Frisky's Corner

Frisco del Rosario

Welcome to Frisky's Corner, which features a new Netrunner article each week written by Frisco Del Rosario. New articles are posted each Sunday.

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Reverse Spin:
An Overview of Bad Publicity

January 12th 1997

Did the bad publicity aspect of the Proteus expansion unbalance NetRunner or add a new level of excitement? Nine runner cards introduced in that expansion added an element to NetRunner similar to poison in Magic – if the corporation receives seven or more bad publicity points, he loses the game.

NetRunner constantly delights players by providing a game atmosphere that is so well balanced that contests are often decided by the lack of one action or even a single bit. Bad publicity gives the runner basis for a new and treacherous game plan, but does it shift the balance in the runner's favor?

Following is an overview of the nine bad publicity cards. Seven of those cards are preps – we'll look at the others first.

Scaldan

This 3-installation-cost virus program is arguably the most dangerous bad publicity card, forcing the corporation to roll a die for each Scaldan counter to start his turns, and gaining one BP point for each 5 or 6 rolled. A counter is given with each succesful headquarters run.

It's possible to construct a bad publicity deck with Scaldan as the only BP source, and some think that a bad publicity deck can't deal enough BP without Scaldan. It's true that two of the Proteus viruses – Scaldan and Viral Pipeline – are more likely to win a game outright for the runner than any other viruses.

Code Viral Cache (with or without Time to Collect) and Shredder Uplink Protocol are helpful to Scaldan, as they are to any HQ virus.

Corporate Defense: Extra attention to HQ ice (and the archives, considering Shredder). Timely forgoing of actions. The Disinfectant node (which rose greatly from its joke status before Proteus).

Back Door to Netwatch

Another new wrinkle in Proteus was the addition of hidden, face-down resources. The trashing of Back Door to Netwatch and the cost of three bits permits the runner to cancel the effect of a successful trace (if the effect of the trace had an effect other

than or in addition to giving a tag), and hit the corp with one BP point.

Back Door to Netwatch is a terrific card because it serves the runner well during the normal course of the game. For instance, if the runner feels compelled to run a fort protected by strong tracing ice, Back Door to Netwatch will serve to move the runner past the ice – without an icebreaker – and deal a BP point.

Corporate Defense: None, except for the impractical measure of playing without the affected trace cards.

The remainder of the bad publicity cards are preps. Two of them have requirements which the runner can satisfy entirely on his own. They are:

Faked Hit

The simplest BP card – pay five, deal one BP, take two brain damage. Long discussions have been conducted on the viability of a Faked Hit deck architecture, and the consensus is that "all Faked Hit, all the time" constructions work. My thought on the matter is, "why bother?" I think we play NetRunner in order to dance across netspace, and Faked Hit requires no runs. Still, if the corporation has six bad publicity points, Faked Hit finishes the job.

Corporate Defense: Almost none, except for the boredom a formulaic Faked Hitter might feel eventually. Also, a dedicated Faked Hitter might have no contingency plan to run in case the corporation gets wise and simply installs and advances agenda brazenly. It is further possible that the corporation will play Underworld Mole after the Faked Hitter installs a Top Runners Conference (Faked Hit decks rely exclusively on the Top Runners resource for income) to tag him in preparation to kill him.

Poisoned Water Supply

The second-simplest BP card – pay four, trash two connections (Broker, Databroker, Preying Mantis), give one BP point. Poisoned Water Supply is a useful card because it requires that the runner have two other useful cards preinstalled. Poisoned Water Supply works very well in conjunction with Databroker in a bad publicity plan – if the runner aims to win with bad publicity, he will intend to invest any stolen agenda in Databroker bits, which will then be parlayed into Scaldan runs, for instance.

Corporate Defense: Again, none, except for perhaps Underworld Mole after a connection is installed.

Four of the remaining five bad publicity preps are played before or after a run. These, I think, are the BP cards most characteristic of NetRunner:

Frame Up

Played on the same turn that successful runs on both HQ and RD are made. Gives 1 BP point, plus an additional BP point for black ops cards liberated or trashed during those runs.

Frame-Up is one of many BP cards with stringent requirements. Therefore, a BP runner needs a lot of hand size to carry those cards before they can be played. Frame-Up also suggests that some detection (Technician Lover, for example) be used in order to reveal a Black Ops card that can be trashed or liberated during the RD and HQ runs.

Corporate Defense: None, but Frame-Up is an expensive card to use – two bits to play it, plus the bits used to fuel the HQ and RD runs – and if the runner succeeds in those runs, I feel he deserves the BP reward.

Subliminal Corruption

The corporation gets one BP point for an advertisement (BBS Whispering Campaign, Rockerboy Promotion, Braindance Campaign, Holovid Campaign) trashed during a Subliminal run.

Considering that many corporations feel safe in installing unprotected BBS Whispering Campaigns, Subliminal Corruption is a very good card. In fact, BBS Whispering Campaign is such a popular node, that a case can be made for installing Record Reconstructor and using it in order to put BBS Whispering back on top of RD to get another Subliminal shot at it.

The best partners for Subliminal Corruption are Poltergeist, which lessens the cost of trashing those advertisements, and On the Fast Track, which pays the runner for trashing them.

Corporate Defense: Icing the subsidiary fort, sometimes a foreign notion to the arrogant BBS Whispering Campaigners.

Senatorial Field Trip

Played if the corporation rezzes black ice on that turn. The corp either derezzes that ice, or receives two BP points.

What could be more fun than playing a Forged Activation Orders to cause the corp to lose a pile of bits to inconveniently rez a Liche, and then go on a Senatorial Field Trip?

Played at the right moment, Field Trip deals a major psychological blow, or permits the runner to coast past the ice guarding a critical corporate card. Choice companions are Forged Activation Orders, Ice and Data's Guide to the Net, Live News Feed, Simulacrum.

Corporate Defense: Only Government Contract and Skalderviken SA Beta Test Site will soften the blow of having to rez an expensive piece of black ice for a second time.

Live News Feed

Another black ice punisher. Live News Feed precedes a run, and if the run is successful, the corp gets one BP for each black ice encountered, one for each Black Ops card rezzed during the run, and one for each Black Ops agenda liberated during the run. The bad news is that the runner gets two tags after the run.

Like Frame-Up, Live News Feed requires hand size, and a great deal of patience before the Black Ops cards make themselves known.

I think Terrorist Reprisal would be an excellent card to have in conjunction with Live News Feed. Live News Feed somewhat hopes that the corporation will be playing with Black Ops agenda, and if a News Feed run to steal a Corporate War isn't possible, perhaps a Terrorist Reprisal will make the dirty corporation sorry.

Corporate Defense: See Frame-Up. Live News Feed's costs (two tags!) are high, and if the runner can deal with them, power to him. Playing without black ice or Black Ops cards sometimes occurs naturally, so can't really be considered a "defense" to bad publicity, but merely a more pleasant way of doing business. The two tags that make up part of Live News Feed's cost brings us to the final bad publicity card, which *dares* the corporation to tag and bag:

Identity Donor

Play Identity Donor during the corporation's turn when it would deal meat damage. Prevent that damage, and give the corp two BP points.

Identity Donor is unique among bad publicity cards in that some runners use it solely as a defense to meat damage, and play with no BP besides that. Identity Donor has helped spawn a new type of deck which gladly takes tags, and springs a trap when the corporation attempts to do damage.

Identity Donor offers the runner plenty of opportunity to bluff, for he can steal Marked Accounts and make Edited Shipping Manifest runs with impudence, daring the corporation to guess whether Identity Donor is in hand.

Corporate Defense: None. Consider different "if tagged" operations. Conclusion

Wizards of the Coast said that it kept the bad publicity aspect out of the version 1.0 card set in order to keep the game rules simple.

Even after my "Corporate Defense" suggestions – mostly "none" – we can take their word for it, I think. In spite of the fact that bad publicity cards are difficult to counter, seven points is a lot of bad press to deal. Also, even though Wizards gave the corporation no "remove bad publicity" cards, the win-loss ratio did not shift dramatically in the runner's favor.

Ambush Agenda:
Kill Them with Kindness

In last week's look at bad publicity, I forgot to mention the corporate card which gives the corporation bad publicity – Charity Takeover. The 4-difficulty Black Ops agenda awards one agenda point and nine bits when scored, and gives one point of BP.

I think it's a testament to the power of bad publicity that Charity Takeover is unused to the point of forgettability. Charity Takeover awards a bigger bit windfall than any agenda except Corporate War, but the single bad publicity point it confers is a nearly-prohibitve deterrent. Imagine being hit with six BP points, and then drawing no agenda but Charity Takeover.

You say your opponents aren't dealing any bad publicity? Lucky you. Charity Takeover's nine-bit reward is handsome, and doesn't come with Corporate War's stringent "have 12 bits or lose 'em" rule.

If Proteus gave the corporation anything, it's cool agenda, especially the ambushes. A 9-pack of Marked Accounts has become a common agenda makeup, for not only does a runner facing nine Marked Accounts have to build a suite of icebreakers, he has to construct a solid tag defense.

Omniscience Foundation, a node which gives a tag at the end of a turn in which the runner receives a tag, grew in stature with the debut of Marked Accounts. Conversely, Trojan Horse, the classic operation which tags a runner on the turn after he steals an agenda, seems to be losing value.

The cleverest card to combine with Marked Accounts? Bizarre Encryption Scheme. Give them a tag, and keep your agenda. Tell me why, though, does Marked Accounts still give a tag when accessed from the archives? Ambushes should always lose their venom when pitched into the trash (except for Stereogram Antibody, the specialized archive ambush).

Fetal AI is one of most bloody annoying cards a runner can access, extracting a toll of two bits and two net damage before its three agenda points can be liberated. Fetal AI was also the cornerstone of a new kind of deck, where Red Herrings are Edgerunner-installed in multiples, and Dieter Esslin is far more than a novelty.

When the successful (?) runner accesses Viral Breeding Ground, one program is returned to his hand for each advancement counter on it. Some runners imme-

diately lose interest in a subsidiary fort when an advanced Viral Breeding Ground is detected.

This suggests to me an unusual plan. Most schemes which involve Falsified Transaction Expert include an advanceable ambush node – that is, advance a Vacant Soulkiller several times, and if the runner doesn't kill himself on it, the advancement counters can be moved elsewhere with Falsified Transaction Expert.

I would like to try advancing Viral Breeding Ground up to and past its difficulty of four, and leaving the agenda unscored. After that, Falsified Transaction Expert is used to score agenda from HQ. Finally, after five agenda points are scored that way, *then* the original Breeding Ground is scored to win the game.

Quarantine

Did any cards from the original NetRunner set get as big a boost from Proteus as Disinfectant and Code Viral Cache? In fact, if I were to try to put Proteus in a nutshell, I would express it this way: "Disinfectant in a Roving Submarine."

Nothing underscores the power of the Proteus viruses better than the fact that Disinfectant – a waste of a card slot in v. 1.0 play – is now a great card to sink in a sub.

The story goes that the Wizards of the Coast NetRunner development team kept the v. 1.0 viruses weak on purpose, because they were concerned that stronger strains might be too good. One of the v. 1.0 viruses, Skivviss, would actually help the corporation at times, and some of them were so benign (Butcher Boy, Deep Thought) that the corporation might let the viral counters sit around endlessly.

How times have changed. The Wizards developers felt it was safe to unleash the deadlier viruses with the Proteus expansion, and suddenly we were regretting that we included Disinfectant or Code Viral Cache in two-crappy-rares-for-one-good-one trades.

Let's survey the viral landscape. Viral Pipeline and Scaldan flat out win games. Viral Pipeline is unarguably the best virus program, literally choking corporations to death. Pipeline, I think, has joined Loan from Chiba in the unofficial class of cards, "so good, it's boring, and we'd rather play with something else."

Scaldan would probably be one of those "so good, it's boring" cards, except for its requirement that the afflicted corporation has to roll a die, and random cards are always fun (look at Quest for Cattekin – is any other card so enjoyable for both sides?).

How else has the NetRunner environment changed with the addition of the expansion viruses? HQ Interface and RD Interface are played far less often, because Vienna 22 and Highlighter work like interfaces which grow. The once-feared Romp through HQ and Kilroy Was Here preps are mostly replaced by Crumble and Garbage In, Garbage Out.

I think Wizards expected corporations to forgo actions more often, seriously underestimating the pain and impracticality of that forgoing. In order to cope, corporations are hiring more and more Edgerunner, Inc., Temps, for the three actions the card imparts can be foregone to remove counters.

Do you think the Wizards folks regretted fixing the installation for Cascade –

the best v. 1.0 virus – at four when they were working on Proteus? If Cascade costs four, how much should Viral Pipeline cost by comparison? Ten?

Proteus even served to aid the older, weaker v. 1.0 viruses. For example:

* Who played with Fait Accompli as long as corporations were fast advancing agenda in new forts? Fait Accompli has new life in conjunction with Precision Bribery.

* Pox was at best a minor annoyance in v. 1.0 play, but imagine Pox counters combined with Armageddon – first the corporation has to pay Pox bits to install a card, and then has to roll dice to see if the darn card survives.

* Deep Thought permits an action-free look at RD, followed by three Promises, Promises, and a run on a Tycho Extension.

* Naturally, Incubator, which was a "who cares?" card earlier because it was incubating crappy viruses, is now a killer. Same for Code Viral Cache – it used to protect two relatively harmless counters, but now it's serving to lock down a Pipeline crush.

Corporate CEOs, get your flu shots!

Book Review:
Mastering NetRunner

February 2nd 1997

Optimistically, one could view Wordware Publishing's "Mastering NetRunner" as a response to growing interest in the game. In the real world, however, where booster boxes can be bought for less than $40, "Mastering NetRunner" looks like Wordware rushed it to press before the game was completely dead.

Authors Ben Matthews and Charles Schwope sandwich 10 vain pages of fiction and 109 pages of unoriginal material around 64 pages on elementary deck construction and play strategy. Game mechanics are not touched upon, though a complete sample game is described in the "Weefle Initiation" chapter. The play-by-play narrative in "Mastering NetRunner" is easier to understand than Wizards of the Coast's sample in the official rulebook.

Matthews and Schwope's advice is time-tested ("it is normally a good idea to make at least two runs during your first turn") and sometimes overly general ("Roving Subs need to be run immediately"). The chapter on corporate deck construction introduces the classic themes of fast advancement and tag-and-bag, and the authors advise well to choose agenda which fit into a deck's overall plan, but lose focus when they mention the "BitsBitsBits" deck, which gains "money for money's sake", and offer no method for such a deck to win.

Confusion also sets in regarding the book's basic strategy: "simply generate bits and keep your opponent bit-poor." Later, in the chapter on runner play strategy, the authors suggest, "trash anything that you can that the Corp rezzes." Who's keeping whom poor here?

Matthews and Schwope forget that they are writing for beginners when they state, "keeping the corp bit poor can be accomplished with cards like Dropp, forcing the corp to rez ice." Experienced players understand why Dropp prompts the rezzing of ice, but beginners have no idea. The authors are at their best when addressing more experienced players in Chapter 8, "Newsgroup Tauntings," which discusses the ramifications of card restrictions, and the earliest myths about game balance in NetRunner.

Newcomers will be turning to the card list appendix often, for the authors refer to cards by name, but without explanation of the card's function. This name-dropping also results in ambiguous prose – when advising against building a 100-

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card deck, Matthews and Schwope joke that "you now need 15 minutes just to shuffle your deck every time you use a Mantis or Temple MicroCode Outlet," leaving the reader to consult the appendix, or presume that playing Mantis, Fixer at Large or Temple Microcode Outlet precedes a shuffle.

Technical errors in "Mastering NetRunner" abound, from typographical to subject/verb disagreement to describing Tokyo-Chiba Infighting ("Gain 2 after each unsuccessful run on this fort") as a card which the corporation can use to gain bits with an action. There are annoying passages where the corporation is referred to by personal pronouns ("he" or "we"), but inconsistently, which suggests that the authors wrote independently of each other.

On the back cover, Wordware Publishing cajoles "players of all levels" to spend $9.95, while the authors say they're writing for beginning and intermediate players on the "About..." page.

I am really glad that this book exists, for perhaps people will take an interest in NetRunner after they see it. I also hope people buy it, for Wordware Publishing should be encouraged to publish more books about the game. I think it's a bad book, though, and most of its material can be found on the Web for free.

The Psychic Hotline

There's a great scene in ‗House of Games‗ where Joe Mantegna tells Lindsay Crouse to hold a coin in one hand, and to hold her hands out. Unerringly, the Mantegna character picks the hand with the coin over and over. "You've got a tell," he says to her, "I can do this all night." He explains to her that his poker opponent has a similar "tell" and he knows he can win a big hand, but he needs her to back him. Convinced by the hidden coin trick, the woman consents.

Winning poker players learn to read body language, and are always on the lookout for such "tells." No matter how well an opponent can keep a stone face, a tug at his collar or a sip of his drink might be the unconscious tipping of his hand.

When your opponent successfully runs headquarters, and your hand consists of safe cards and one agenda, do you have a tell? Do you unconsciously disclose the location of the agenda in your hand? I believe that I do, unfortunately. There have been HQ runs where I have shuffled my cards, fanned them, and looked for the agenda in my hand. I think that eye movement has given away an agenda or two.

Superstition? Coincidence? Maybe, but I don't think so. Your thoughts influence your environment. If you believe black dogs are scary, you will meet many scary black dogs. If you look for your agenda in your hand, you will be thinking, "there is my agenda."

There are some runners who successfully run headquarters, then rely on a die roll to select which card to access. Again, you can call me a crazy voodoo Frisk, but I think those runners aren't taking full advantage of their psychic abilities.

You might find the notion of reading the corporate player's body language during HQ runs silly and farfetched. When you're playing the corporation, though, how about the idea of being able to "suggest" a safe card to the runner?

Consider the magician's device of "card forcing" – fanning a deck of cards in such a way that their audience members "randomly" pick the card of the showman's choice. If you held one ambush node in hand, wouldn't you love the ability to steer the runner towards it? I believe that's a magic trick worth learning!

Love Story

For Valentine's Day, I'd like to discuss the most loving couple in NetRunner – Bartmoss Memorial Icebreaker and Joan of Arc.

Is there another card combination in the game as well-known as that? Bart and Joan. Joan and Bart. The two cards appear inseparable.

First of all, Bartmoss and Joan of Arc belong to a class of cards which I consider, uh, bat guano – cards whose power sets them so far apart from the others that they're boring, and impossible to employ imaginatively. Other cards in this group are Corporate War, Top Runners Conference, and Loan from Chiba. Bart and Joan are a fun couple because they're two bat guano cards which belong together.

Bartmoss Memorial Icebreaker stands out as the best icebreaker in the game. It's generic, so you've always got the right tool for the job. Bart doesn't come with the other generic breakers' disadvantages. Its costs to increase strength and to break subroutines are half of Krash's costs. Bart's installation cost is half of Morphing Tool's, and doesn't stall in order to "morph." Bart doesn't do Blink's net damage.

Bart has two weaknesses, no doubt intended to give the card balance.

Bartmoss's strength is zero, and both sides use tactics to exploit or compensate for that defect. Corporations install ice whose strength is approximate to its rez cost – I've heard cards like Mazer and Neural Blade called "anti-Bartmoss" ice. Runners need a strong financial plan – since Bart takes up two fewer MU than a suite of three specific icebreakers, those MU are often devoted to a Newsgroup Filter, and sometimes even stealth programs.

Bart's second flaw is probably intended to be its Achilles heel – roll a die after passing a piece of ice where Bart was used to break a subroutine, trash the five-bits-to-install Bart on a one. Behind every man is a good woman, though, and it's Joan to the rescue. Roll a one, and trash Joan or pay a bit to bring her back to hand, and Bart lives on.

Considering Joan of Arc's too-inexpensive ability to preserve Bartmoss Memorial Icebreaker, a runner need only devise a good income plan to make Bart work for him. Too good and too boring – it's the runners who risk icebreaking with Bart but *without* Joan who pass the gut check.

Did the game developers expect runners to install several Umbrella Policies for Bartmoss protection? Sheesh.

