

The Theory of Card Engines

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Some of you might consider this an old hat, but there are always newcomers to the game and to this list, so I don't feel guilty writing this maybe for the second or whatever time.

Sitting here and trying to design a new constructed runner deck, I ask myself the old question well-known to every constructed NR player: What card drawing engine should I use?

Apart from "exotic" cards like N.E.T.O., Livesaver Nanosurgeons etc., which are only good in a few special decks, there are always the two basic cards in mind: Bodyweight Synthetic Blood (BSB) and Jack'n'Joe (JNJ), which are used in most runner decks. For those who don't know: JNJ draws 3 cards for cost 0, whereas BSB draws 5 cards for cost 2. I just took a second look at both cards and tried to compare them.

I noticed that both cards are very well balanced to each other. Once again, Richard Garfield did the maths right. Let's take a runner deck with the minimum 45 cards as an example. With an opening hand of 5 cards and an optimal draw (always a BSB or JNJ in hand), you need to play 8 BSBs or slightly more than 13 JNJs to draw the remaining 40 cards. So JNJing takes about 5 more cards and 5 more actions, but it's free! BSBing costs 16 bits. So it's obvious that the choice of the bit engine mainly influences the choice of the card engine:

For example, if you use the popular one-shot Score at least as part of your bit engine, you need exactly 4 Scores to provide the necessary 16 bits. In that case, BSBing saves you no more than 1 card and 1 action at best, but you still take a higher risk of falling below the 5 bit limit (which slows you down, because you can't keep playing Scores for bits) or exceeding your maximum hand size! You have to gain some bits before the first BSB to avoid falling below 5 bits, but you also have difficulties with your hand size when you play a BSB in your first turn. Therefore, I'd highly recommend JNJ as a complement to a Score bit engine.

If you use a "re-usable" bit engine like Broker or Newsgroup Filter (NGF), you save about 5 card slots in your deck with BSB instead of JNJ, but you can't generate the 16 bits in 5 actions, so your deck becomes even a bit SLOWER. That means, if you have the slots, you should still use JNJ instead of BSB, since deck speed is always important. This is a somewhat surprising discovery, because many "hardcore" constructed players almost always prefer BSB over JNJ (they think they have faster card access in any case). However, trimming down the deck to 45 cards can also be a pain in the ass, and there are many cases in which you DON'T have the slots, even when using such slot-saving cards like NGF or Broker. If you then decide to use BSBs, you should include a steady bit flow in your deck like you have with NGF or Short-Term Contract. Both cards provide the 2 bits you need to BSB for 1 action, and you can never fall below a "critical limit". Nonetheless, you might get into trouble when you draw too many and too expensive cards, because you aren't able to generate lots of bits fast. A combined bit engine (with Broker, for example) seems to be the best choice here.

Let's take a look at some really powerful bit engines. Loan From Chiba (LFC) is the first one. LFC in multiples (about 10) is imo a bit abusive: simply too many bits too fast. But when bits are not the problem, BSB is often better (since faster) than JNJ. Not only because you have more bits to pay for the BSBs (in fact you are often broke at the start of your turn and have to play a LFC only to be able to BSB; a steadier bit engine would be much better), but because you can always install or play several cards in a single turn, too.

Top Runner's Conference (TRC) is probably the best bit engine for BSB (or the best in general), but, of course, TRC powered decks are not very interesting to play.

Field Reporter for Ice and Data in large numbers are powerful, and Field Rep. deck need to be very fast. The need for speed should favor BSB, but since the Field Rep. bit engine doesn't really work until you are through most of your deck, you either have to add a second bit engine (normally Score) and PRAY for a good draw or stick with JNJs once more.

Organ Donor (OD). You need about 7 ODs to set up a BSB/OD/MIT West Tier bit engine. This engine is NOT SO GOOD in generating bits as one might think at first glance. The main advantage is ultra-fast card access. Therefore I have never seen a JNJ/OD bit engine.

And finally, there are a few decks which don't need a bit engine at all. These include stealth decks or clown decks, which

use Zetatech Software Installer or The Shell Traders to install cards. A good example is Dennis Duncan's Hyperclown deck. Needless to say that all these decks only run with JNJs.

Ok, I left out some bit engines like Lucidrine Booster Drug or misc.for sale. I also left out the possibility of a mixed card engine (some BSBs, some JNJs). A mixed card engine can be very reasonable, but is always difficult to analyze. I also left out the analysis of decks with only a partial card engine (like only 7 JNJs or 5 BSBs in a 45 card deck). I just wanted to give an introduction to this element of deck construction, maybe with one or two new aspects even for experienced players.