunner* more broadly. The *ANR* case illustrates that sports are not simply structures within which people play games, but are *agentive*; the act of organizing has social, economic, and political implications that can mobilize, challenge, and motivate communities of play. In this way, then, perhaps these *ANR* cases can give us hope that Boluk & LeMieux's earlier suggestion of the critical impact of metagames might be at play, even in these niche card game communities.

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