The feminist sentiment "a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle"

surely applies to Joan of Arc without Bartmoss – Joan gets my vote for the worst card in the original set in terms of overpoweredness and undercostedness. For an installation cost of zero bits, and a recycling cost of one, Joan of Arc can double the effectiveness of any program whose ability is triggered by a trash. Lockjaw is the most obvious example – trash Lockjaw to strengthen an icebreaker, yank Joan to your hand for a bit, and trash Lockjaw again.

I had an unusual ambush idea, derived from the old Namatoki-plus-ambush-node chestnut. I wanted to install *two* ambush nodes with Namatoki – the idea was that the runner could trash Skullcap to prevent one source of damage, but die from the second, instead of stealing the expected agenda. One flaw in that plan is Death from Above. Another is Joan of Arc – why bother *trashing* Skullcap? Pay a bit for Joan.

A humorous and powerful Imp tree? Six Imps, five Joans of Arc, one Lockjaw. An unfunny and I'm-glad-it's-as-dead-as-a-doornail Imp tree? The ones we used to sell with misc.for-sale, preserve with Joan of Arc, and sell again. Wizards deflated that ridiculous combination, and *still* I think Joan is too good a card.

When Joan of Arc is employed, she also serves to nullify two ambush threats, Experimental AI (unless it's advanced far enough to nuke everything, which is unlikely) and Chimera. This might suggest to runners who wish to play the increasingly-popular "tag me" scheme to play with Joan-protected daemons to supply MU, since memory chips can be smashed with Power Grid Overload.

Bartmoss Memorial Icebreaker and Joan of Arc – a match made in someone else's heaven.

Mailbag

About last week's column on ESP and headquarters runs, one reader suggests this corporate tactic: if the runner makes consecutive successful runs on HQ, tuck the agenda into the card slot the runner pulled the first time, for runners seem not to pluck the same slot.

Selective Service

I participated in an experiment this week where four of us opened a NetRunner booster pack, chose one card, and passed the remaining cards to the player on the right. After we each opened and passed 10 packs, we constructed our decks from the 150 cards we drafted.

The idea is borne of Magic, and it seems that Magic is better suited for it. Magic's element of five "colors" with different characteristics means that the players can strive to develop a deck with a real theme, whereas in the NetRunner booster draft, the goal was to "pass the Rabbit."

Of course, some of the decisions made in the first pack influenced those in the fifth. For instance, I pulled a Team Restructuring early the evening, and was charmed to find a Falsified Transactions Expert passed to me later.

Picking cards from random booster packs resulted in a "starter deck" feel, so I wasn't too surprised to pass Encoder, Inc. – one of the hottest cards in the constructed deck game – and have it return.

An odd aspect of the draft stemmed from the fact that we selected cards from 10 booster packs, where the ratio of rare and uncommon to vital and common cards is greater than in starter decks. Agenda, bit operations, and icebreaking programs were in short supply – I didn't get a pumpable sentry breaker, so I had to choose Clowns to accompany the Codeslinger.

Perhaps it might have resulted in more typical decks for all if we had passed around starter decks, but it seems likely that everyone would've ended up with, well, a starter deck.

Perhaps this NetRunner draft can be thought of as an odd amalgam of constructed and sealed deck play. On one hand, the players can apply their experience in deck architecture to their choices, but on the other, the randomness of the card distribution will probably mean that the player who chooses Access through Alpha and its 9 base link will also be dealt a Rabbit to reduce ice trace strength.

I had fun participating in this NetRunner draft, but I'm reminded that any event where people choose cards (or basketball players) from a diverse pool is never truly equitable. Two nights ago, someone opened the pack with City Surveillance while someone else found Twenty-Four Hour Surveillance. Nor can you improve the conditions by spreading all the available cards face-up on a table – who goes first? And who goes first in the second round?

Every so often on the Wizards NetRunner listserv, someone asks, what are your favorite and least favorite cards? and which are the best and worst? Such a poll is going on now – I wonder how a draft atmosphere would affect one's feelings about favorite cards. If the one Joan of Arc were chosen before you, would you take the Bartmoss Memorial Icebreaker?

For the multi-birds

Two pages in the April 1997 issue of _The Duelist_ are devoted to multi-player variants of NetRunner. What a waste of space.

Wizards of the Coast research and development team member Shawn F. Carnes is right on the mark when he writes in the lead, "NetRunner is the quintessential two-player game, a battle of wits between radically opposed competitors."

Sure, the social aspect of several friends sitting around a table and sharing a game sounds great, but NetRunner is *not* the game for that. Part of the corporate player's art lies in timing the installation and advancement of an ambush. If the runner can successfully run it before it's advanced far enough, the trap isn't painful enough. On the other hand, if the corporation lays the ambush too far before the runner can take the bait, the runner will smell trouble when the corporation refuses to "score the agenda" or "cash the Information Laundering." In a multi-player contest, I believe that skill is moot – the more cards your opponents hold, the more likely it is that they hold detection, or shields.

Successful runners cultivate a sharp instinct for running blindly – without damage protection or sentry breakers – and cheating death. With two runners at the table, why bother? Let the other guy make the discovery runs.

If you *must* indulge in Wizards' suggested multi-player options, they offer one where two runners face one corporation. The corporation plays, followed by runner A, and runner B. The corporation plays again, followed by runner B, and runner A.

Wizards suggests that the runners spending eight actions per turn to the corporation's three is balanced by the runners fighting against each other – according to Carnes, one runner investing several bits in trashing a node is performing a service for the other.

My first question: If both runners and the corporation score six agenda points, the corporation will lose by being decked. Do the runners draw the game? What if all three players score six agenda points, but one runner is flatlined, does the other runner deserve to win when the corporation is decked?

Suppose runner A has a code gate breaker installed, while runner B is prepared to knock down walls. Is the corporation favoring one side or the other by installing a certain piece of ice when he has a choice?

I think it could be interesting when two very dissimilar runner strategies collide

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against the same corporation. Suppose one runner employs a Crumble scheme, running headquarters whenever possible, but the other isn't running at all, saving up for a huge RD dig. Pit those two runners against a corporation prepared for a viral attack, one with Disinfectant and lots of Edgerunner, Inc., Temps. The "big digger" wins this round, but I'll bet on the Crumbler against the fast advancement deck. The rock/scissors/paper aspect of NetRunner at its most pronounced.

The other multi-player variant ˍThe Duelistˍ suggests teams two corporations against two runners. Each member of a side must score five agenda points for the team to win. The most unconventional rule permits a player to spend an action to take bits from his partner's bit pool. This variant loses me when Wizards explains if one runner is flatlined, the surviving runner can win only by decking both corporations or dealing a bad publicity win to both. Excuse me? Doesn't this insist that runners play a bad publicity plan if they want to maximize their chance to win this game? Why not increase the agenda point requirement to eight or nine for the survivor, instead?

My advice? Forget all this, and play NetRunner the way it was designed to be played. One on one. The daring data thief against a multiversal conglomerate. An odd number of players in attendance? Drag someone in off the street, and give him a starter deck.

If you must have everyone involved in the same game, play bridge.

Dog Whistle:
Improving the Siren deck

March 9th 1997

Think back about six months ago, when the Proteus expansion was released. Do you remember a sense of horror among the NetRunner community when the card text to Siren became available?

”Oh, no!” we cried ”The game is ruined! What's going to happen when someone installs that in a boobytrapped Namatoki Plaza?” Similarly: ”Ack! Now that we have bit-gaining ice, we can inexpensively build a long Rio de Janeiro fort, and Siren will be invincible!”

It turned out not to be so easy. It takes a long time to advance a Namatoki ambush to death levels, and there are handling charges for protecting Namatoki Plaza and Siren while they are in RD and HQ. It's also true that the Namatoki ambush theme in general has been weakened since Proteus introduced Enterprise, Inc., Shields and Skullcap.

The cheap-ice-over-Rio idea got old fast, and I believe we're seeing less of it because NetRunner players have learned that random cards – cards whose abilities depend on a die roll – will fail you at the damndest times.

Both of those plans take much time to develop. The Namatoki ambush node must be advanced, and several pieces of ice (plus a Chester Mix, perhaps) must be drawn before they can be installed on the long Rio fort. I think Siren was intended to be an exceptionally powerful corporate card, perhaps to offset the ridiculously strong new viruses – however, the speed of the virus decks might have rendered a slow Siren scheme impractical.

Finally, some early Siren implementors found the card to be too expensive once in play. It costs one bit to trigger the Siren call, and if the first piece of ice encountered on the Siren fort is harmless, the runner can drain the corporate bit pool by running with each action.

Siren is enjoying a strong rebirth at the MatchPlay Game Center, in two decks which vary from the Siren-and-Namatoki and Siren-and-Rio patterns.

Nat Johnson employs Siren in a fort with big ice – Wall of Ice and Colonel Failure, for two – and Crystal Palace Station Grid. The fort is further enhanced by Antiquated Interface Routines and multiple Chester Mixes. A few Newsgroup Tauntings installed elsewhere add insult to injury. One South African Mining Corp

and a BBS Whispering Campaign provide flexible income. Johnson's agenda are well-chosen, including Ice Transmutation and Priority Requisition.

The drawback to his deck is that it might be very difficult to protect the central forts before the Siren call can begin. Johnson shows good planning there, too – the inexpensive ice he places on HQ and RD is of the type which is uninstalled and stored in HQ if it's passed.

So far, the plans described here have intended for the coerced runs on the Siren to be unsuccessful. In my Siren scheme, I acknowledge that a determined runner will succeed sooner or later – I just want him to regret it.

I love to use unpopular cards, and in conjunction with Siren, Turbeau Delacroix and Tokyo-Chiba Infighting are very useful. Tokyo-Chiba Infighting is a seemingly stinky upgrade without Siren, but if the cards can get together in an unassailable fort, Infighting is terrific. (On its own, Tokyo-Chiba Infighting is a good bluff card – runners have a difficult time psychologically running an Infighting if they think their run might not succeed, so it's worth the risk to install Infighting behind ice you can't even rez.)

Turbeau Delacroix plus Siren will almost always result in tagging the runner. The runner cannot wait for a satisfactory tag defense before attacking the Siren, for an agenda set with chunky values threatens to let the corporation run away with the game.

After the runner is tagged, all systems are go for your favorite tag operations and nodes. I am tickled when a Schlaghund is successful, so I employ a few Datapools(r) by Zetatech and Omniscience Foundations in order to increase the tag count. I also include Chance Observation, TRAP!, and Urban Renewal, standard equipment in any meat damage deck.

Ice is medium-sized – walls and code gates with strength of 3, 4, and 5 plus Neural Blades (4 strength for 4 rez cost) are cost-effective – their reasonable costs quickly protect the surprise Tokyo-Chiba/Siren bit engine. One big piece of ice is earmarked for the Siren fort, Mastiff, with its subroutines to strengthen the next ice encountered.

While the Siren fort is safe (and earning bits!), the corporation installs Schlaghund, Omniscience Foundations, Whispering Campaigns, and thematic agenda – Marked Accounts, Bioweapons Engineering, and On-Call Solo Team. Bioweapons and Solo Team offer 3 agenda points each, giving the corporation a reasonable shot to win the game in that fashion, too.

Spring Break

It's vacation time. I've put in for the time off, I've booked a flight and reserved a room. In a month, I'm headed to Eugene, Oregon, for the Northwest NetRunner Championship. I'm not even sure if Wizards of the Coast is sanctioning this event, even though it will be conducted in WC's backyard, but I'm willing to invest time and money just to satisfy the jones.

In a sense, I feel obligated to go – to spread the word, to evangelize. The EuCon organizers are committed to conducting NetRunner demonstrations throughout – I think we who love the game and believe it's worth promoting should descend on EuCon and show the Wizards folks that we believe, by teaching and volunteering.

It's been seven *long* months since I've attended a Wizards-sanctioned NetRunner event. NetRunner almost died. Wizards claims poor sales; I think Proteus unbalanced it nearly to death. Meanwhile, Magic players are jetting all over the world to sling $350 cards in their global Pro Tour, and dating supermodels.

All we can do is build support at the grassroots level. Give cards away. Teach. Write.

That concludes today's sermon. Let's begin making our plans to win the Northwest NetRunner Championship.

What do we know about the opposition? I imagine that the corporate style in Oregon leans towards strong defense, given local hero Byron Massey's mean Highlighter/Demolition Run-based "Short Stack." Maybe I'll load up on Social Engineerings and Senatorial Field Trips to counter all the expected big ice.

I'm certainly going to pack a Terrorist Reprisal, which I think is as strong as other super runner cards like Loan from Chiba and Top Runners Conference, but much more stylish. Terrorist Reprisal is a counterpunch, smacking the evil corporation for its Executive Extraction.

In opposition to Terrorist Reprisal, it's easy to state the fact that the prep only counters Black Ops agenda, but, c'mon, we all play with Corporate War, whether we like it or not. Three agenda points for three difficulty – difficulty which can be reduced! – *plus* a 12-bit bonus (the occasional penalty is not relevant). Corporate War is a stupid munchkin card, but it's also the only three-point Black agenda, so if you don't want to play with too many small agenda and can't plan for Political Overthrow, you have to play with War.

Along with Terrorist Reprisal, I also plan to play with Deal with Militech, since

all of my decks must include at least one crappy card.

Why is it that Desperate Competitor and Hot Tip for WNS reward agenda points for specific agenda liberation, but Deal with Militech confers nothing but a +1 strength counter on installed icebreakers? That's not even as good as a Clown, since Clown aids icebreakers played later.

Deal with Militech fits well in Clown decks in particular, since Clown schemes employ icebreakers with low strength. Part of Deal's reward is that a Clown not installed might also mean saving the cost of playing a daemon or memory chip.

One argument against Deal with Militech was that Artificial Security Directors was the only Research agenda in play, but with the advent of the mighty code gate plans, Encryption Breakthrough is increasingly encountered.

You pays your money, and you takes your chances: A look at random cards

Did you hear about the runner who calculated that he need 43 bits to steal the winning agenda before the corporation could score it, so he cashed in an 18-bit Broker, and played Playful AI with the plan of earning 25 bits before starting his run.

Before you know it, the runner rolls a string of twos and threes and soon he has 25 dice in front of him, which he starts tossing with the idea of keeping bits now. He starts rolling fives and sixes, and then he's down to five dice, and he starts rolling frantically for dice, but he's out of luck, and the end result of Playful AI – once again – is "pay one bit."

Don't let it happen to you, reader, put those random cards away.

Granted, the runner in our example needed 25 bits, and only Playful AI and misc.for-sale can provide that desperate bit burst, but I'm suggesting that you let that one game go, and earmark that Playful card slot for a Score!. In the long run, you'll be glad you gave up gambling.

Let's look at all of the random cards, starting with the purple-backed. Perhaps you'll find that you no longer have to pack a six-sided die with your counters.

Roadblock – I loved this card at first sight. "Wow, half the time this 2-cost code gate will be as strong as a Scramble, Keeper, or Mazer!" I put three of them in my favorite corporate deck, and then something weird happened. A runner Tech Lovered an agenda, and simply ran into the Roadblock until I rolled a six, and the darn thing derezzed!

Do the math. In 100 encounters with the standard, 2-cost Quandary, Codecracker will pay 200 bits to break it. In 100 encounters with Roadblock, 84 times the Codecracking runner will have to pay an average of 2.5 bits, but the other 16 times, he'll pay zero, *and* the corporation will have to re-rez Roadblock. After 100 encounters, the Roadblocking corp will have paid about 34 bits in rez cost, far outweighing the gain from the occasional added strength.

Rio de Janeiro City Grid – Perhaps the most popular region, and why not? One

rez cost, six to trash, freaky card art, and a 16 percent shot to end a run every time the runner passes rezzed ice on the fort. Throw six pieces of ice over Rio de Janeiro, and you're set, right?

Wrong. Let me tell you about the Law of Independent Trials, which says in layman's terms, "the dice have no memory." Even if the corporation rolls "non-ones" on the first 37 pieces of ice on a Rio fort, it doesn't matter a lick on the thirty-eighth and last piece of ice. It's still just one more 16 percent chance to roll a one.

Without the aid of Chester Mix or Fortress Architects, it costs 15 bits to install six pieces of ice on a Rio region, preferably the silly Proteus ice which awards bits when it's rezzed (only Misleading Access Menus plus Encoder, Inc. is worth a play). I say, lemme use that 15 bits for Neural Blade, Rock is Strong and Mazer. You can take your 16 percent dice rolls; I prefer a sure thing.

Schlaghund – Schlaghund is the best of the corporate randoms because the corporation is in control of Schlaghund's destiny – that is, the corporation can wait until the runner has six or more tags before walking the dog.

Compare Schlaghund to Rio de Janeiro in this fashion: If Schlaghund's card text said, "Roll one die for each of the runner's tags. If you roll a one, do 10 meat damage, and trash Schlaghund," it would be a much weaker card.

The only problem with Schlaghund these days is that so many runners are immune to meat damage.

The green-backed cards offer many more chances to roll dice.

Quest for Cattekin – My e-mail address isn't cattekin@best.com for nothing – Quest for Cattekin was my first runner rare, and it has the letters C-A-T in its name. Since acquiring my first runner are, though, I've learned something about the game.

First, Quest for Cattekin costs the runner four bits, and then it kills him. One-third of the time, a Quest for Cattekin roll will serve unpreventable damage – that's terrible! A Cattekin runner is forced to include in his deck at least one Junkyard BBS and a few Gideon's Pawnshops, plus a number of hand size hardware. Including all those cards in anticipation of Cattekin damage does not leave enough room in a deck for really useful cards.

If you want to employ a card which injures you, and confers an extra action, play with Preying Mantis, which doesn't even cost four bits.

Bargain with Viacox – It's generally accepted that the Bargaining runner must have Dropp installed, so he can Dropp following the occasional roll which forces the runner to encounter a Liche.

I think that's a nearsighted view of Bargain with Viacox – I believe Bargain forces the runner to take Bargain with Viacox into account for *every* card in his deck. Do you want to have Arasaka Portable Prototype in your hand when you make the Bargain roll which forces you to play or install a card at random? How about any prep which tells you to make a run, like Rush Hour or All Hands? Bargain will force you to play those three-bit preps before you have an icebreaker installed. Pirate Broadcast? Blackmail?

Finally, the revised card text on Dropp, Bargain's best buddy, makes it a less effective card – Dropp will now read "0: Break all the subroutines on a piece of ice." That means that the Dropping runner must pay for *every* subroutine on a Crystal Palace-enhanced piece of ice.

Bartmoss Memorial Icebreaker – Bartmoss escapes my withering glare because its ridiculous counterpart, Joan of Arc, nearly negates Bart's weakness. One day, though, when you most need it not to happen, you'll lose all your Joans of Arc and Umbrella Policies, and Bartmoss, before you hit the last piece of ice.

Refer to "Love Story" in the "Frisky AI" archives for more on the Bartmoss/Joan of Arc fun couple.

Forward's Legacy – Forward's Legacy is similar to Bartmoss in that it can't be played without assistance. If you play with Forward's, you must play with Clown, Lockjaw, Personal Touch, etc., if not a second (pumpable) sentry breaker. I think dependence on another card is a drawback to any card, for no other reason than it limits creative expression.

An icebreaking program which depends on a die roll for its strength occasionally causes the runner to sacrifice an action, too. If the runner sees that he can only afford a necessary run if Legacy is a certain strength, he might have to run more than once, in order to have additional chances to roll the requisite number. (Maybe All-Nighter should be included in Forward's Legacy decks just for that happenstance.)

AI Boon – The most expensive sentry breaker only has the previous paragraph to consider. Besides that, I think AI Boon is the most valuable random runner card (Bartmoss isn't one card; it's two cards.).

Vacuum Link – Once upon a time I was enamored of the Vacuum Link/Rio de Janeiro combination, too. Then came the game where I was forced by an unlucky draw to install ice on a Rio fort in this order, innermost out – Shock.R, Sleeper, Vacuum Link. Until another piece of ice, New Blood, or Herman Revista came along, Vacuum Link provided nothing more than a Rio roll.

One unlucky game? Maybe, but I decided then that opponents were better obstructed by non-frivolous intrusion countermeasures. Do you agree?

Vacuum Link would be a deadly card if it were a "stun" sentry – that is, one which prevented the runner from ever jacking out of the run. For that reason, I think Jack Attack and the like are good counterparts to Vacuum Link.

Playful AI – The granddaddy of all random cards, considering that it's the card which prompts the longest discussions of how it should be played, and that it is NetRunner inventor Richard Garfield's picture on it.

Playful AI is the only card in the game which can provide an incalculable number of bits, and that's pretty cool. Still, I think a runner won't need a random burst of bits if he's implemented his income plan well, and if he does, that's life. If you must consult the Playful AI, this is how I believe the card should be used: Calculate the number of bits you will need. Roll dice until you reach that number in dice, and then roll the remaining dice for bits.

In a dream where I wager my soul on a game of NetRunner with the devil, yeah, I'll no doubt wish I had Playful AI instead of Streetware Distributor.

Blink – Blink deserves its own 1,000-word treatment, coming soon. In short, however, a deck built around Blink isn't much better in the endgame – where the runner should win most of his games – than it is to start.

Rabbit, Run

It's fun to think that I constructed a deck around the runner card Rabbit just for Easter. It's realistic to think that I built a deck around the worst card in the game (beautiful card art by Mark Collen, though) because the well of good ideas is dry.

C'mon, Wizards of the Coast, release an expansion – even an itty bitty one will do – and let us NetRunner players continue to expand our imaginations. In the meantime, we will create Rabbit and Ronin Around decks.

What was Wizards thinking when it designed Rabbit? "Ice which traces has its trace limit decreased by one." Let's look at that card text in two ways.

First, "ice." You encounter ice. If you don't break it, you suffer its subroutines. Maybe Fetch tags you, maybe Homewrecker ignites your hardware. If you survive, you look for a sentry breaker, and later you just break the ice. You do not ValuPak a den of Rabbits in order to beat the trace.

Second, "trace." Wizards so obviously overestimated the play value of tracing. Look at the huge number of base link resources it provided – Access here, Back Door there. Programs, too – Baedeker's Net Map, Bakdoor (did you know the Bakdoor's cost is misprinted? It should cost zero to install). Even hardware in form of The Deck. How many of those cards do you use? Three. You use three. If you want a big link, you play with Access through Alpha or The Deck. If you want a small link, you play with Back Door to Hilliard.

How many times per game do the corporation and runner actually get down to comparing hidden bits? Maybe once. Chance Observations often take place before the runner has a link installed. Tracing ice we've already covered.

So, in practice, the trace aspect of trace ice isn't relevant, and Rabbit just doesn't matter. If you're plumb out of deck ideas, though, why not try the frivolous plan of ValuPaking a burrow of Rabbits, and blowing through Cinderella or Hunting Pack with a cheap base link?

The first thing I learned in my Rabbit architecture adventure is that bad cards belong with other bad cards. If you're going to play with Rabbit, you have to play with the stealth card Vewy Vewy Quiet, too.

Stealth is already well known to be either too expensive (Cloak) or too punchless (Invisibility) – Vewy Vewy Quiet is the worst of the stealth programs, for it falls in the middle of the stealth range and offers neither Cloak's maximum stealth bits or Invisibility's low installation cost. However, how could I resist such an easy

"wabbit hunting" gag?

If you must play with stealth, use powerful icebreakers, like Boring Bit and Cyfermaster. They have a cost of two bits to break a subroutine, but it's usually two bits for every wall and code gate encountered. On the other hand, weak icebreakers like Corrosion and Codecracker are better complemented by Clowns, which are installed for the same price as Vewy Vewy Quiet.

The use of Rabbit means that you have to choose your sentry breakers carefully, too, for you don't want its ability to "overlap" Rabbit's. For instance, you surely don't want Replicator, which only breaks trace subroutines. You don't want an expensive, powerful sentry breaker like AI Boon, either, because it would prove as inexpensive to break Asp as it would be to beat the trace, and that's an overlap.

Therefore, I chose:

* Raptor. The least expensive sentry breaker.

* Reflector. The terrific specialty breaker beats the popular Shock.r and Bolter Cluster for free, and that ice doesn't trace.

* Big Frackin' Gun. Takes care of huge multi-routine black ice like Liche, but is spectacularly inefficient against Cinderella, which the Rabbit pack is aimed against. Big Frackin' Gun also allows the runner to quote Bugs Bunny: "For shame, Doc, shooting rabbits with an elephant gun."

Another program that evokes a rabbit joke is Butcher Boy, so you can call your deck "Hasenpfeffer."

Not only does Rabbit encourage the use of lousy cards like Vewy Vewy Quiet, it promotes the use of the ridiculous Proteus base link cards, Back Door to Rivals and Runner Sensei. Those base links award the runner one bit if he uses them to beat a trace, but cost a relative fortune to install, and – again – how often do traces occur?

However, with a gang of Rabbits bunched up in daemons, we are actively seeking to be traced, so there is a reason to play with Back Door to Rivals or Runner Sensei. I preferred Runner Sensei for its art by one of my favorite NetRunner artists, Randy Gallegos.

The other resource which a Rabbit deck mandates is Smith's Pawnshop, so you can sell the cute little fuzzies in case you don't encounter any trace ice at all.

I will not share my entire Rabbit deck makeup with you, readers, because, by golly, I want you to be uninfluenced by my construction. Experiment! Explore! Push the Rabbit deck envelope!

Mailbag

I get mail commenting on my words here at the Card Place and on the Wizards listserv. Some of the questions make up this, the first Frisky AI FAQ:

Do you think Wizards will release another NetRunner expansion?

Yes.

Do you, really?

Yes. I don't know *when*, but I think that Wizards will eventually see NetRunner the way television executives look at shows which are critically-acclaimed but get low ratings. They're scared to give the show to a rival network – where its ratings could skyrocket – and maybe they'll call for more of it to be produced rather than commit to an entirely new production. Sometimes the small TV audiences which are loyal and vocal keep their shows on the air, and in time, maybe the greater public comes around.

What would you like to see in an expansion?

Anything, as long as the new cards aren't as powerful as the Proteus viruses and some of the Proteus resources. Time to Collect, Death from Above, Precision Bribery...

Want to see these cards I designed?

No. I'm sorry, but I'd rather see your plans for cards which are really available.

Don't you think it's fun to think of new cards?

Sure. I'd like to see a prep which hits the corporation with bad publicity after it scores a Black Ops agenda. It makes "real world" sense, and it has the same balance in the play environment as Terrorist Reprisal. Still, I think we can do more for the game by tinkering with real cards, especially cards which no one else plays with.

What is your thing about bad cards, man?

I think people get bored looking at the same cards repeatedly – I know I do. Also, it says something about your skill if you win with bad cards. It doesn't take much acumen to Systematically Layoff an Artificial Security Directors, and then gain bits while you wait to draw Corporate War.

Hey! I built a rawkin' deck with Corporate War! Want to critique it?

No, I want you to get a life. Corporate War is bullcrap. Three agenda points for three difficulty, plus a 12-bit reward, *and* its difficulty can be reduced. Come on,

even if Corporate War said, "when you score Corporate War, lose all your bits," it would still be a good card for its difficulty-to-points ratio and reduceable difficulty.

Well, then, look at my new runner deck! It's a bankrupt-the-corp, big-dig, reduce-corp-hand-size, increase-agenda-difficulty deck!

I don't have to look at all the cards. I can tell already that it doesn't work. You're trying to do too much. An effective deck works towards a single idea. NetRunner is like chess in that way. If you ask an average chess player what his plan is in a given position, he might say, "I want to line up my rooks against his queen, and trap his knight, and disrupt his pawn structure, and checkmate him." A grandmaster in the same position might say, "I want to centralize my knight." Outstanding chessplayers aim for very little in any position – the control of one key square, or the improved placement of one piece. Well-designed NetRunner decks are tightly focused.

Can you recommend a place to buy cards?

I enjoy reading rec.games.trading-cards.marketplace.misc. There are as many bargains as there are dealers who list Pox and Butcher Boy for sale for $1.25. So, I can't recommend any one vendor, because I like shopping so much.

Do you think there will ever be a marketplace for NetRunner like there is for Magic?

I hope not. My best-loved deck contains 11 rares, worth about $33. I feel sorry for players who find they *really love* Magic, but can't afford to explore their ideas.

I think your ideas about a World Domination deck suck. I would...
I think your ideas about a Siren deck suck. I would...
I think your ideas about Hijack suck. I play it this way....
I think you're wrong about Joan of Arc. I install....

You're absolutely right to examine my ideas critically. Keep those cards and letters coming.

Descrambling the code gate decks

April 13th 1997

I sat down with the intention of writing an article about how to beat the "nasty code gate" decks, those which rely extensively on code gate ice, the Encoder, Inc. node, and the Encryption Breakthrough agenda.

After thinking about this for a while, I concluded that we can't beat 'em. Every time I've won a game running against one of those Encoder decks, it's been a fluke.

Everybody has a favorite type of ice. Some like the monstrous brain scramblers like Liche and Code Corpse; some like the fast and easy Filters and Data Walls. In the middle, though, lies the *best* ice – the ice with rez costs of roughly 5, and strengths of roughly 5. That is, Mazer (5 rez cost, 5 strength), Rock is Strong (6 rez cost, 5 strength), Neural Blade (4, 4). That's the strongest ice there is with the outstanding 1-to-1 rez-to-strength ratio.

There's a lot of ice which has strength which is higher than its rez cost. I love Shock.r, for instance, because it's 3-strength for 1 rez cost, and if it's front of "end the run" ice, it forces the runner to find a sentry breaker. The problem with such ice is that it doesn't end runs. Canis Major and Minor, Vacuum Link, etc., have terrific strength/rez ratios, but have to be combined with run-ending ice.

The code gate Ball and Chain, on the other hand, is 5 strength for 2 rez cost, and it ends the run in conjunction with Encoder, Inc. Furthermore, its rez cost is lowered by Encoder. If two Encoders are installed, a Ball and Chain costs zero to rez, and has three subroutines, two of which end the run. That's the best piece of ice in the game in terms of rez cost and strength.

It gets better for Encoding corporations. The puny Proteus "payback" ice Snowbank has this pipsqueak subroutine: "end the run unless runner pays 1". Washed-Up Solo Construct says "trash a program unless runner pays 1". Misleading Access Menus, the code gate version of the payback ice, has the same subroutine as Snowbank, but in tandem with Encoder, Inc., it has a real "end the run" subroutine. Consider that for a second – installing an Encoded Misleading Access Menus is like installing Sleeper and playing the Efficiency Experts operation in the same action.

It gets better, still. All of the code gate breakers are flawed in practice. Codecracker is too weak to deal with an Encoded Ball and Chain, or Mazer. Cyfermaster is the strongest code gate breaker, but it spends two bits to break a subroutine, and Encoder, Inc., appends too many subroutines to make Cyfermaster effective.

Skeleton Passkeys from Proteus very quickly became the popular code gate breaker because it breaks any 2-5 strength code gate for three bits, which makes run planning easy. However, Skeleton Passkeys turns to rust as soon as the corporation's ice goes to six strength – conveniently for the corp, Tutor, Mazer, and Ball and Chain are all five strength, and one scored Breakthrough or one Antiquated Interface Routines elevates them to six strength. A six-strength Mazer with one Encoder subroutine on a Crystal Palace Station Grid fort extracts a toll of eight bits from a Skeleton Passkeying runner. Ouch!

Raffles, the most expensive code gate breaker, falls painfully short at times because it's only four strength, and costs two to increase strength. In one example, the 7-cost Raffles has to pay seven bits to break all of Ball and Chain's routines if there are two Encoders in play and if the corporation has scored an Encryption Breakthrough. *Seven* bits for the most expensive icebreaker of its kind to break a piece of ice which costs *zero* to rez. That example puts the effectiveness of code gate decks in a nutshell.

Another powerful aspect to code gate decks is that they grow greatly in strength. Each additional Encoder installed, and every Encryption Breakthrough scored bolsters the corporation's ice across netspace. For that reason, runners need a code gate breaker which also grows in strength. That's right, readers, think Dupre.

Dupre was one of the joke cards of v. 1.0, but given the success of these Encoder decks, Dupre is a fine choice for runner decks which depend on concentrating on a specific central fort. One strategy at the runner's disposal is to target Dupre against HQ or RD, and pumping its strength against a Misleading or other weak code gate, while breaking toughies like Ball and Chain with Raffles. Eventually, Dupre will take care of breaking the whole fort.

Clown decks also have a fighting chance against code gate decks. Clown schemes require a great deal of time to set up, but so does the typical Encoder deck, and the Clowns sometimes win the race. A useful runner card in the Clown vs. Encoder battle is Deal with Militech, which obviates the need for one Clown – Encoder decks include Encryption Breakthrough, so research agenda will be available to fulfill Militech's Deal.

Inside Job and Social Engineering are usually cards of equal play value, but not against a code gate deck. Inside Job never misses, but only passes the first piece of ice. Social Engineering passes any piece of ice, but occasionally causes the runner to lose a flock of bits. Inside Job is to be preferred against a code gate scheme, for the corporation's best start is often one Ball and Chain protecting one Encoder. Inside Job will pass the ice, whereas Social Engineering usually requires a lot of bits sit in the runner's pool so the corporation will have a wider range of guesses.

Other effective runner attacks against Encoder decks are "Restrictive Net Zoning All to Hell" and/or ice destruction plans. Ice destruction can be a depressing undertaking – it sometimes costs as many as four bits to break a Misleading Access Menus before Startup Immolating it for zero. Still, a runner with the resources to Restrict HQ and chip away at the HQ ice gradually has a good chance to win.

Precision Bribery is also a good card to employ against Encoder decks, for each

Encoder that isn't installed equals one fewer "end the run" subroutine to be broken on a code gate. Precision Bribery just doesn't win friends and influence people, though.

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EuCon Ho!

How did you deal with your Taxman counters on April 15? Forgo actions? Edgerunner, Inc., Temps? Corporate War?

By the time you read this, the Northwest NetRunner Championships in Eugene, Oregon, will have been completed, and perhaps Jim McCoy and I will need to buy another airplane ticket so the trophy has a place onboard.

Looking back on this week, I'm surprised at how this weekend jaunt to EuCon has developed into something which required so much planning.

McCoy seems to think that since we're the only representatives of the San Francisco Bay Area – home to the best NetRunner players in the world – we should show off some of the best homegrown decks. Jim posted to the Bay Area NetRunner listserv requesting decks, and he's been running around for days gathering all the cards.

The best of these, in my opinion, is David Liu's "Hope You Have Disinfectant in a Roving Submarine," a Chiba-fueled Viral Pipeline deck. The deck is pure power – Bartmoss, Synthetic Blood, Loans – but it's crafted so smartly that even I can't dislike it too much.

Dave Liu, who won the last Wizards-sanctioned tournament in the Bay Area, has been so busy with graduate student work that he's never played HYHDRS in a tournament. McCoy has Dave's notes, though, and is pondering unleashing HYHDRS on the EuCon crowd.

I am trying to stay true to myself, as far as runner deck selection goes. The Oregonians might expect us trash-talking intruders to wheel out state-of-the-art decks at every opportunity, but that's just against my religion. Sorry, Eugene, I hope my Deep Thought deck doesn't disappoint.

Jim and I also have different ideas about corp deck concealment. Jim said he's going to stash his corporate deck until the main event, but I want to show mine to everyone I meet, with delight. I don't see why Jim is reluctant to show his "McCodeGate" deck – it's an Encoder deck, the kind I described last week, and my point was they're close to unbeatable. Jim can play his deck face up, and be a favorite to win all of his corporate games.

I haven't begun to pack yet (it's Thursday afternoon), but I know I'm going to bring at least one tie. I haven't worn a tie in three years, but NetRunner tournaments should improve on Magic tournaments at least in appearance if not attendance.

Also, I'm expected to perform some demonstrations, and neatness counts.

I have a stack of business cards to distribute from my neighborhood game store, Gator Games. Owner Jean Seaborg gave me a pack of Proteus for my trouble – sure enough, the rare was my 27th Hijack.

I swear this will be the last time I type reasons for why Hijack is substandard. The result of Hijack is that you gain two bits for the purposes of installing one program or one hardware. A simple comparison to ValuPak Software Bundle (one bit for installing up to five programs) has not deterred the Hijack supporters, so here's another comparison. Suppose you have five bits in your pool, and two cards in your hand, Score! and HQ Interface. You may play Score! and install HQ Interface. After those two actions, you are left with zero cards, five bits, and one piece of hardware installed. Now suppose you have five bits, and Hijack and HQ Interface. You may play Hijack to install HQ Interface. You have three bits remaining. With your second action, I dare you to get to the same level of bits you had in the Score! sequence.

The Hijackers are fond of the card because it combines a savings in bits plus an installation, an extension of the "cards and bits per action" method of assessing plans. The problem with the "cards and bits per action" thinking is that cards are worth more than bits. Sure, you can either draw one card or draw one bit with one action, but the card is almost always better to draw. A card might provide you with bits, or it might show you the way to play your next several turns. When a drawn card suggests a line of play that demands you draw bits singly, then do so – but not before.

Well, there are many things to do. I must seed my new French NetRunner cards into my display binder, add three Project Babylons to my whimsical Corporate Negotiating Center deck, do the laundry, buy a disposable camera... Until next week!

Socket to me

Viral Pipeline was the cornerstone of two undefeated constructed runner decks at the Northwest NetRunner Championship held April 19 in Springfield, Oregon. Hometown hero Dennis Duncan won the event with a remarkable Clown-and-Pipeline deck, and visitor Jim McCoy borrowed a Loan from Chiba-powered Pipeline deck for the occasion. (The first-place trophy was awarded by combining scores from the constructed and sealed deck events – Duncan scored 4-0 in constructed, and 1.5-1.5 in sealed, and I achieved 2.5-1.5 in constructed, and 3-0 in sealed. The tiebreaks favored me.)

The superpowered Viral Pipeline is clearly the most lethal virus program the runner has at his disposal. After each successful run on the archives, headquarters, or research and development, a ”socket” counter is placed on that data fort. When one socket counter has been placed on all three central forts, the ”pipeline” is complete, and the corporation must forgo one action during its turn.

That is brutal. The Crumble virus trashes normally untrashable cards, and Taxman grinds away at the corporation's bit pool, but cards and bits can be recovered. Actions – the basic unit of NetRunner movement – are priceless. Even the richest corporation with a headquarters full of perfect cards will collapse if it has no actions.

Viral Pipeline is different from all other virus programs in that it requires successful runs on three different forts. Many virus attacks which concentrate on HQ or RD employ Restrictive Net Zoning in order to weaken the target fort, but Viral Pipeline plans cannot reasonably restrict all three central forts. Therefore, a Pipeline scheme requires an effective bit engine and a strong icebreaker suite. The Pipeline decks which won four games at the Northwest NetRunner Championships took two different approaches.

Dennis Duncan's runner deck requires zero bits to win. Zero bits. The deck relies on Jack 'n' Joe plus ValuPak Software Bundle to install several daemons, Zetatech Software Installers, Clowns, and icebreakers with the ability to break subroutines for zero bits. When the tableau is complete, Duncan needs just to run three times – once on each central fort – to lay down nine Socket counters, leaving the corporation with zero actions per turn.

Programs 8 Zetatech Software Installer 5 Afreet 5 Clown 3 Viral Pipeline 2 Joan of Arc 2 Succubus 1 Emergency Self-Construct 1 Forward's Legacy 1 Imp 1

Wizard's Book 1 Wrecking Ball

Preps 12 Jack 'n' Joe 7 ValuPak Software Bundle 1 MIT West Tier

That's all, readers – 30 programs and 20 preps in the most remarkable architecture I've ever seen. Can it be beaten? Perhaps. Crystal Palace Station Grid forces the runner to pay one extra bit to break each subroutine on its fort, and Duncan's deck, remember, has no income plan. It's also possible to strengthen ice with Antiquated Interface Routines or Security Net Optimization to the point where the runner has to pay to pump the corresponding icebreaker.

City Surveillance must be the corporation's best answer to this deck, but the part of me which likes absurd humor wants to install three Chimeras on a central fort.

While Dennis Duncan's Pipeline deck depends on Clowns to ensure successful runs to give sockets, David Liu fuels Bartmoss Memorial Icebreaker with Loan from Chiba.

Programs 1 Bartmoss Memorial Icebreaker 1 Joan of Arc 1 Viral Pipeline

Preps 7 Bodyweight Synthetic Blood 2 Pirate Broadcast 2 Inside Job

Resources 11 Loan from Chiba 4 Code Viral Cache 3 Time to Collect 3 Airport Locker 2 Fall Guy 2 Junkyard BBS

Hardware 4 Millitech MRAM Chip 2 The Deck

Duncan's deck drops three Socket counters per action by having three Viral Pipelines installed. Liu's deck has just one Pipeline in play, but Pirate Broadcast demands a run on each fort, and smacks the corporation with three Sockets per action that way.

Liu's scheme typically starts running several turns before Duncan's does, sometimes doing an Inside Job on HQ on turn one or two in order to install Code Viral Cache. Because this deck gets off to an earlier start and has a dozen Loans from Chiba to protect, it needs tag protection and base link.

It's a very different approach, but there are some similarities. City Surveillance is the bete noire of any Synthetic Blood-sucking runner deck, and strong ice is a deterrent, too. Of course, it's a lot easier to find ice stronger than Bartmoss than it is to hamper a Forward's Legacy bolstered by five Clowns, but Loan from Chiba is one hell of an equalizer.

I don't know what you plan to do about these mighty Viral Pipeline decks. The corporation can't hope to gain actions to burn with a huge Project Venice because the runners prepare themselves rapidly – Liu's deck takes about nine turns to win, Duncan's sometimes takes fewer. Corporate Boon? Pacifica Regional AI?

E-mail and Blackmail

May 4th 1997

Last week's Viral Pipeline column inspired a little bit of discussion. Reader Holger Janssen wrote that an advanceable ambush – or any multiply installed ambushes – is an effective defense against Pirate Broadcast runs out of David Liu's deck.

Jim McCoy, who deals one of the nastiest Encoder/code gate decks, believes his favorite corporate deck would also stand up to the Liu deck Bartmoss attack, for it rezzes so many 5-strength Ball and Chains with multiple "end the run" subroutines for free.

I assembled Dennis Duncan's Pipeline/Clown deck, and played it twice. Perhaps the deck takes more practice in its handling, or maybe I suffered two very bad shuffles. I found myself making many painful discards in both games – in the second game, I recall that two Zetatech Software Installers and two Jack 'n' Joes were on the bottom of the stack, and that I had to play MIT West Tier and draw cards a second time in order to retrieve two Clowns and a Viral Pipeline.

This week I would like to talk about the runner prep Blackmail. Pay 12 bits and make a run on headquarters. If the run is successful, gain one agenda point.

Twelve has become one of my favorite numbers in NetRunner. Twelve advancement counters for World Domination, twelve bits to play Blackmail. The first reaction of most players to those tasks is that it's too much, but – trust me – it's not. Twelve advancement counters or 12 bits in order to win the game is cheap. In constrast, consider Arasaka Portable Prototype, which costs 11 bits plus an agenda point – it doesn't provide a win; it provides 3 MU and icebreaking bits. Now that's expensive!

Naturally, you should only play Blackmail when it wins. You certainly wouldn't want to invest 12 bits plus icebreaking costs just to reach six or fewer agenda points; you're better off investing those bits accessing cards.

When the runner reaches six agenda points, it's a whole new netspace. The runner starts to concentrate solely on headquarters – how many bits are needed to make a successful run? Where's my detection card to reveal the middle piece of ice on HQ? Oh, no! The damn corporate bastard installed another ice! It seems the most deflating operation the corp can play when the runner is planning a Blackmail run is New Blood.

Corporations know the dread of watching a runner feed a Broker and gain three bits for consecutive turns, and wondering what the runner has in store. The tension

– a hallmark of NetRunner – builds as the corp strives to score his agenda. Blackmail leads to dramatic finishes.

Blackmail's greatest strength is that, in most cases, it gives the runner a one handicap. A failed Blackmail run, on the other hand, is spectacular and very expensive. Blackmail offers greater empowerment than other preps which award one agenda point. For instance, Desperate Competitor and Hot Tip for WNS depend on certain styles of corporate agenda. Promises, Promises takes detection on the runner's part, unless he's willing to take a wild shot. Blackmail is a sure thing which doesn't need the aid of Technician Lover or Mouse.

Blackmail is also an interesting card because it somewhat requires that the runner be a skillful player to use it. First, it would be a novice mistake to use Blackmail before six agenda points have been stolen. Second, the runner has to have the basic ability to be able to calculate the number of bits needed to complete the run, sometimes based on incomplete knowledge, and that is a runner's high art. Finally, the runner needs to have gained six agenda points – in the long haul, it takes greater skill to steal six agenda points than to steal five.

One aspect of Blackmail that isn't true of most other runner cards is that it makes excellent discard fodder, at any time before the runner has stolen six agenda.

Why isn't there a bad publicity equivalent to Blackmail? Just wondering. See you next week.

Art, science, or sport?

Is NetRunner an art, a science, or a sport?

Look at the minimalism displayed in the Viral Pipeline decks discussed two weeks ago in "Socket to Me". Dennis Duncan's Clown deck, comprised of 30 programs and preps, distills the runner's dangerous, frenzied life into a recipe – Jack 'n' Joe, ValuPak, complete the Pipeline. It's a science.

On the other hand, Joe Ganis wins with a deck where the corporation must score a Political Overthrow. Ganis and others like him continually push the artistic boundaries.

The bottom line, however, is that the players who score the agenda points win the blue ribbons.

It's the sportsmen who hear about a NetRunner tournament and ask, "will this be a 'fun' tournament or a 'tournament' tournament?", which means, "I'll play with Tycho/ACME/Project Consultants, OK?"

Along with the often-inequitable scoring systems, the worst aspect of tournament play is that it encourages players to construct the worst kind of deck – quick to set up, and operating in short bursts. Install a Tycho behind a Filter, advance it four times. Annual Reviews until ACME and Project Consultants roll in.

Decks which are crafted for tournament play aren't much fun. Loan from Chiba decks fit that "quick setup, short burst" description, too. Take a loan, install The Deck. Take a loan, pop the Airport Locker for five bits, use five more to install Bartmoss. The forementioned Duncan Clown deck is also a "tournament" deck for all of its remarkability – sets up in about 10 turns, and shuts down the corporation entirely, without any thought to typical runner concerns like reconnaissance or diversion.

This is very wrong. Where is the palpable tension that exists in sealed deck play? Which runner cares what the corporation is doing when he is playing Synthetic Blood, ValuPaking Imps with the plan of misc.for-selling them, and then paying for RD Protocol/Microtech AI runs? Hey, readers, just because you can't sell the Imp pyramid more than once doesn't mean that this still isn't a tournament-winning (read: boring, stupid) strategy.

Chess tournaments award brilliancy prizes, cash for producing the most aesthetically-pleasing game in an event. NetRunner tournaments have begun granting "cool deck" prizes, after polling each participant about his opponent's decks.

That's a start towards promoting creativity in tournament NetRunner, but it won't go further than that until NetRunner players find a way to follow chess-players in another regard – game recording.

Chess allows the recording of its games for posterity. Brilliancy prize-winning games instruct and entertain generations with the simplest of languages – each piece and each square has a name, and we coordinate them on paper.

How can we possibly make this work for NetRunner? Is it enough just to record whether a player drew a bit, drew a card, played a prep, or installed something? If you were reading such a list, would you want to arrange a collection of cards so you can see the choices as they presented themselves to the player?

We'll have to give them some hard thought. When the NetRunner Pro Tour takes us to Paris and Sydney, newspapers will want to print the gamescores.

Quest for Jamocattekin – Searching for new ideas over ice cream

May 18th 1997

The recent days in the San Francisco Bay Area are long and hot. I would like to share with you some of the thinking I did over two scoops of Baskin-Robbins Jamoca. Proceed at your own risk.

I overheard a discussion of the construction of cool decks. The more experienced player suggested that a good place to start exploring would be in corporate agenda. He said that the newer player should look for novel ways to advance agenda, or use the agenda's special ability.

In time for next week's tournament – with its "cool deck" prize – I wish to enliven the Data Fort Reclamation agenda.

The four-difficulty, two-point Gray Ops agenda rewards the corporation 10 bits for the construction of a new data fort. Data Fort Reclamation compares unfavorably to the other four-difficulty Gray Ops – Employee Empowerment's card-drawing reward and Corporate Retreat's windfall both seem to outweigh a Data Fort Reclamation, and they confer an additional agenda point, to boot.

The other drawback to Data Fort Reclamation is a big one. Precision Bribery nullifies Data Fort Reclamation's ability. However, in the absence of Precision Bribery, other cards from the Proteus expansion can maximize a Data Fort Reclamation score. A Reclaimed Sandstorm can be installed with four subroutines, Sphinx 2006 can be installed as a five-strength sentry.

Consider this: score Data Fort Reclamation, and install Braindance Campaign, and three pieces of payback ice. That pays 21 bits over time, and that's an outstanding bonus. Data Fort Reclamation favors Rockerboy Promotion over BBS Whispering Campaign.

I think it would be hilarious to install 10 bits worth of ice and a Viral Breeding Ground, and then blow the new fort up on the next turn.

Other ideas I kicked around:

Has anyone used the Pavit Bharat upgrade to haul a plain Grey Ops agenda away from a fort and replaced it with the Fetal AI ambush and a Red Herrings?

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Fetal AI is always cool, but to make it the business end of a Pavit surprise is new.

Scoring more than one agenda per turn wins style points. Just 25 bits are needed to Edgerunner two 4-difficulty agenda, and Project Consulting both of them. Install Corporate Negotiating Centers, Rustbelt HQ Branches, and New Galveston City Grids until you turn blue. Install a Panic Button on HQ, and hold the Main Office Relocations.

The other way to score multiple agendas in a turn is a chestnut – six Executive Extractions, six Genetics-Visionary Acquisitions, and six Artificial Security Directors. I'm not convinced that this is cool, though – any novice can score a zero-difficulty agenda, after all. You know, they have a name for this agenda set in the Northwest – they call it "The Golden Eighteen."

The speed agenda do have a lot of creative potential, though. An Executive Extraction deck with a handful of Corporate Downsizings or Hostile Takeovers could gain a pile of bits effortlessly.

Speaking of Gray Ops, someone's gotta be first to find a use for Please Don't Choke Anyone. I think inexpensive damage ice like Laser Wire and Chihuahua are key.

Do the unexpected. Reduce yourself to zero bits by advancing an agenda, and then sell a counter to Raymond Ellison in order to rez three Red Herrings. Pile five Lesley Majors and a Bizarre Encryption Scheme on top of a Political Overthrow (and have the 25 bits necessary to pay for Lesley).

"Go ahead and run, Wilson. I'll get ice cream."

The question arose on the Wizards listserv this week: On its first turn, the corporation installs a card inside a subsidiary fort, and advances it twice. In the absence of detection, force shields, Weefle Initiation, Speed Trap, or Death from Above, do you run the fort?

The prevailing attitude on the listserv is the macho posturing, "the name of the game isn't NetSitOnYourButt, let's run the fort". Nonsense.

The first question the runner should ask is "what do I know about your opponent?". Only if there is a precedent for your corporate opponent installing an unprotected agenda and advancing it should you run the fort. We have all, I guess, installed an unprotected three-difficulty agenda and hoped to score it next turn, but advancing a more difficult agenda, and possibly losing the advancement counters, too? That's too great a risk.

The next question the runner should ask is "what is my deck's plan?". Can a run on a subsidiary fort on turn one possibly further that plan? Probably not, while a viral attack can proceed unhindered for the first turn.

Why be seduced by that subsidiary fort, anyway? Our first action is almost always a run on a central fort, and if seven agenda points are plucked off RD, the subsidiary fort is moot. A successful run or two on RD might possibly give us a clue as to what sits in that mysterious subsidiary fort. Would you be surprised to find Namatoki Plaza or Falsified Transactions Expert? Of course not – both of those cards combine so well with advanceable ambush nodes.

Maybe there's a Vapor Ops in that corporate deck. Suppose your opening draw as the corporation includes Efficiency Experts, Chance Observation, Urban Renewal, and Vapor Ops. In our hypothetical situation, you could score a turn two flatline after installing Vapor and advancing it twice on turn one. The runner runs it, and it turns to Vapor. Then if the runner doesn't keep five cards in hand, you can Efficiency, Observe, Renew.

What has the runner to gain by flying into that subsidiary fort? Some number of agenda points. Consider that under the "three phases" umbrella. In the early-going, the runner can often steal agenda from central forts before HQ and RD are iced. What's the difference if he steals them from central forts, or gambles on our

mysterious subsidiary fort?

Allow me a bit of absurdity. Suppose the card in that fort is a Political Overthrow. Right, the corporation's first three actions were install Political Overthrow, and advance it twice. Suppose you – brave runner, you – steal it. You lead 6-0. Nothing else good happens this turn. On the corporation's second turn, he gains some bits, and installs some Filters or Data Walls. You're nearing the middlegame, just as if you'd stolen those six points from a central fort.

What has the runner to lose? What's in his hand? An Arasaka Portable Prototype and a Rabbit? Sure, go ahead, take the damage.

What if the runner is dealt better cards? Do you take the damage? No, you run the central forts, pressing your opening advantage. Then you start moving to get through the middlegame, when the corporation's defense is solid, to the endgame, when you can't be stopped.

When you get right down to it, what if the runner is dealt the cards we discuss in the first paragraph, force shields, Weefle Initiation, Speed Trap, Death from Above? Corporate players know those cards are out there; they know runners may often run with impunity. Furthermore, there are other cards which could ensure a safe run on that shadowy subsidiary fort – Weather-to-Finance Pipe and Credit Subversion both guarantee that the corporation won't rez that supposed Soulkiller, and also prevent the corporation from scoring an agenda. Then the runner has another turn to draw any of the other preventive measures.

What does the corporation have to gain by so brazenly installing and scoring an agenda in this fashion? Again, consider the "three phases" theory. If the corporation's rapidly-scored agenda does not provide an income, the corporation may be injuring itself by paying bits for advancement counters – that is, the runner's opening advantage will be lengthened as long the corporation has no bits to rez ice on the central forts.

I am swimming against the tide here, recommending that the runner ignore this hypothetical subsidiary fort. You may attempt to show me up as a blowhard contrarian by installing an agenda on turn one, and advancing it. You may prove me wrong with some well-chosen words.

The sky is falling

Meat damage is in.

After the advent of the "tag me" decks and their multiple Full Body Conversions, decks which dealt meat damage went into decline. However, clever corporate players are finding ways to bag previously-bulletproof runners. Furthermore, these new strategies are proving especially effective against runners which do not employ outstanding meat damage defense.

The Lesley Major sysop can rough up a runner in a few different ways. Lure a runner into a fort which contains Lesley Major and Cybertech Think Tank, plus firestarter (Homewrecker or Cinderella) ice. As the runner approaches the firestarter, Rez Lesley, pay five bits to advance Cybertech two times. Rez the ice, then Cybertech Think Tank to increase the unpreventable meat damage by two.

This combination may be more fancily achieved by use of other sysops – Pavit Bharat and Olivia Salazar – and if Cybertech Think Tank is advanced far enough, Lesley Major isn't needed at all.

The combination of Lesley Major and Pavit Bharat can soften up the Full Body Converted runners by surprising them with Corprunner's Shattered Remains. Of course, Lesley and Pavit may also be used to harm a runner with Viral Breeding Ground and Bizarre Encryption Scheme, or any other advanceable ambush.

One of the earliest attempts to flatline runners with unpreventable meat damage centered around using Lisa Blight or Marcel deSoleil to repeat a firestarter subroutine. The problem with that was that Cindy and Homewrecker routines end the run, and save the runner from dealing with the replicated damage. Lisa and Marcel went back to work in the Bolter Cluster division.

Standard "tag and bag" decks took an evolutionary twist during the age of full-bodied runners. In place of the Chance Observation/Urban Renewal strike, many corporate players are turning to major explosions – Manhunt plus Schlaghund or I Got a Rock. (Speaking of Manhunt, Byron Massey's observation bears repeating: Manhunt and Schlaghund Pointers were obviously meant to bear each other's name.)

I suppose the idea is that the Full Body Converted runners are going to get away, but we might be able to blow up a couple of guys who merely sit in an Armored Fridge. I think these corporations hope to blow away a couple of "tag me" runners as well, by doing the big damage rapidly, before the defense is set.

I've enjoyed playing with Schlaghund (see Dog Whistle: Improving the Siren Deck in the archives), but I have had a hard time taking I Got a Rock seriously. A cost of three agenda points to crush a twice-tagged weefle? Also, its rez cost is higher and its trash cost is lower than Schlaghund's. But you know something? I'm being converted by popular opinion. I've seen enough meteors fall from the sky lately to believe that the card is enough fun to play even if the rare runner has an Identity Donor.

Another factor which favors Rock over Schlaghund is that Rock only requires the runner to be tagged twice. Occasionally a Schlaghund die roll will fail. Have you considered this very fine distinction between tag operations? When you play with Schlaghund, Datapool by Zetatech adds tags for the purposes of the die roll, but when you play with Rock, Netwatch Credit Voucher deals the last tag needed, and awards what could possibly be the third bit needed to rez the meteor.

Empty Mailbag: I received no mail about last week's Frisky AI, in which I wrote that the best thing to do about a card installed in a subsidiary fort on the corp's first turn, then advanced twice, is to ignore it. I suppose you all think I've gone completely out of my mind.

Discovering World Domination and other memories of Proteus when it was new

June 8th 1997

I remember a wonderful, mysterious time last year, right before Proteus was released. I thought the expansion set might be the shot in the arm that NetRunner needed to boost itself into its deserved place as The Collectable Card Game Which Everyone Plays.

Promotional packs of Proteus made their way into the bloodstream. Card spoilers trickled in to make up much of the listserv content, which I didn't read because I wanted to discover the card text along with the card art.

I recall Joe Ganis was planning to bring a Redecorator deck to the upcoming Pacificon tournament. I had no damn idea what a Redecorator was – I could only imagine a brand new card under the control of the guy who had just won the ManaFest tournament.

On the morning of the first day of Pacificon, I hustled into the dealers room looking for the Wizards of the Coast table. I was disappointed to find only the familiar green-and-purple foil packs. "We don't have any Proteus to sell, but I do have some Proteus cards in my decks" was the first thing Wizards-netrep-to-be JD Wiker said to me.

In the middle of a NetRunner demonstration, Wiker then said, "Here's [a Proteus card] now." He reached into the bank for three bits to put on a Streetware Distributor. "A Spinn for the runner," I thought. "C'mon, show me something new." The demonstration game ended with a fast advancement operation, and I was allowed to sit in.

"Would you like to play for ante?" Wiker asked.

"Ante? I didn't know that was possible," I said.

Wiker explained that all comers were allowed to ante an uncommon or rare NetRunner card against a booster pack, and lost singles were to be signed by the defeated for display at the Renton office. I thought about that for a second – I stand to gain a potential Krumz but stand to lose a Newsgroup Taunting which will go up on their wall with my sorry signature on it.

"No, thanks," I said.

Wiker nodded, and turned to Wizards cyberspace coordinator Charles Keith Stanley. "The Magic players are always up for that, but the NetRunner players are usually 'uhhhhnnnhhhhh', " said Wiker.

In those days as a novice, I was playing with Bartmoss Memorial Icebreaker, the cheesiest icebreaker, and stealth, which showed mostly to be an inadequate resource (though theory marched onward, and Mystery Box plus Cloak is a good try). I was Valu-Paking Invisibilities and Imps to pay for Bartmoss's sorry butt – I believe that was the first Imp pyramid designed to be recycled rather than sold.

Early, I made on a run on HQ without Joan of Arc in sight (you've gotta do it, Bartmossers – it's the only excitement you'll ever get from that card), and pulled a card from Wiker's hand – World Domination.

The first thing I noticed about the card with the familiar blue makeup was its difficulty. "Holy crap," I said, looking up at Stanley and Wiker. "What the hell is that?"

"That's one of the new agenda," said Wiker.

"Twelve advancements?"

"Read the agenda bonus text," someone suggested.

"....awards .... four .... additional ... points," I read somewhat aloud. "Hey! This card wins!"

"Yeah, but how are you gonna score it?" asked Stanley.

"How are you going to score it?" I repeated in my mind, and a love affair was born.

I found the answer to "how are you going to score World Domination?" in December. Six months later, the framework is presented in the June issue of the The Duelist, at game stores and newsstands now.

Driving across the San Mateo Bridge today, I tried to compare myself to Ruy Lopez, the 15th-century Spanish priest who first analyzed chess openings which are played at the highest levels even today. Can NetRunner possibly grow to such popularity that articles like mine are remembered? What could I do to promote NetRunner further, so that another expansion might be released, providing the fuel for more ideas, and more Duelist articles, and more interest, and more expansions, and more ideas, ad infinitum?

I briefly pondered a future as a traveling NetRunner salesman, moving across the country in a 1967 VW Beetle, performing game demonstrations at collectables shops all over the land, and showing the Magic-sheep the one true way. "Yes!" the proselytized will cry, "we MUST HAVE another NetRunner expansion! We must have a million dollar Pro Tour with spokesmodels drawing the first card from R&D!".

The truck behind me on the bridge blew its horn, breaking the reverie. I continued on the Armadillo Armored Road Home.

Take out the papers and the trash

June 15th 1997

Do you spend enough time deciding what to discard? I think trash management is an overlooked aspect of NetRunner play.

The first thing to understand about your discard pile is that it is easily recycled. Gideon's Pawnshop, Junkyard BBS, and Off-Site Backups are low-cost retrievers of single cards. The runner can pay three bits for MIT West Tier, and shuffle his hand and discard pile together. If the corporation scores the AI Chief Financial Officer agenda, he gains the ability to take one action to shuffle the central forts together. AI CFO's ability to recycle trash and reshuffle is so powerful that InQuest magazine called it the "Card to Get" in NetRunner.

Off-Site and Gideon's extend the usefulness of your other cards by allowing them all to be played more than once, but without having to include multiples in your deck. Gideon's Pawnshop should give the runner the courage to take ice damage – go ahead and force the corp to rez Code Corpse, for the vital cards in your hand can be salvaged.

Just because it's easy to fetch cards from the discard pile, it doesn't mean you can choose your discards haphazardly. When the need arises for a certain card which you've already thrown away by choice, it is very frustrating – it is even more annoying if the card you kept in its stead never came into play.

The state of the game before you is always the best guide to selecting discards. Correctly sizing up the contest will make your discarding choices less painful, and it will also help you make best use of cards which permit you to draw extra cards – Crash Everett, Inventive Fixer is an excellent resource in the hands of a runner who recognizes trash when he sees it. Furthermore, you will find that you don't have to include as many hand size expansion cards in your deck, leaving room for power cards.

The agenda score often influences choice in discard. When the corporation reaches six agenda points, it's safe for the runner to throw away Terrorist Reprisal. Before the runner achieves six agenda points, Blackmail is expendable, but after the makes reaches six, all the bonus preps like Prearranged Drop and Desperate Competitor become disposable. The corporation, similarly, can easily trash Trojan Horse and Silver Lining Recovery Protocol.

I am far more likely as runner to trash a Corporate Ally if I have not scored an agenda point. Same goes Arasaka Portable Prototype, but who plays with that?

(what an expensive card).

Concealment is another consideration in choice of discard. Just because you have two of the same card in your hand does not make it an obvious discard. If I am holding two Technician Lovers, I will not discard one until I am ready to run RD.

Keep in mind a card's ability in relationship to the time of game. Early in the game, I will considering keeping two code gate breakers in hand, if one is Dupre. Dupre installed fast and pumped on a small code gate is a long-term strength. Misc.for-sale pays best when you have had time to install many cards, and is therefore a fair choice to pitch early.

Late in the contest, Floating Runner BBS is a goner, because the game might not last the seven turns Floating needs to start returning a profit. Same goes for all the cards like it – Rigged Investments, Holovid and Braindance Campaigns, Spinn, Streetware, etc. (Similar thinking applies to whether you should load a previously-installed Spinn or Streetware, or cash out a Broker.) The Detroit Police Contract agenda (a "Campaign" agenda) loses a lot of its value late in the game, and is an easier agenda to trash than others. Political Overthrow and other high-difficulty agenda can be discarded in a pinch, when there's no time to score them.

Early in the game, I bet it is more convenient to ditch a memory chip than a daemon. When there is plenty of available MU in which to install a daemon, the daemon may provide all the extra memory that is needed, plus it is cheaper to install. Later, there might be no room for the daemon, and a chip is needed.

As ever, keep an eye on your opponent's bit pool. Runners can painlessly toss Weather-to-Finance Pipes and Forged Activation Orders when the corporation can easily afford their effects. The corporate player makes such decisions every time he draws a piece of ice – when the runner has icebreakers installed, it's simple to pass judgment on a Sleeper.

Where your own bit pool is concerned, let the state of the game guide you. If you feel like discarding AI Boon because you think you're on a Loony Goon budget, check the agenda tally – if the score is tied at zero, you're probably wiser to plan for a long term, and save bits for Boon. However, if you have to run now, chuck the Boon, and keep the Goon.

Tuning a starter deck, part 1

I directed two sealed deck NetRunner tournaments at last week's Mini ManaFest held at the MatchPlay Game Center in Mountain View, Calif.

I gave the players at least 45 minutes for tuning their sealed decks, and found that some players were struggling to judge some cards as they neared their deadlines. For that reason, I will spend this week and next noodling about the tuning of sealed decks, starting with runner cards this week. I wonder if anyone who reads this column can use this kind of help.

Is tuning really necessary? In last Saturday's sealed deck tournament, a brand new player, who had just learned to play at a demonstration, finished second with an untuned starter. Furthermore, her runner deck was a bad one – the big cash cards were Databroker and misc.for-sale. No Broker, no Loan from Chiba, not even a Short-Term Contract.

Yes, to have the best chance to win a sealed deck contest, tuning is necessary. Sixty cards are far too many to draw from in order to find the right icebreaker or cash card. You will find that you really want to keep just 30 to 35 cards from your starter, and the other 10 or 15 are blah, which usually serve as discard fodder. I love to find a Crash Everett, Inventive Fixer in my sealed decks, just so I can whittle the crap down on the fly.

The reason for deck size minimums is based in game design. The designers of NetRunner understood that if runners were allowed to play with just the 30-35 "good" cards in their starter, their decks would be too good, too easy to play.

I have cracked a fresh starter for the purposes of this column, and found an exceptionally good runner box. It's possible that 45 cards in here will be standout choices, which won't make for thought-provoking reading, will it?

First things first. Separate your cards by class. That should be obvious, but I watched players sift through their 60-card stacks plucking cards as they went. It's much easier to choose between icebreakers if all of your programs are in one place.

Hardware
Microtech Backup Drive
Nasuko Cycle
PK-6089a
Pandora's Deck
Parraline 5750

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RD Interface
Tycho Mem Chip
Zetatech Mem Chip

Prep
Edited Shipping Manifest
Forgotten Backup Chip
Gideon's Pawnshop
If You Want It Done Right
Jack 'n' Joe
Livewire's Contacts
Mantis, Fixer at Large
MIT West Tier
Open-Ended Mileage Program
Score!
Security Code WORM Chip
Temple Microcode Outlet
Weather-to-Finance Pipe

Programs
Baedeker's Net Map
Black Dahlia
Clown
Cyfermaster
Dwarf
Force Shield
Gremlins
Invisibility
Loony Goon
Pattel's Virus
Pile Driver
Rabbit
Ramming Piston
Raptor
Raffles
Replicator
Scatter Shot
SeeYa
Shaka
Shield
Signpost
Smarteye

Speed Trap
Vewy Vewy Quiet
Wizard's Book
Worm
Zetatech Software Installer

    Resources
Access to Kiribati
Back Door to Hilliard
Back Door to Orbital Air
Broker
Fall Guy
Leland, Corporate Bodyguard
Loan from Chiba
Nomad Allies
Springboard
Short-Term Contract
Submarine Uplink
Trauma Team

Keep every card which can provide a bit. That's the bottom line. I know that some card gamers are turned off by NetRunner for its prevailing "money is everything" character, which is certainly true of many constructed runner decks which rely on a dozen Loans from Chiba, or 15 Scores! In sealed deck play, an artful runner must learn to make good use of subtle cards like Smith's Pawnshop. (The easy tricks with Smith are to sell Rigged Investments with one bit remaining on it to gain an extra bit, or sell Short-Term Contract with two bits on it to save an action, or sell Loan from Chiba to gain four bits.)

Choose resources and preps first, then programs, then hardware. This allows you to pull all of the cash out first, and programs are far more important than hardware.

Make the easy choices first. It's like spinning a radio dial. You zoom in close to the station you want, and when you're close, you move the dial only a little bit each way before you're tuned in. In a NetRunner runner deck, you keep 30 cards easily, then make finer judgments about the other 15.

With those points in mind, we can get to work.

Resources

This is the first starter deck I've ever seen which includes Broker, Short-Term Contract, and Loan from Chiba. Keepers. For tag prevention, Fall Guy is the tops. Between Nomad Allies and Leland, Corporate Bodyguard, I keep Nomad for its special ability to remove tags cheaply is much greater than Leland's meat damage prevention. Besides, we've got a Trauma Team for meat protection – I set that aside for now, though. Rely on resources for base linkage. We got a few program links

in this starter, but they take MU. Back Door to Hilliard is the cheap link of choice, and Submarine Uplink is an overlooked card, which often works as well as Dropp against trace ice. The other three base links (Orbital Air, Kiribati, Springboard) are set aside.

Preps

What a great set of preps. Keep the cash first. Edited Shipping Manifests, Live-wire, Score. Deck management preps come next. Done Right, Jack 'n' Joe, Mantis, Temple. Recycling is great (see last week's Frisky AI installment). Gideon's, and a terrific rare, MIT West Tier. Sabotage is good, too, so we keep WORM Chip and Weather-to-Finance.

So, out of 13 preps, 11 are easy keepers. Only Forgotten Backup Chip and Open-Ended Mileage Program are set aside. I figure Open-Ended won't come back, considering that we have Nomad Allies among our resources.

Programs

Roughly half of the cards in a runner starter are programs. Therefore, I sort them further by use – icebreakers into four separate groups (code gate, wall, sentry, specialized) and others.

One big icebreaker of each type, one small one. That's fairly common sense. Keeping two of each makes it easier to draw one, and permits you to lose cards to damage.

Black Dahlia is the only big sentry breaker. Its weakness is that it has to pay four bits to break the piddly little sentries like Banpei, so I'll prefer Shaka over Loony Goon as my small breaker because Shaka is slightly less expensive to use against weak sentries. Raptor and Loony are set aside.

Raffles is the best big code gate breaker. I suppose code gate breakers could be considered a weakness in this starter, since there's no Codecracker to handle Filters and Sleepers. I'll take the Wizard's Book for them. Put Cyfermaster away for now.

Dwarf is the expensive wall breaker, and Pile Driver will serve as the cheap one. Ramming Piston and Worm are put away, but I have a hunch Worm might return as a better answer to Data Wall 2.0 than Pile Driver.

Our only specialty icebreaker is Replicator. That's kind of a drag. Dogcatcher is always fun in sealed deck play, for corporations are forced to play with dog sentries. My favorite specialty icebreaker is Reflector, because Shock.r and Bolter Cluster are such prime sealed deck cards. Flak is a heavy sealed deck card, too, because corporate starters are often provide a full complement of AP sentries which do brain damage.

Other Programs

Keep the money cards first. A Zetatech Software Installer is a big bonus, and Scatter Shot is an amusing and useful rare. I like Scatter Shot very much even in constructed play because upgrades like Rio de Janeiro and Crystal Palace Station Grid have such high bloody trash costs.

The other money programs we received are stealth cards, Invisibility and Vewy Vewy Quiet. Stealth, in general, sucks. It takes MU, and except for Invisibility, costs too much to install. I've seen sealed deck runners save and save to install

a Cloak, and not even use its installation cost in stealth bits before the corp wins the game. Keep a card's installation cost in mind. That's a big thing to remember when thinking about hardware, too, in a following paragraph. I'll keep Invisibility because it costs zero to install. Vewy Vewy Quiet can go.

The base link programs can go. Cards like Baedeker's Net Map and Bakdoor are useful mostly in constructed decks which rely heavily on ValuPak Software Bundling and lots of MU.

Detection is good in sealed deck play. Smarteye is an annoying program against a corporation which hopes to bluff with ice it can't afford to rez. Speed Trap is an unsung card in constructed deck play, too. I'll put SeeYa away, because it's a little expensive to install and to use. I'd much rather have a Mouse, anyway. SeeYa can expose ice, but good NetRunner players expose ice by slamming the hell into it.

For now, I'll prefer Force Shield to Shield, just for its brain damage protection. It's just easier to make choices like this when you have a Zetatech Software Installer in hand.

Between the viruses, I'll keep Gremlins over Pattel's because it's potentially more damaging to the corporation. Also, Pattel's is good if it saves the runner icebreaking costs – this particular starter set is very cash-rich, though.

Rabbit? One of the worst cards in the game. Pass.

Clown. Hmm. Clown is just a good card, but in this deck, with its strong Dahlia and Pile Driver, I'll leave it aside. Maybe it will come back in the second look.

Hardware

RD Interface is the only sure thing, because it permits the runner to access an additional card. I now see what's missing from this deck. No Custodial Positions, no Executive Wiretaps. Keep cards which provide extras. Custodial and Wiretaps are classic sealed deck cards. Even All-Nighter, which allows an extra run, is a good sealed deck card.

I'll put all three decks away. Wizards screwed up with the design of those cards. They're all expensive to install, and don't provide much.

I'll take both mem chips, and hope I draw Zetatech before I draw Tycho. Nasuko Cycle is expensive to use, but it is a lifesaver occasionally. Keeper. Microtech Backup Drive goes away for a while.

We've kept 36 cards so far:

Hardware Nasuko Cycle RD Interface Tycho Mem Chip Zetatech Mem Chip

Prep Edited Shipping Manifest Gideon's Pawnshop If You Want It Done Right Jack 'n' Joe Livewire's Contacts Mantis, Fixer at Large MIT West Tier Score! Security Code WORM Chip Temple Microcode Outlet Weather-to-Finance Pipe

Programs Black Dahlia Dwarf Force Shield Gremlins Invisibility Pile Driver Raffles Replicator Scatter Shot Shaka Smarteye Speed Trap Wizard's Book Zetatech Software Installer

Resources Back Door to Hilliard Broker Fall Guy Loan from Chiba Nomad Allies Short-Term Contract Submarine Uplink

At least we only have to find nine cards in the drek. Some sealed deck tunings are painful at this point.

I'll pack Backup Drive because it can be installed, while Forgotten Backup Chip has to stay in hand.

Clown, just in case. Shield is free to install, and provides at least a little net protection. Worm is great against cheap walls, and who knows, maybe Worm plus Wizard's Book will give our Clown life.

Open-Ended Mileage Program might save a few tag-removing bits, and even costs less to use than Nomad Allies. Trauma Team is also free to install, and might save a life.

That's six. Three more cards to save, darn it. Springboard could also result in avoiding a tag. Vewy Vewy Quiet, as bad as stealth tends to be, could work out if Zetatech Software Installer comes out first – besides, keeping Vewy Quiet pays attention to the first rule, keep the money.

One more card to keep from this mess.

I'll make it Parraline 5750, a deck, just for its icebreaking bit. It'll probably be discarded during the play, but money is money is money.

Like I said, this is an outstanding sealed deck, and was almost too easy to tune. Make it hard for me.

Tuning a starter deck, part 2

Last week I touched on a few principles of tuning a sealed deck for the purposes of reducing a 60-card starter to a tournament minimum 45 cards. That article prompted more reader feedback than any other – each correspondent suggested a change or two, but everyone agrees on 35 or 40 cards.

Perhaps if this week's look at the corporate cards generates enough mail, I'll devote next week's Frisky AI to the discussion.

I don't know how cards are distributed for the purposes of filling out a 60-card starter, but it makes some kind of sense to me that as good as the runner cards in this box were, the corporate cards are bad. (I asked you last week to send me an icky runner starter – Charles Schwope of Dallas did, and that's another work in progress.)

Agenda
*Corporate Boon
Corporate Retreat
Detroit Police Contract
Executive Extraction
*Main-Office Relocation
On-Call Solo Team
*Polymer Breakthrough
Priority Requisition
*Private Cybernet Police
Political Coup
Project Babylon
Tycho Extension

Ice
*Asp
Bolter Cluster
*Canis Minor
*D'Arc Knight
Data Naga
Data Wall

Data Wall 2.0
*Fang
*Fang 2.0
Fetch 4.0.1
Filter
Fire Wall
Homewrecker
Hunter
Ice Pick Willie
Neural Blade
*Pi in the Face
Scramble
*Sentinels Prime
Sleeper
*TKO 2.0
*Triggerman
*Viral 15
Wall of Static
Zombie

Nodes
Braindance Campaign
Corprunner's Shattered Remains
Holovid Campaign
Investment Firm
Rockerboy Promotion
Rustbelt HQ Branch
Setup!
Solo Squad
South African Mining Corp

Operations
Chance Observation
Closed Accounts
Datapool by Zetatech
Efficiency Experts
Management Shakeup
New Blood
Night Shift
Off-Site Backups
Project Consultants
Trojan Horse

Urban Renewal
Upgrades
Olivia Salazar
Rio de Janeiro City Grid

That's only 59 cards, too. I'm not even sure what I'd want the 60th card to be. City Surveillance, maybe, considering all the tag cards. We've got an Executive Extraction, so Corporate Downsizing and Employee Empowerment come to mind. When you get right down to it, this starter is so poorly distributed, we only got three code gates, so even a Quandary would be helpful.

A sealed runner deck is easier to tune than the corporate side. Keep the income and carry enough programs and other cards with useful abilities. The corporate starter, though, has to be tuned with other considerations in mind:

To bag or not to bag. It's always a good idea for the sealed corporation to carry Chance Observation, Trojan Horse, and Urban Renewal. To make meat death a larger goal requires a few more damage dealers – perhaps three meat damage cards should be a minimum. In this deck, we have Urban Renewal, Solo Squad, and On-Call Solo Team.

Built for speed? Constructed speed decks can live on the thinnest of ice – even 15 Filters is a plausible selection of ice in a Psycho Stupid Tycho deck. In sealed play, corporate agenda will be installed and left vulnerable, and bigger ice is needed if the corporation is to prolong the middle game. Our subject starter is disgustingly weak in the ice department – the strongest ice here is Zombie, Homewrecker, and Data Naga. That might suggest a tag and bag policy, for the runner will probably reach the endgame sooner than we would like.

Agenda ability. In constructed play, an agenda's special ability seems to be diminished slightly. Take the Psycho Stupid Tycho deck again – please. Tycho Extension awards no special ability – it's just the fourth agenda point which makes the deck work. As much as I hate Corporate War, the card becomes interesting in sealed play because it's far more difficult for the corporation to arrange to have the 12 bits handy. In a starter deck, you are forced to play with seven or nine different agenda, and you must make each scored agenda count. Priority Requisition rarely sees the light of constructed play, but it's a big sealed deck card. An early Corporate Retreat is often a win for the corporation. If you're dealt Project Babylon in a starter, play with it.

The first thing to do is separate cards by class, and we're off.

I begin by selecting agenda, always keeping the money first. Detroit Police Contract (hope to draw it early!), Corporate Retreat (gold in sealed deck play), Political Coup. I'll play with Executive Extraction, even though there aren't many Gray Ops agenda around. Project Babylon is a sealed deck must. Priority Requisition isn't so wonderful with so much weak ice, but the other available agenda – Corporate Boon, Private Cybernet Police, Polymer Breakthrough – are too difficult to achieve. And that, dear readers, is the only reason Tycho Extension is included, because the others are overly difficult. I do not recommend playing with Tycho Ex-

tension is sealed deck play – there is nothing worse than losing four agenda points to an early RD run which you can't stop due to the draw. Finally, I preferred On-Call Solo Team to Main-Office Relocation, even though Main-Office's difficulty can be reduced, because this deck will attempt to bag the runner.

I include 14 or 15 ice in a 45-card deck. In sealed play, I like to keep five code gates, five walls, and four or five sentries. This crappy assortment only gave us three code gates and four walls. The sentries give us options, though. I take Zombie, Homewrecker and Data Naga because they're the biggest we have. I like Bolter Cluster and Neural Blade very much for their "can't break next ice" subroutines. Hunter and Fetch 4.0.1 might serve the winning tags, who knows? There isn't much inexpensive "end the run" ice here – I don't like this deck at all.

How bad is this deck? I keep all of the nodes, operations and upgrades. In 59 cards, we got 22 nodes, operations, and upgrades, so few that there's nothing to think about. So, after selecting eight agenda, 14 ice, and keeping 22 nodes/operations/upgrades, the only cards left to choose from are ice. I go with Ice Pick Willie because it's the least expensive "end the run", non-tracing sentry we have to choose from, and for the sentimental reason that I used to believe that Ice Pick Willie came in every booster pack.

Last week, I said, "hey, I got a great runner deck, so challenge me with a bad one." This week, I ask, I got a crappy corp deck, give me something which presents options.

What I say during a demonstration – your mileage may vary

July 6th 1997

My buddy Mark "Meteor Shower" Davis opened a can of worms when he wrote to the Wizards listserv that the NetRunner demonstration I conduct for groups is pretty good. I got much mail asking to put my demonstration patter in writing, to post it here, to share it there.

I've spent days thinking about this. Can I convey the atmosphere of one of my demonstrations in a Frisky AI installment? It's not really what I say during a demo, it's how I say it. I teach NetRunner with the attitude that I am saving souls, converting sheep into cybernetically-enhanced data thieves. The Leo in me loves to perform, too – no matter how well you know the rules, if you've got stage shyness, not even Gideon's Pawnshop will buy your act.

I tell the novices very little backstory. I welcome them to the 21st century where sinister corporations do business as usual, pursuing hostile takeovers and world domination. I ask them if they've seen BladeRunner or Johnny Mnemonic (I haven't seen either, actually), and I move to the rules.

If you have an unrealistically short time in which to explicate NetRunner, what must new players know? Both sides have to know what they can do with their actions. Corporate players should be clear on the action of advancing and scoring an agenda. Runners should understand how icebreakers work.

I spend much more time explaining the corporate side than I do the runner side. Which are the permanent, central forts. How many subsidiary forts may be created. Costs and reasons to install ice. Advancing nodes and agenda, and why they can't share a fort (Namatoki is a card best left discovered). Tagging, resource trashing and meat damage. Make a grand show of explaining meat damage. Describing brain damage always delights the audience more than net damage, though everyone like the idea of flatlining.

When the corporate newcomers begin their first game, I encourage them to install and advance an agenda as soon as possible. This gets them into the habit of winning the damn games instead of fussing over ice, and actually does the same for

the runners – the new runners will have to encounter ice early in their experience, and break it.

I try to do a fairly complete job of describing the corporate side of the game, and I have a reason for teaching the runner side relatively lightly. At the heart of the game, we're more successful runners if we mostly run, and establish income. So, when I teach the game, novice runners learn to do just that.

I tend not to cover trace limits and base linkage during the lecture. I find that if I wait for the players to start practicing, it only takes a minute for someone to ask. Then it's a homogenous process to explain the trace and link cards as they are put into play, and discuss further their interaction when a trace occurs.

During the laboratory practice, I encourage players to play good NetRunner. I explain why corporations should strive first to end runs on the central forts. It's easier to explain the runner's opening play – run until you are stopped, and after your runs are ended, look for the right icebreakers.

Good habits start early. Discourage the use of SeeYa to expose ice. Encourage runners to smack into AP ice, and praise them for bankrupting the corporation. You can't stress highly enough to a new corporate player that a scored agenda awards a special ability which should be used – advancing agenda is a good thing. They will learn in time to protect the agenda at the same speed the runners learn to steal them.

It's too easy to sit beside a player who wants assistance, and guide them through their actions without telling them why. It is vital to show a new runner how every combination of actions will eventually result in a successful run.

The use of a card like Core Command: Jettison Ice should be explained as a means to making a successful run later. Walk them through the whole adventure. First, the prep requires that ice be rezzed, so runs must be made until that happens. Then the runner has to manage his deck until he can find the right icebreakers for the HQ ice, install them, successfully run HQ, and finally play the prep, which – ta da! – makes the run on that fort easier.

The runners have to quickly learn the basic skill of calculating the number of bits necessary to make a successful run – if your students make many unsuccessful runs, it's not much fun for them.

Have fun yourself – you're doing a great thing. Applaud. Praise. Laugh.

I remember part of the fun at the Northwest NetRunner Championship was taping a card to your convention badge to identify yourself as a NetRunner player. If I ever do that again, I'm going for Tutor. See you next week.

The Wellspring of Ideas and Hope

July 13th 1997

Once in a while, columnists throw together a column made up of little ideas which don't quite merit 500 words on their own. Some of those works just suggest to me that the author came down with writer's block, and just couldn't get a good idea.

Now, I ask myself, am I blocked? I cannot be, I argue, because I follow the advice I give to my writing students, which results in never being blocked.

Could it be that the well of ideas is dry?

Think about this for a while – what's left to write about? A year ago, Chris Wagner (I miss you, man) used to discuss a different card every day on the Wizards listserv. Towards the end of the run, Chris was talking about Roving Submarine – now, come on, Roving Submarine is a very powerful card, but it's nothing to talk about. It submerges. End of story. There just weren't enough intriguing cards around for Chris to explore.

The Wizards listserv. Bah. Got an idea for a new card? Put it on the Wizards listserv, where the people who matter – Wizards employees – must ignore your post. Here's a scoop, friends. Most people ignore those posts.

The day after my first piece on sealed deck tuning, Byron Massey (I miss you, man) wrote to say that he was starting his own journalistic endeavor, and his first piece was about .... sealed deck tuning.

What was the last straw for Byron, who is said to have turned his back on the game after having been one of its indefatigable promoters? Was it the Wizards press releases which said, "hey, we just bought Legends of the Five Rings, and oh, yeah, we make Magic and Battletech, too", without a nod to NetRunner?

Wizards of the Coast, you must release another NetRunner expansion. You are losing support among your evangelists now. Chris Wagner, gone. Byron Massey, gone. I am losing my faith, Wizards of the Coast. Heaven help me, I own two Macintoshes, my Apple stock is a loser, and I play NetRunner instead of Magic.

Speaking of M-a-a-gic, I saw a boy at a chess tournament on Independence Day weekend examining Magic cards. "Hey," I said, brightly. "Would you like to play some blitz chess?". "No," he said, reading card text. "Oh. Well, would you like to learn to play the best collectable card game?". The kid looked at me, and noticed my NetRunner button. "No," he said. Stupid kid – at a chess tournament, and he refuses chess and NetRunner in order to look at Magic cards.

And speaking of chess tournaments, my chess colleagues suggest that NetRun-

ner tournaments would be well served by the use of chess clocks. I thought that was a great idea, and then I remembered that the corporation sometimes has to do a lot of thinking during the runner's turn, in the midst of a run. Chessplayers also scoff at NetRunner because we can't keep track of our games – I agree that that sucks, because I make better moves than Joe Weefle, and I want people to see them later. I think it's impossible to record a NetRunner game unless a third party noted the order of both decks before turn one – that seems like an incredible waste of someone's time, but it might provide the seed of an idea for duplicate NetRunner tournaments.

When did you last get a new deck idea? Relax, it's a rhetorical question.

My most recent idea? I'm going to construct a tag deck with nothing but Closed Accounts and Doppelganger Antibodies to see how penniless I can keep a runner. It's come to that – there are no more good decks to build, only fair decks with unusual twists. We try to kill runners with Chihuahua. We don't tag and bag, we tag and nag.

I am an artist, damn it, and Wizards of the Coast won't make any new crayons for me. Still, we must carry on. I am performing a demonstration July 19 at Gator Games in San Mateo, Calif.

I'm tired, readers. I will taking a break from writing Frisky AI for two weeks in August, to coincide with my vacation from work. I have absolutely no idea what I will write about next week. Send me an idea.

Tin Soldiers –
A look at one-cost sentries

Lessening the costs of various corporate activities will always be a winning strategy. Install seven Data Masons and rez Wall of Ice for free. Play with an agenda set of six Executive Extractions, six Genetics-Visionary Acquisitions, and six Artificial Security Directors – eventually you're scoring agenda instantly upon installation.

So, you go through your Security Purge phase, score a few Priority Requisitions, Emergency Rig this, Skalderviken that.

I've begun looking to the other end of the ice spectrum for new ideas, and this week I'll look at the three sentries from v. 1.0 which cost one bit to rez: Shock.R, Fatal Attractor, and Too Many Doors.

There's not much new to discuss about Shock.R, a card whose praises I've been singing for a long time. Throw a Shock.R on top of a Filter, and you've paid one bit in rez cost for a combination of ice which forces the runner to find two icebreakers. Then, even if the runner breaks Filter for zero, it's Shock.R which extracts the toll – Shaka pays three bits to break Shock.R, for instance.

I have one corporate deck which includes Shock.R as its only sentry, to be combined with cheap walls and code gates, but Shock.R's "stun" subroutine combines neatly with another sentry, like Banpei. Let's say one unrezzed piece of ice is outside a rezzed Banpei, and the corporation has only a few bits in his pool. That situation lulled me to sleep when I played most recently – I figured my two or three bits would break Banpei and even a Data Wall 2.0 (if that's what it was), but one corporate bit rezzed Shock.R, and to the trash goes Raffles. That's a nasty surprise.

Reflector, of course, is the card which embarrasses Shock.R, but I see it employed in too few decks. Two bits for Reflector is such a small price to pay for Bolter Cluster insurance.

Fatal Attractor is not as good a card as Shock.R. Shock.R in conjunction with an "end the run" forces the runner to find a sentry breaker in order to run successfully. Fatal Attractor doesn't even slow the runner down if he's willing to take the damage, or armed with a shield.

And why does Fatal Attractor deal net damage? All the other black ice scrambles runners' brains. Fatal Attractor would be much cooler if it dealt one or two brain damage if the runner didn't break each subroutine on the next piece of ice.

Fatal Attractor would also be improved by an increase to two in rez cost, justified by an increase in strength – I'm thinking that it would then find a home with all the other black ice in Skalderviken SA Beta Test Site decks.

Fatal Attractor's subroutine is the only one in the game which takes effect if the runner doesn't break subroutines on the next piece of ice. That suggests combining it with strong, cheap ice which doesn't even have to end the run. Canis Minor and Ball and Chain are well suited to install behind Fatal Attractor.

Fatal Attractor also works nicely with that stupid Proteus ice which can be rezzed in different ways. That is, if the runner decides not to jack out after encountering Fatal Attractor, ice like Caryatid and Sumo 2008 gives the corporation two chances to rez a subroutine that the runner can't break.

The other dopey Proteus ice – Food Fight, Gatekeeper, Sandstorm – which permit the corp to pay for as many subroutines as it wishes, is also suitable for combining with Fatal Attractor. That ice belongs in Data Fort Reclamation decks, certainly, in order to maximize the Data Fort Reclamation agenda bonus.

Speaking of dopey Proteus ice, has anyone found a use for Iceberg or Riddler?

What's the difference between Too Many Doors and the other two sentries discussed here? Too Many Doors ends the run. Shock.R needs to be installed outside another piece of ice, and Fatal Attractor only deals damage.

Too Many Doors is a fun card. A 1-cost sentry which ends the run, and forces the players to play rock-scissors-paper during the encounter. I don't think a deck could be built around its unusual character, unless one was willing to heap several Too Many Doors over an Obfuscated Fortress, perhaps. A better use of Too Many Doors is in an ambush deck, I think. Imagine the runner's mood after "winning" the mind game, passing Too Many Doors, and then hitting a Setup.

Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous
July 27th 1997

My local game store shares a parking lot with a video store, a comic book store, and a travel agency. I think that's pretty darn convenient. I dropped in on the game store before picking up airline tickets at the travel agency, to find a kid jumping to greet me. "Hey, NetRunner! I bought some cards! The game is great!" he said. I think it fitting that some people recognize me more easily as "the NetRunner teacher" than as "Frisco."

It's growing around here – I've been introducing at least one newcomer to the game per week.

The airline tickets will send me to Roanoke, Virginia Saturday morning at 9:55 a.m., one hour before the scheduled start of a sealed deck tournament at the Roanoke library. If the plane lands on time, and if I can rent a car and retrieve my luggage very quickly...

Second prize at this tournament is my own autograph on a World Domination. The thought of dropping $480 on airfare, and winning my own autograph cracks me up.

I expected to take some time off from writing Frisky AI, but I'll be off work, so I'll have time to write, and maybe the Roanoke tournament will provide some inspiration.

In the meantime, what's in the mailbag?

Fallguy@trustme.com (I'm not kidding) wrote to say that Too Many Doors is not a good card because the runner can chew up the corporate bit pool by running on the Too Many Doors fort, and hiding zero bits, causing the corp to hide one or two bits to end the run. Now, is that really such a tragedy for the corporation? Instead of the runner drawing one bit with an action, he forces the corp to spend one. I also wrote that Too Many Doors is very suitable for an ambush deck, in which the corp doesn't have to guess "right".

Compsbugs@aol.com thinks I overlooked Tinweasel as an anti-code gate weapon in "Descrambling the Code Gate Decks". Well, I didn't mention Tinweasel by name, but I did say that Clown decks have a better shot than most at defeating the tough Encoder decks, and Tinweasel is certainly an excellent choice.

CmdrTrev@aol.com thinks a "Millstone" deck – Kilroy Was Here plus RD Moles and Interfaces – would be an effective runner plan. "Millstone" must refer to a card in that M-a-a-gic sheep game, am I right? Yeah, RD plans are as old as

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dirt. RD Protocol/Microtech AI Interface is an obvious combination, and the "big dig" schemes were very popular for a while.

My favorite runner deck these days is sometimes a Kilroy deck, and sometimes a Romp through HQ deck. I include two of each kind of hardware interface, one Romp, and one Kilroy. I let luck of the draw determine the target fort, and then use Ronin Around – that fantastically great card – to find the right interface later. Well, come on, what else are you going to do with Ronin Around?

I read on the Wizards listserv recently that someone is using Black Widow and Dupre in an HQ-specific deck. I agree wholly with that – I also suggest that a deck which employs Black Widow should also include Dropp. Dropp is just a fine card for everyday "please don't kick my ass, Miss Cinderella, ma'am" use, and will ensure a big sentry is rezzed for Black Widow.

kzinti@iti2.net writes to suggest two new sysop upgrades, "Pinky" and "Brain". I will not change my opinion that we should not invent new cards, but rather focus on teaching new people to play the game, looking forward to a future when there is sufficient demand for a true expansion. However, I appreciate the thought put into the Pinky and Brain upgrades very much.

Thank you all for writing!

Debunking and De-Blinking

I leave tonight for a sealed deck tournament in Roanoke, Virginia. I feel that after I write this installment of Frisky AI, in which I bash Blink, I am certain to find Blink in my starter Saturday.

First, let me say that it's possible that I'll include Blink in a tuned starter. Blink's advantages in a sealed deck game are obvious – it's the strongest generic icebreaker, and it breaks subroutines for zero bits.

I know that Blink's charms seduce inexperienced NetRunner players immediately, and I'll wager that most players try to craft their first constructed runner decks based on Blink. Proteus made Blink even more attractive by adding Weefle Initiation ("make a run, and prevent 7 of the net damage Blink will do to you") and Enterprise, Inc., Shields ("pay to avoid net damage instead of paying to break subroutines") to the mix.

Here is the single most compelling reason that Blink is a poor cornerstone for a constructed deck: Blink decks do not improve as the game progresses.

The three phases of a NetRunner game are:

Opening – The runner has an initiative until the corporation ends runs on the central data forts.

Middlegame – The corporation can win while the runner establishes income and installs icebreakers.

Ending – The runner has installed the right breakers and will win if he runs at the right time.

A typical runner deck gets better in the late middlegame. Perhaps he has been spending tons of bits in order to break a Liche with Shaka – a typical runner deck will allow the runner to draw an AI Boon or Big Frackin' Gun. Standard runner decks include many different icebreakers for different kinds of ice. Blink decks do not adapt to the changing landscape. The fact that Blinkers must play with Clown and/or Personal Touch to cope with ice of greater than five strength is a drawback – playing with a particular card should not mandate playing with another, unless it's a weak card, like Blink.

Blink decks have a fairly standard complement of cards – Enterprise, Inc., Shields, Green Knight Surge Buffers, Dropp, Weefle Initiation. Again, the lack of flexibility makes me cringe.

Once the Blink "kit" is in place, the runners decide how they're going to win.

I once read of a "Blink Dig" plan, a major RD Mole excursion in combination with Blink. I would laugh – laugh, I say – if every Blink roll during the final "big dig" run came up three. Like I wrote in my piece on random cards ("You pays your money and you takes your chances"), you live with random cards, and you die with random cards. (I also wrote that week that Blink deserved its own 500-word treatment, and here it is.) Be a dude – make some money, and pay to break subroutines.

Some Blinkers recognize the problem, and include a Bartmoss Memorial Ice-breaker – if you do that, you're a wuss of a different color.

Standard runner decks should also have an income plan which improves as the game goes on. In a long game, the corporation should look across the table and shudder at the runner's Broker, Short-Term Contract, multiple Streetware Distri-butors, Smith's Pawnshop buying this and that. In a Blink deck, the corporation doesn't care if the runner plays Playful AI and gains a billion bits, because in most Blink decks, the bits just pay for Enterprise protection.

I don't like Enterprise, Inc., Shields, anyway. The thought of paying for damage protection bugs me – pay to install cards, pay to break subroutines, pay to make special runs, but bloody well take the damage!

That is the crux of the matter – Blink players don't like to take damage, but you are not a NetRunner player until you have taken a LOT of it.

I wrote last week that Dropp is a good card to use with Black Widow – that is, Dropp should ensure that a big sentry is rezzed as bait for Widow. I've been thinking that Forged Activation Orders might serve well in that function, too.

Someone drive me to the airport!!

Mailbag:

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that the most recent Frisky AI installment – "Debunking and De-Blinking" – resulted in the most mail to feedback@cardplace.com than any other.

For one thing, "Debunking" was up on the CardPlace site for six weeks. The piece I mailed in from Virginia was misplaced in a Mystery Box or something.

Then those of you with affection for Blink all rushed to say something in its support, like how the installation of 37 Green Knight Surge Buffers makes Blink really good. Next time one of you Blink dinks manages to install three or five Blinks, and finds that each of them fails during a game's critical run, write again, so I can laugh.

Get lives. Play with real icebreakers. Learn deck management skills, because a deck with specific icebreakers will force you to judge to Temple or Crash (when NetRunner was new, to "search" for cards or to "dig" for them was a big philosophical question). Install a Jackhammer or a Dwarf when both are in hand? – that decision may have serious consequences later.

Sometimes I wonder what kind of influence a paragraph like the last holds. Do you listen to what I have to say because I win often, or not listen at all, because I express my opinions insensitively?

For instance, one local player joked that Joan of Arc isn't played around here anymore because people fear a Frisky tonguelashing. Bartmoss? Corporate War? Sniff. Precision Bribery and Time to Collect? Not unless you want to be berated for the unimaginative munchkin you are.

So, I've been experimenting with a new runner deck lately, which includes ... three Precision Briberies.

Call me a hypocritical blowhard if you will, but in my defense, I have to say that I'm trying to use the stupid card in an original way.

Consider my candidate for cheesiest deck in history. Bartmoss/Joan, many Top Runners' Conferences, multiple Precision Briberies and Times to Collect, drawing everything with Synthetic Blood, selling what isn't needed with Organ Donor, eventually Demolition Running each subsidiary fort (blowing up the contents with Death from Above), removing tags with Total Genetic Retrofit, and recycling the Conferences with a MIT West Tier or three.

Compare that to my harmless Fait Accompli deck. Fait Accompli is one of the

weak v. 1.0 viruses, infecting subsidiary data forts by increasing the difficulty of agenda installed inside them. The drawbacks to Fait are obvious – fast advancement operations often preclude the need for a subsidary fort, and why run a subsidiary fort before anything important is installed?

The second of those concerns can be addressed by Poltergeist, Scatter Shot, On the Fast Track and Karl deVeres, which make those runs for dropping Fait counters less costly, if not profitable.

The first concern – fast advancement operations – is handled by Precision Bribery. Yeah, when you install a Bribery, the corporation will call you a snert, but if you shrug and point out that you have installed neither Time to Collect nor Junkyard BBS, you might salvage some self-respect.

Perhaps the combination of Fait counters and timely bribery will stall the advancement of agenda – Corporate Ally (pay 3 bits and an agenda point to increase agenda difficulty) is also waiting.

Another Precision Bribery plan which doesn't include blowing up subsidiary forts on the way to a Time to Collect lock involves multiple Restrictive Net Zonings – that is, Bribe the corp as soon as possible, then Restrict every fort in sight (I suppose when the time is right, the runner misc.for-sells all the Net Zonings). Perhaps the corp might find himself unable to afford to install a card, and might have to make a very painful discard – which suggests that the lame Cockroach virus might have a place in such a deck.

Ah, well. If Wizards won't give me new crayons with which to draw, I have to play with old crayons which I really hate, like Precision Bribery.

Rekindling the Flame War deck

September 21st 1997

The mail about Blink continues to trickle in. One reader suggests that Blink is the "light saber with which the Blinker uses the Force", and another says "put up or shut up" while offering a $500 challenge match.

I've been getting more mail than usual about my attitude lately, but it's just a coincidence that I've revived a Newsgroup Taunting deck recently. It's also a coincidence that it's exactly a year after the first successful Taunting deck was born.

David Liu, who won last year's Pacificon tournament (Nat Johnson won this year in a constructed/sealed biathlon), was perhaps the first player to conceive of using Edgerunner, Inc., Temps to install multiple Newsgroup Tauntings, and sharply limiting the number of the opponent's runs. Liu dropped the idea because the Taunting deck was not strong enough to defeat his Loan from Chiba/Bartmoss/Romp deck.

Joe Ganis passed the idea to me, and I embellished it with Day Shifts and New Galveston City Grids. On the eve of last year's Pacificon tournament, I was tuning the deck well into the morning, and trading for every Taunting in the hotel. I ultimately finished fourth in the Bay Area's last Wizards-sanctioned NetRunner event, and the corp deck lost only to two Loan from Chiba decks, which could afford to pay for the Newsgroup flaming.

Shortly after Pacificon, the Proteus expansion went into full distribution, and the Taunting deck faded away. Proteus offered greater bit-gaining machinery to the runner, dampening Newsgroup Taunting's effect, and the Proteus viruses made it almost impossible to play with an iceless corporate deck.

I tried adding ice to the deck, but found it too difficult to balance 10+ Tauntings, agenda, bit gainers, and Edgerunners with enough ice to keep it all safe. The best I could do towards the end of the deck's life was to combine Misleading Access Menus with Encoder, Inc., but was dismayed when viral-minded runners would pay the Taunting bits, and ignore the unrezzed payback ice. The last straw was when a runner successfully played a Pirate Broadcast, picking off all the Tauntings in order, then completing the Broadcast on the central forts. The runner financed the whole thing with Drone for a Day, primarily.

Months later, I saw Rob King playing a Taunting deck which combined Encoder, Inc., with Ball and Chain – bit for bit, the strongest ice in the game – and

finding income elsewhere. That's a plan to explore, readers.

Cheap, weak ice does not suffice to protect a Taunting corporation in these days of Proteus. Filter, Sleeper, Data Walls 1.0 and 2.0 are not enough of a deterrent, and once the runner has installed a Skeleton Passkey and a Wrecking Ball, the corporation would rather draw another Taunting then another ice card.

I spent months thinking about this problem. Sentry ice had to be the answer. Shock.R is an obvious choice, but how many does the corporation include in the deck? Where do the bits come from to install the second row of ice? I couldn't figure it out, and World Domination soon became my signature deck. (Which other deck types became extinct with Proteus, I wonder.)

The Frisky AI installment Tin Soldiers reminded me that Too Many Doors is the least expensive sentry which actually ends the run, assuming the corporation wins the guessing game. The rap on Too Many Doors (no pun intended) is that the runner can just run into it – hiding zero bits each time – and bankrupting the corp in that fashion. Against a Taunting deck, though, the runner has to pay the Taunting toll before starting each run, and if the runner doesn't move quickly in search of a sentry breaker, the Taunting flames will grow.

Another card I've included in this "new, improved" taunting deck is Fetal AI. Red Herrings is a great card to include in a Taunting deck if there's room – Fetal AI has that similar, nifty "runner must pay 2 to steal Fetal in addition to normal costs" text, and doesn't force the corp to use another card. The drawback to Fetal AI is that there is no agenda bonus – that's not such a problem in a Taunting deck.

Dr. Frisky's Guide to Home Remedies and Antibodies

September 28th 1997

Reader Peter Eng wrote to ask, "How much mileage can you get out of the antibodies from Proteus?"

Lots. The best thing Proteus gave the corporation was the agenda – ambushes and World Domination – but the antibodies and the upgrades were useful additions, too.

Peng wrote, "I was studying the Bel-Digmo Antibody, and I realized that the major problem with it is that using it in enough of an amount to make it worthwhile will delay the Corp badly."

Bel-Digmo Antibody's value is not in the one net damage it does if the runner accesses it from RD – Setup! or TRAP! are much better in that regard. Bel-Digmo's interesting ability is that it is shuffled into RD when it is rezzed. Say the runner discovers an agenda with Technician Lover, plays Promises, Promises twice, and makes a Lucidrine run for the bit burst he needs to pass all the ice. After he passes the last piece of ice, Bel-Digmo should be rezzed gleefully. Similarly, an RD Protocol wiseguy can also be surprised.

Rezzing Bel-Digmo also rearranges RD if a Planning Consultants brings bad news – kind of a Rescheduler Light.

The first idea some people get for Bel-Digmo is that it will save the corporation from being decked. That's only true until the runner gathers the bits to trash it from RD, but who knows? – maybe that will prove to be enough someday for a corp to scratch out a win.

Stereogram Antibody intrigues some players, including me, too much for their own good. Its only ability is in the single point of net damage it does when the runner accesses it from the archives. Clearly, Stereogram was meant to provide a small deterrent against runners who run the trash with Karl deVeres, and perhaps Wilson, Weeflerunner Apprentice.

Stereogram was surely not meant to create a haven for agenda. I'm trying to forget that I once thought of pitching a heap of Stereograms into the dumpster, along with some agenda, until I was ready to Off-Site Backup, and Project Consult. There are several flaws to that plan. Net damage is so easily prevented. A runner with an Militech MRAM Chip has to access nine Stereograms before he dies. How

many Off-Site Backups go into that deck?

Stereogram death is a rather hopeless plan. However, Eng's letter caused me to think, and I've implemented a Stereogram deck with a psychological twist. The corporation scores a Security Purge without Planning Consultants, and perhaps has to trash an agenda. I suspect some runners will run the trash before drawing cards.

Someone once asked the Wizards listserv how to engineer the discard of Stereograms without drawing cards uncomfortably. Install them, then overwrite them.

Doppelganger Antibody is a terrific card, the only corp card besides Closed Accounts which directly drains the runner's bit pool. It's easy to conceive of a multiple Doppelganger deck which completely disables one's opponent. Even a single Doppelganger in a corporate deck is an annoying, simple ambush which cannot be prevented with hardware, or a shield program.

While Doppelganger is an effective ambush in any corporate deck, it works especially well in a Newsgroup Taunting deck – the runner loses bits to start his turns, and then pays bits to run later. If the runner takes the time to remove Doppelganger counters, the corp can increase the Taunting pressure.

The corp pays one bit fewer to give a Pattel Antibody to the runner than the runner pays to install a Clown, which slightly favors the CEOs. Also, the runner can't remove Pattel counters – he can only overwrite his programs. That strongly favors the corp.

I have a feeling, though, that most corp players would rather hit the runner with a Doppelganger counter than a Pattel counter. Doppelganger costs less for the corp, and if the runner accesses Pattel before he has any icebreakers installed, there's no effect at all.

I include Pattel Antibody in a Black Ice Quality Assurance deck, because strong brain-wiping ice might be unassailable after a low-cost breaker like Shaka or Loony Goon becomes stricken with the antibody. Conversely, I wouldn't put Pattel in a wall deck, because an infected Pile Driver is not much worse (Pile Driver can be installed reasonably in an Imp or Afreet for the same reason).

Unsubstantiated rumors, recycled ideas, and relentless negativity

October 1st 1997

With five weeks to go before the start of basketball season, trade rumors fly in hoops discussion newsgroups. Gotta love a good rumor, especially when it has Michael Jordan going to your favorite team for a bag of laundry.

The other good rumor I heard last week is that Wizards of the Coast will give us the card text to Silent Impact, and let us playtest the expansion.

Now, unlike the Jordan-for-laundry deal, the NetRunner rumor is good for everyone involved. NetRunner players get to explore new ground, and Wizards gets skilled playtesters who will work for free.

I could write that I'm happy with this development – albeit rumored – but that wouldn't be relentlessly negative, as I am described on the Wizards listserv Sept. 24.

Let's see... what can I be relentlessly negative about this week?

I've been recycling old ideas for lack of a new one. A year ago, I was toying with a Dog Pile-themed deck, combining Dog Pile with many Canis Minors and Ice Transmutation, and calling the assortment "Ice Transmuttation." The 5-cost Dog Pile isn't strong enough to carry a corporation, though, and the idea was scrapped. Recently, I combined that insufficient idea with another, by including as many Chester Mixes and Fortress Architects as I owned, and installing Rio de Janeiro City Grid behind a nine-deep Dog Pile.

It's simply a bad deck, one which deserves to be discussed with relentless negativity. The deck is so heavy with ice and upgrades that there isn't room to make money, or score agenda. And, at the heart of it, Rio de Janeiro City Grid is not a good card when one applies the Law of Independent Trials, which says in layman's terms, "the dice have no memory." That is, even if you throw 15 Canis Minors and Tutors in front of a Dog Pile, and roll for Rio de Janeiro after each one of them, each piece of ice results in just one more 16 percent chance.

I've also been contemplating the most obvious kind of Fetal AI deck, one which protects the agenda with many Red Herrings, and just making Fetal too expensive to steal. Many runners will account for Red Herrings when calculating bits needed to make a run on a subsidiary fort, but it's easy to forget the two Fetal bits.

Other cards which fit into that simple Fetal deck are Dieter Esslin and Bizarre

Encryption Scheme. Dieter adds another smack of net damage, and Bizarre combines well with any ambush agenda, preserving the agenda while maintaining the effect of the ambush. Doug Caspian-Kaufman and I have been discussing his plans for Obfuscated Fortress, and Red Herrings is a terrific card in an Obfuscated fort – it follows that Obfuscated makes sense in the Fetal scheme, too.

I've never been wholly convinced that the pay-for-subroutine ice (e.g., Riddler) and the morphing ice (like Sumo 2008) is right to include in an Obfuscated plan. I did get the odd notion that Too Many Doors plus Obfuscated Fortress would be amusing – say the four-cost, zero-to-trash Obfuscated were protected by just a single, piddly one-cost, no-real-end-the-run Too Many Doors. The runner declares the number of bits he can pay during the run – he'll have to name two in order to give the corporation three chances to misguess. Too Many Doors is presumed weak because the runner can always guess "zero", but with Obfuscated behind it, are the tables not turned? Just a thought.

Grid Luck

I was telling a local Magic sheep about Gridlock, this weekend's worldwide Netrunner event. "A dozen or more sites all over the globe!", I said. "Bringing the world's Netrunner players together as one!".

"How many players is that?", he said. "Six?".

I had to laugh. Maybe you had to be there, but I felt his timing and understatement were funny.

Wherever you are this weekend, I hope you attend the nearest Gridlock location. Bring some new players in by announcing that you'll conduct demonstrations there, or else the whole grand gathering will just be preaching to the choir.

Next time, I hope decks are duplicated at each site, which will give a real sense of unity, and give players a method to compare themselves to players whom they don't face across the table.

And that's all I have to talk about this week. I guess I'm lucky Gridlock was scheduled now, or I wouldn't have had any copy to file at all.

Frisky AI is close to becoming an irregular feature, appearing only when an idea surfaces. There are a few interesting pieces of mail in the in box – Dave Williams wants to know what an expert thinks about during the play of his turn, and Justin Dennis won't let the Blink thing go – but neither of those causes 500 words to fly from my fingertips yet.

I will leave you this week with this thought: If an Netrunner expansion were printed, but Wizards of the Coast had no money left for distribution or marketing, how many cards do you think you could move?

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The Dark Side

Out of boredom and a dearth of ideas, I tried to construct the kind of deck against which I have cried out for two years. After striving for so long to build good decks from bad cards, I finally decided to build a great deck from good cards, win a zillion games with it, and then say, "I told you so. Decks like these should not be allowed."

I began with two card combinations which are very powerful: Artificial Security Directors plus Corporate War, and Encoder, Inc., plus Ball and Chain.

I have been relentlessly negative about Corporate War since day one. It is one of two agenda with one-to-one difficulty-to-agenda-point ratios, and the difficulty can be reduced, not to mention the occasional 12-bit bonus!

When you combine Corporate War with Artificial Security Directors, the "have 12 bits or lose all your bits" clause on Corporate War doesn't mean squat. After you've scored one ASD, you can be entirely broke, but draw two bits from the bank, and you're read to score the next Corp War out of hand. Score two Security Directors, and you need neither a bit nor a Corp War in hand before your turn begins in order to score one on your next turn!

An agenda set of Corporate Wars lends itself to two kinds of deck types. If the corporation plans to score Corp War and gain the 12-bit bonus, he will be able to afford big honking ice, and perhaps even pay to kill a Full Body Converted runner. If the corp includes Artificial Security Directors, he can play for pure speed – losing all his bits to the first Corporate War doesn't slow the corp down much.

The drawback to going for the speedy Corporate War win – or any speed win – is that if the cheap ice doesn't keep the runner out long enough for the speed to score seven agenda, the runner can usually proceed to an endgame where he is in control – making huge digs, or laying gobs of virus counters.

Since weak ice is sometimes the Achilles Heel of a speed deck, it seemed to me that Encoder, Inc. plus Ball and Chain might solve that problem. Two Encoders plus one Ball and Chain give the corporation a five-strength code gate with three subroutines, for zero rez cost. That is serious stuff. Encoder plus Misleading Access Menus gives the corporation a piece of ice with more strength than a Sleeper and awards the corp three bits. (Please see Descrambling the Code Gate Decks in the archives for detail.)

It's true that these combinations require a lot of cards to be drawn and installed,

so I called the nice folks at Edgerunner, Inc., Temps, and performed a few Annual Reviews.

Even though Dr. Frisky is now summoning the evil and cheesy forces of nature, there was one imaginative card combination to come out of this.

When Proteus came out, my first reaction to the agenda-difficulty-reducing upgrades – Networked Center, Weapons Depot, Research Bunker – was "these suck". The trash cost of three is very, very low for a region which screams "run me! run me now!", and the upgrades only affect one type of agenda. Washington, D.C., City Grid also screams "run me!", but its trash cost makes runners blanch, and it works with every agenda. A much better card.

Consider this card combination, though. If the corporation uses Edgerunner to install Networked Center plus a three-difficult Gray Ops agenda, he may then take two more actions to advance the agenda to completion. The cost in bits is seven – one for Edgerunner, four for Networked, two for advancement counters. That is only one more than installing the agenda, advancing it, and playing Systematic Layoffs. The cost in cards is one more than agenda-plus-Systematic, but you get to keep the region until the runner knocks it down.

You should all be pleased to know that the deck served to remind me that the game balance built into Netrunner prevails. Any corporate deck will lose after a bad initial draw.

This experiment with Corporate War is over. I'm glad I did it, because its development gave me the idea for Edgerunner/Weapons Depot/Corp War, an idea I will explore further in a Gray Ops plan.

1. Dig hole. 2. Cover with blanket. 3. Place bird seed here. 4. Wait for roadrunner. 5. Eat.

November 3rd 1997

I realized during one of my "what the hell am I supposed to do to keep Netrunner interesting?" conversations with myself that I don't do a good job selling an advanceable ambush node.

I contemplated my assortment of constructed corporate decks, and find that I prefer to include static ambush nodes – lots of Doppelganger Antibodies, Traps! here, Setups! there. I suspect that much earlier in my Netrunner experience, I decided that an advanceable ambush that was either detected or unsold to the runner was a waste of actions and advancement counters.

While that's true, it's also true that talking the runner into a giant death trap is a major rush. The question is, how?

Timing is everything. If the corporation installs and advances an ambush before the runner can successfully access the fort, the jig is up when the corporation doesn't "score the agenda". For the purposes of this discussion, we'll forget the "poison pill" decks which include many ambushes plus Falsified Transactions Expert to move advancement counters around. Those decks don't employ psychology – they really don't care if the runner runs ambushes or not.

On the other hand, an ambush installed when the runner is fully prepared to pounce on anything can't be advanced to serious smack levels. Basic Netrunner strategy in those cases calls for the corporation to install a small agenda (or "run me" card – Roving Submarine is the classic "run me" card) as bait, and let the runner steal that. Hopefully, it will drain the runner of his bits, and then while he is refueling for another go, the trap is installed and advanced.

Similarly, it's a good play for the corporation to wait for the runner to play Hunt Club BBS before laying a trap, again letting the runner burn his powder before countering. Of course, many play with Hunt Clubs, or Mouse. (I consider it beyond the scope of this discussion to mention the old Namatoki/ambush chestnut, but perhaps you don't, and it is, I guess, the only way to make an ambush a good card when the runner has Mouse or SeeYa in play.)

The corporation has to watch the runner's actions, especially his discards. If the runner discards a code gate breaker, he's holding one. That will make it easier to judge whether the runner will be able to take the bait.

Good runners conceal their programs. Bad runners install their programs as they get them, and gather cash until they run. These are easier opponents to kill with ambushes. Along that line of thought, you'll find that better runners make use of Valu-Pak Software Bundle, sometimes installing all of their icebreakers in an instant, and then embarking on a fort, not to mention that Valu-Pak saves actions, the game's most limited commodity.

The best advertising a corporation can do for an ambush node is to lose an agenda which can be advanced many times, like the Project agenda, Subsidiary Branch, or World Domination. If the runner steals a Project Zurich early on, it won't surprise him to see an card advanced seven or eight times later. Conversely, if the corporate agenda looks like it's made up of Corporate Downsizing and Hostile Takeover, a Soulkiller advanced to death levels will smell like trouble.

One of the peculiar aspects of my World Domination deck is that it deals more damage than my Schlaghund deck. The runner knows that the agenda must be advanced 12 times, but it's always the winning agenda, so he is more tempted to rush into a "World Domination" fort than any other. The thought of a big Silver Lining Recovery will also move runners into running the Virus Test Site before digging for detection. Once the runner steals a Project Babylon from the corporation, the corporation is ready to play similar mind games.

I began this piece by saying that I don't sell ambushes well, but I just said that my World Domination deck kills runners regularly. The fact is that the Virus Test Site sells itself – if I draw an agenda or an ambush, I install it, advance it, ice it. From the runner's perspective, it looks exactly the same. (For just that reason, I have scored World Domination behind nothing but Shock.R because the runner didn't trust the look on my face.)

Another important sales tactic for the corporation is to ice the ambush with big ice. If the runner has seen a Sleeper and a Crystal Wall on the subsidiary fort already, and then approaches an unrevealed piece of ice which protects an advanced card which turns out to be Chihuahua, the runner will jack out certainly. A Mastiff, though, will encourage the runner to proceed – furthermore, the Mastiff will serve the corporation better later, when he needs the fort to stand up.

Of course, the previous paragraph can be played entirely backwards in the bluffing game which makes Netrunner great. Wouldn't it be cool if the runner jacked out after breaking the Chihuahua, and then the corporation scored his agenda with a laugh? Then again, there are a lot of poor runner players who don't think about the ice they encounter – they break it, they continue. These poor runners are to a good corporation as poor poker players are to a good poker player – they're sometimes a pain in the ass because they can't be bluffed.

Romper Room

The recent mailing list discussion over whether Crumble and Romp (and their RD counterparts, Garbage and Kilroy) trash upgrades installed on HQ went unresolved, though it did serve to remind me that Crumble and Romp through HQ are both exceptionally powerful cards.

Crumble and Romp both permit the runner to trash normally-untrashable cards which are accessed from HQ. The most serious damage done to the corporation occurs when the runner trashes operations – no tag-and-bag combination will succeed if the runner romps the Chance Observation or the Scorched Earth. A fast advancement deck is worthless when the Project Consultants hit the trash.

Whatever the corporation's plan, the trashing of a key operation will ruin it. Someone asked on the mailing list why Romp through HQ costs two to play, while the RD "romp", Kilroy was Here, costs zero. I suggest that it's because Romp is a more damaging card to the corporation – the corporation manages his hand, installations, and discards carefully, and a Romp or Crumble run wrecks his planning. A successful Kilroy run, on the other hand, just prevents the cards from reaching headquarters, roughly the same effect as putting the cards on the bottom of RD.

The other huge factor in a Crumbler or Romper's favor is that he guarantees that he won't access the same cards from HQ repeatedly. When the runner trashes a typically untrashable card, his chances for accessing an agenda next time are improved.

Cards "which normally can't be trashed" also include nodes and upgrades that the runner can't afford to trash "normally". That is, if the runner makes a Romp or Crumble run, and has X bits in his pool when he accesses a node or upgrade with a trash cost greater than X, the card is still trashed. This suggests that On the Fast Track is an outstanding complement – instead of paying four bits to trash BBS Whispering and then gaining eight with Fast Track, pay zero to Crumble, and then gain eight!

I am most reluctant to include Proteus cards in a sealed deck event, citing Crumble plus Shredder Uplink Protocol as a combination too good for sealed deck play, and the worthlessness of bad publicity. If you entered a "starter plus Proteus pack" event, and your Proteus runner cards were Subliminal Corruption and Senatorial Field Trip, while the other players got Rush Hour, how would you feel?

With a view to the above, a case can be made for Crumble as the most powerful

runner card in the game. When the strength of the Proteus viruses became apparent, I wrote in Quarantine that Crumble and Garbage In would mean the disappearance of Romp through HQ and Kilroy was Here from constructed deck play.

I've been right about that, but I've been successful with a Romp deck lately, and it pleases me to play with an unfashionable deck. Proteus virus decks are very common these days, and very good at crippling the corporation. Therefore, they all share certain characteristics. Laying virus counters is as important as finding icebreakers and establishing income, so you see a lot of Inside Jobs and Social Engineerings. HQ decks all contain a Shredder. Code Viral Cache, a joke in pre-Proteus play, is in play. Demolition Run and Remote Detonator are also found in Proteus virus decks – it's a simple recipe; destroy all the ice, then drop many virus counters.

This Romp deck I've been playing is a throwback, the kind of deck we saw a lot before Proteus. It has no frills – the income is slow (Streetware Distributor, Smith's Pawnshop), fast (Score!, a Playful AI for laughs, On the Fast Track), and in between (Short-Term Contract). Two of each type of icebreaker, three HQ Interfaces, a Junkyard and two Gideons to recycle the Romp.

I'm sure you've noticed the trend in icebreaker choice among "single-minded" decks. Virus decks, for instance, target one fort and pack icebreakers appropriately. The code gate breaker Dupre is sometimes big and strong if installed early and works long and hard at hammering the same central fort. Black Widow often chooses the first sentry the corp rezzes on the quarantined fort as its "mate". The card we should see more often in single-minded decks is Morphing Tool, which is slightly better than Black Dahlia for breaking sentries, and offers early code gate and wall flexibility.

The Experiment

Most of my constructed runner decks look the same. Two of each kind of icebreaker and maybe a Reflector, one Broker, assorted cash resources, some card drawing, some tag stuff, plus whatever cards make up the deck's theme. Not many viruses around – there's a Deep Thought in one, and a Fait Accompli in another.

The characteristic that those decks share is that they're all pretty slow, and they rely on my being able to disrupt the corporation in the middle game.

I've been looking for ways to increase the speed of my current darling Romp deck, without relying on Mystery Box (Mystery Box decks are blazing fast – I recommend dabbling with Mystery Box), Synthetic Blood and Organ Donor, Loan from Chiba, or Lucidrine Booster Drug.

Any deck will run more efficiently if it only needs the original 4 MU of programs. I threw away its MU hardware, and started tinkering with its icebreakers. I like the common "one big icebreaker and one small icebreaker" approach. Code gate breakers are all kinda the same – there isn't much difference in the entire range of cards from Skeleton Passkeys up to Tinweasel. Codecracker is too small these days, considering that smart corp players aren't playing with code gates weaker than Quandary, against which Passkeys has to pay full freight. Raffles, for its seven-bit installation cost, is less than convincing when it's paying three bits to break Ball and Chain (I think Raffles is a fine candidate for Personal Touching). Shrugging, I selected Passkeys and Codecracker, just for variety.

Wall breakers don't lend themselves well to the "one big, one small" game. Is Pile Driver a big icebreaker, or a small icebreaker? I kept Hammer and Ramming Piston because they were already in the deck.

Sentry breakers is where the "one big, one small" criteria falls apart. Wild Card and Raptor are too small for long-term use, and in many cases, for short-term use. Most players choose Loony Goon or Shaka as their "small" sentry breaker, but we're all well aware of their flaws – Loony is zero strength, and Shaka costs two bits to pump, and both of them look bad in the long haul if they have to break a lot of ice. They cost four to install, which isn't chump change, making it more painful to overwrite it later with a bigger breaker. Also, the bigger sentry breakers are not always bargains. Banpei laughs at Black Dahlia just as much as Data Naga does. AI Boon is damn expensive. Snowball? Ha!

Codeslinger has always been one of my favorite overlooked cards. It's three

strength, so it handles popular inexpensive three-strength sentries like Shock.R and Fetch for one bit. The trouble, of course, is that it's not pumpable. When you compare Codeslinger to Redecorator, it's obvious why Redecorator has so many fans. Same strength, but pumpable, for just two more installation bits – Redecorator costs a whopping three bits to pump, so the card is handled like Codeslinger in that it's a great partner for Clowns and Personal Touches.

Even though Redecorator wins that argument, I still chose Codeslinger just to save two bits in installation cost. To handle the many sentries with four strength or higher, I included Flak. You might say that this is dopey – installing two programs for 11 bits instead of, say, 12 bits and one action for Boon, and there is some sentry ice which can't be broken by this combination of breakers!

I thought about that for a long time, and went ahead to play with Codeslinger and Flak. The idea is that if the runner can get the right one installed first, he can be making runs while money is gained and the other card is found. I felt the chance to make a Romp run or two would balance the time invested in having to find and install two sentry breakers.

It's a good idea, probably, to include a Dropp here, and use Dropp to "drop" the big AP ice before the Flak comes out and the "trash a program" sentries before Codeslinger is available. I've been playing with Force Shield, though – I wrote in "Romper Room" that one reason Romp through HQ (and Crumble) is such a good card is that it thins out headquarters by force, and makes it more likely that an agenda will be pulled later. The other side of that coin is that it's more likely that a static net damage ambush will be accessed, too!

The question is, which ice is going to cause this scheme to fall apart? Most of the sentries which are four strength or greater but not AP ice are tracing. For that reason, I considered including a huge base link, but just for a second. I mean, if I opted for Codeslinger rather than Redecorator just to save two bits, I should certainly think twice about Access through Alpha. I decided on Runner Sensei – maybe I'll go back to Access to Arasaka, if fewer Data Ravens and Fangs show up than I expect.

The bigger sentries which aren't tracing or AP doom this plan. There aren't many, though. Colonel Failure, Data Naga and Sentinels Prime cost a lot to rez, and so do Lesser Arcana and Sumo 2008, if anyone plays with 'em. Vacuum Link and Virizz don't end the run. The card which really worries me is Minotaur, and there are a lot of those out there. Keep in mind that the underlying plan is Romp through HQ, though, and it's certainly possible that the dangerous ice won't be installed until the corp can rez it, and it might get trashed.

Perhaps later, if I want to continue experimenting with an icebreaker suite which can't break every sentry, I'll add, say, a Social Engineering and a Core Command to use in combination. That drastic measure hasn't been needed yet, and I'm sure when I run into the impossible ice on HQ, I'll just grin and bear it, turn my attention to other forts, and sell the HQ Interfaces to Smith's Pawnshop.

Thinking outside the Mystery Box

March 1st 1998

It was immediately apparent how some Proteus cards altered the use of cards from the original set. Disinfectant, Inc., and Code Viral Cache were suddenly fine cards, because the Proteus viruses are so ridiculously powerful. Schlaghund was Manhunt's best friend. Red Herrings and Fetal AI were instantly combined. Sentry breakers like Forward's Legacy and Redecorator are much better suited for Clown decks than the earlier sentry breakers.

It took a little time to understand some of the other relationships between Proteus and version 1.0. Department of Truth Enhancement (and to a lesser extent, Corporate Negotiating Center) became more popular cash nodes since many runners were On the Fast Track. After two years of Proteus play, it dawned on me that Mystery Box benefited nicely from the Proteus expansion (sudden thought – in my writing I can use "only" as a synonym for "Proteus", as in "only expansion").

Before Proteus, you used Mystery Box to cheaply install AI Boon, Raffles, Dwarf, and Cloaks. The only drawbacks to the plan occurred infrequently. Sometimes all three AI Boons would lie at the bottom (by the way, remember that Boon is zero strength during a Box run, and that installing more than one Boon means rolling more than one die), or, even more ironic, is drawing all three to start the game, and having to pay real money to install them.

Proteus improved Mystery Box decks by giving them blazing speed in the form of Morphing Tool (forget Fubar – you can't pay for Fubar with Cloak bits). Morphing Tool's chameleon quality meant that Crash Everett could always leave the "right" icebreaker on top of the deck, and runners were able to break ice sooner in the contest.

In fact, the faster Mystery Box decks are so good that corporate players in my neighborhood are asking runners not to play with them, but I'd rather construct a corporate deck which is loaded with Experimental AIs. Experimental AI might be the corp's best defense against runner decks which install huge programs for free (and not so bad against typical green-backed decks), because you might find that Mystery Box decks don't always include a regular income source, therefore hard-pressed to re-install trashed programs, and don't have much deck recycling, either.

My Experimental AI assortment is an odd deck. Because Experimental AI takes up so much room, there's no space left for cash nodes, and agenda has to provide the income. Morphing ice is included for the unlikely chance that a conveniently-morphed Caryatid will keep the runner away while the ambush is advanced. It is not a Falsified Transactions Expert scheme, so an ambush which is detected by card or by instinct will be overwritten, as often as twice per game.

I have a dream for the Twenty-Four Hour Surveillance in the deck. I want to compel the runner with three Morphing Tools and three Cloaks to run a fort with nothing but his stealth bits, and then I want to rez Twenty-Four Hour Surveillance only when the runner encounters Ice Pick Willie. (Keep this tactic in mind when playing with Antiquated Interface Routines, too – if Antiquated will stop the runner at the third piece of ice, keep it a secret until he's paid for the first two encounters.)

Count Zero

My recent piece on Mystery Box brought on a bit of mail about Joan of Arc, because Joan of Arc interacts well with Mystery Box and nullifies Experimental AI, two cards which were discussed in the essay. All of your comments about Joan of Arc are surely correct – I just didn't give the card any thought when I sat down to write because Joan of Arc, my pre-Proteus candidate for worst card in the game, doesn't exist in my playgroup. If I later neglect other weasel cards like Death from Above and Time to Collect, you have my excuse in advance. Onward.

More than a year ago, the best Proteus decks were discovered and then worn out. It also became clear that there wouldn't be another Netrunner expansion. So, designers turned their attention to "fun" decks, those with unusual themes or card combinations, and which wouldn't stand up well against a "good" deck, but would provide a few laughs. Chihuahua Death Traps were typical "fun" decks – that is, once the runner could cope with Chihuahua, the game was probably over, but in the rare instances where the little bug-eyed creep flatlined the sucker, it was news. Everyone had a scheme for charging the Chihuahua to death levels, too – Hacker Trackers, Vacuum Links, Jack Attack here, Lisa Blight there.

Anyway, the latest wrinkle in my neighborhood is the zero-cost runner deck, wherein every card must cost of zero to install or play. That condition severely limits one's choice of cards, of course, so the challenge is to make an efficient assortment.

Your cohorts should agree on whether or not hidden cash resources are allowable. Liberated Savings Account might have "0" printed in the corner, but it's not a zero-cost card, truly. Another odd little question is if the Valu-Pak Software Bundle bit permits the inclusion of one-cost programs. I think not, because the runner's task suddenly becomes much easier – he can then play with Jackhammer, Dupre, and Raptor, far better than Grubb, Krash (the only zero-cost "code gate breaker"), and Wild Card. Hell, throw in Armageddon, and it gets dangerous.

Income sources Top Runners' Conference, Loan from Chiba, misc.for-sale, Databroker, Livewire's Contacts, On the Fast Track. Prearranged Drop makes sense if your playmates agree that Ice and Data Special Report may be played for zero – it's supposed to be printed as such. Lucidrine Booster Drug and Organ Donor suffer in these conditions because there aren't any zero-cost trash recycling cards besides Forgotten Backup Chip.

There aren't many plans at the runner's disposal, but they are good ones. Ice destruction is a winning scheme, and WORM Chip and Core Command both fit the zero bill (though I guess one could argue that Core Command doesn't really cost zero), and so does Startup Immolator. A Kilroy Was Here/RD Mole attack is possible, and so is a Weather-to-Finance/Credit Subversion annoyance.

I opted for the obvious Top Runners Conferencing plus misc.for-sale of an Imp tree (leaving Imps behind to hold RD Protocol and AI Interface). The problem with packing all those TRCs, Imps, Jack 'n' Joes, and ValuPaks is that there's no room for safety items like Fall Guy, Full Body Conversion, or even Enterprise, Inc., Shields. I mean, I'd just have to resign if the Protocol runs revealed too many Fetal AIs.

There's not much scope in the architecture of zero-cost runner decks, naturally – you will grow bored very soon. Then you can get started on your zero-cost corp deck.

alt.lockjaw.ideas.bottom-of-the-barrel

before July 11 th 1997

I wrote some large number of words to rec.games.trading-cards.misc last week, after writing months ago to the newsgroup that there isn't any Netrunner discussion there because the Netrunner-L mailing list gets all the traffic. There are actually four Netrunner-related threads going on in that newsgroup right now, not counting the announcement for the Manafest Netrunner tournament on June 13. I'm quite happy to see the newsgroup debate the game, even if the main thread is about why Netrunner "didn't sell". You'd think Netrunner weren't dead or something.

Neal Byron is conducting a deck design contest, he writes, with a $20 cash prize. Now this is a great thing, the likes of which we haven't seen, I think, since InQuest magazine conducted a card combination contest three years ago. It's kinda sad that the entries to both contests will be the same, but never mind that. Invent something to win that Andrew Jackson.

I actually have two deck construction things to talk about. A month ago I decided to finally play with one of my Evil Twins (maybe you haven't heard this story – a signed Evil Twin was the prize at a sealed deck event in January, and my starter included an Evil Twin, so I ended the day with two Evil Twins, but that's not as weird as the tournament at which I finished with three Diplomatic Immunities...). I thought any assortment with Evil Twin should also include all the other cards with which I've never dabbled, so there was a Drone for a Day in there, and a Drifter Mobile Environment, and a Danshi's Second ID, maybe some other weird cards which start with "D".

I'm playing this piece of crap against a corporate starter deck, and the damn corporation fishes his Namatoki Plaza from the archives with an Off-Site Backups, and tosses it on top of the Vacant Soulkiller which he'd advanced five times (for the record, I thought it was a Vapor Ops). He starts cackling while I begin asking myself if one of the "cards with which I never play" includes Skullcap. While he's advancing an agenda in the Plaza, I'm Jacking and Joeing and Everetting, and the 44th card in the runner deck was indeed Skullcap, so the story has a happy ending.

I love Lockjaw, always have. As a one-shot deal, you trash the red dog for value equal to six bits in the case of Wild Card, or more likely, four for Wrecking Worm or Shaka. So, that's in tune with the rest of the game – instead of gaining

four bits for Score!, you don't spend four bits on Wizard's Book. Pretty much any runner deck which employs low-strength icebreakers would benefit from a Lockjaw charge during the course of a game.

It's more likely, though, that players will choose to look at Lockjaw as "two Clowns", and aim to reuse the programs. Then there are handling charges, because you have to draw and install lots of programs – a typical idea is to Bodyweight and ValuPak a Lockjaw/Imp tree, Tech Lover or Mouse something big, then make Promises to the Preying Mantis until you win. The manner in which you recycle the Lockjaws is a matter of preference – sending them all to the Backup Drive is slow because you can only retrieve them one at a time, but the other main option is Joan of Arc, and long-time readers know how I feel about that (the single-use Lockjawers should prefer Forgotten Backup Chip).

There is another way to reuse Lockjaw, but it's pretty weak. If you choose to save Lockjaw with Umbrella Policy, you have a few things working against you. One, it's much slower to install single Policies than it is to ValuPak an Imp tree. However, this is offset a bit by the fact that you don't rely so much on drawing the right balance of Imps/Lockjaws/Joans/ValuPaks, and so on. Two, you don't truly know how many Umbrella Policies you need, and what's worse is that there's a real danger of running out of them, as opposed to "trash Joan, pay a bit to bring her back to my hand, install Joan, trash Joan, pay a bit...". It seems that you must pack a MIT West Tier.

You know where I'm heading with this, of course. After 18 months of playing with Lockjaws in an Imp tree, I felled the tree in order to start dealing the bad scheme. And, yeah, it's pretty poor, far clunkier than the ValuPak operation. Here's the twist, such as it is: since it takes several turns to build a Lockjaw pyramid, plus more than a turn to recycle a Backup Drive full of Lockjaws, runners looked for ways to maximize their scoring opportunities when they had them. That is, build the tree, detect the agenda, make gobs of Promises, then go. The Promising takes lots of actions, too (which is why Preying Mantis works in such decks). So, I chose to include the prep which contains an untold number of runs in it, Pirate Broadcast. That is, instead of detecting an agenda, and improving on the number of agenda points gained from it, I'm detecting, then increasing the number of runs made because of it.

After exactly two trials, the idea of running a Pirate Broadcast after Technician Loving or Mousing an agenda seems pretty good. In one instance, the Broadcast resulted in five agenda points – the two-point detected agenda in the subsidiary fort, the one-in-five pull from Headquarters garnered two more, and the point for completing the Broadcast. Also, there's some synergy there in that the rap on Pirate Broadcast has always been that there's rarely an assurance that all the runs will succeed, but that's what multiple Lockjaws are all about, yada yada...

My plan has been to conduct this Manafest tournament next week – come play! come play! June 13, South San Francisco Conference Center – and then retire from Netrunner until – nyuk, nyuk – an expansion is released. To that end, I've blown the dust off a few chess books. If you've never played chess, it's pretty cool – playable

right out of the box.