

DISTRIBUTION, DECKBUILDING, AND DESIGN IN STAR WARS: THE CARD GAME

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Since the release of the first collectible card game (CCG) *Magic: The Gathering* in 1993, card games have played a major role in the tabletop gaming market. In these games, players amass a personal collection of cards, construct and customize decks, and play with or against other players who have done the same. Collecting, deckbuilding, playing: all are dramatically effected by the card distribution that designers utilize in their games. Building upon Carter, Gibbs and Harrop's (2012) orthogame/metagame/paragame framework, in this paper I examine the impact of card distribution on *Star Wars: The Card Game*.

The distribution of cards is central to the production and play of card games. Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler (2006) define how randomness informs both playing and collecting in these games:

CCGs take advantage of the fact that the card decks are shuffled, thus limiting a players' ability to bring cards into play in a specific order. [...] The 'collectible' aspect of the genre refers to the fact that not all cards are equally common. Players typically buy randomly assorted packs of cards and then assemble a deck of cards to play. Packs each have a mix of mostly common, a few uncommon and one rare card. [...] The more cards a player buys, the greater the

In this paper, I examine *Star Wars: The Card Game*, designed by Eric M. Lang and published by Fantasy Flight Games, to look beyond this collectible model of card game design. As one of Fantasy Flight's Living Card Games (LCGs), *Star Wars* utilizes a non-random distribution model, which directly impacts multiple facets of its design and play. In the following section, I apply Carter et al's orthogame/metagame/paragame terminology to the complex constellation of activities that comprise the card gaming hobby, focusing particular on the collection process. After this, I turn to the example of *Star Wars: The Card Game* and how its deckbuilding rules and gameplay reflect design spaces that become accessible when card games move beyond collectability.

DISTRIBUTION MODELS AND COLLECTING IN CARD GAMING:

Card gaming—like all gaming practice—involves a huge range of interconnected activities. Consumption habits are vital to active participation in collectible card game, but factors beyond consumption are necessary to understand player practices. Williams (2006) writes, “The feelings players express about gaming, how they relate to and treat other players, the ways in which players use and share game products, and their emphasis on skills all offer counter arguments to claims that subcultural selves are reducible to consumer products” (Williams 2006, 96). Card gaming is not simply shuffling the cards and playing the game; it is engaging with rules and structures, deckbuilding possibilities, and various levels of player community, both on- and offline. And it is the extended process of card collecting itself. That card gaming involves multiple layers of gaming activity is well recognized. Owens and Helmer (1996) write, “Collectible card games are two games in one: playing the cards and collecting the cards. Both games depend on the luck of the draw, as well as your skill in playing the hand you've been dealt” (Owens and Helmer 1996, 16). Though these are both important

ludic dimensions of card games, Owens and Helmer under-count here by stating that it is *only* two games in one.

More nuanced and granular terminology, like what Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop propose in “Metagames, Paragames and Orthogames: A New Vocabulary” (2012), can better elucidate the interconnected web of gaming activities. The authors build off the broadly used term “metagame,” describing perspectives above or beyond (thus, the prefix “meta-”) the baseline experience of a game. As they explain, the discursive use of metagame by players functions as “a tool that players use to conceptualise distinctions between game and non-game activities, as well as *more*-game and *less*-game activities” (Carter et al. 2012, 11). One definition of “metagame” that Carter et al. explore is that of “higher strategy,” the use of knowledge that derives from the broader contexts of the game: “In [*Magic*], the metagame is ‘what everyone else is playing,’ the player’s consideration of the context of their game (i.e., what cards other players might be using in their deck)” (Carter et al 2012, 12). In *Magic*, gameplay is a competitive duel, abstracted through cards and facilitated through rules; the metagame is how players understand the current state of the game, what strategies they can expect to see from opponents, and what approaches to use to meet these expectations.

Carter et al. offer two additional terms: orthogame and paragame. The orthogame is the game proper, the rules and structures to which the metagame is meta (above or beyond): “orthogame can be utilized to refer to what players collectively consider to be the ‘right and correct game’” (Carter et al 2012, 14). In contrast, “paragame refers to that which is performed peripheral to, but alongside the orthogame. We argue that the ‘paragame’ is distinct from the metagame by being contingent on a player’s desires and motivations rather than the context of play” (Carter et al 2012, 14). Unlike “metagame,” neither “orthogame” nor “paragame” have been widely adopted. These terms may strike some readers as unnecessary, but I believe that the added

precision Carter et al's vocabulary provides can allow for a more robust appreciation of the range of "*more-game* and *less-game* activities" that structure and define play. These terms helps us discuss much more than just "the game," an often-ambiguous construct. There is the game within the framework of its rules, systems, and procedures (the orthogame); the game in its cultural and strategic contexts (the metagame); and the game as a venue for its players' desires and priorities (the paragame).

Collecting is a central aspect of card gaming, a driving force for a game's longevity, both as a commercial product and as a site of community formation. Within card gaming, collecting has aspects of both a metagame and a paragame. The cards a player wants may be contingent on the current state of the metagame—the cards and decks that are being played at the moment—and knowing what cards are competitively valuable allows a player to seek out specific products. But other collecting paradigms exist, dependent on player preference. Players may gravitate toward aspects of game design divorced from strategic value—a player may want every card featuring art from a specific artist, or be a completionist, wishing to own every card produced. Here, collecting transmutes from a competitive consideration into an individualistic process; though there may be *some* cards a player needs to stay competitive, there is generally little competitive benefit to owning *all* the cards of a given game.

It is important to draw a distinction between the process and mindset of collecting and the marketing paradigm of "collectability." We must remember that neither collecting nor card gaming are inextricably tied to these economic structures. Richard Garfield, creator of *Magic*, explains: "I prefer 'trading [card game]' rather than 'collectable' because I feel it emphasizes the playing aspect rather than the speculation aspect of the game. The mindset of making collectables runs against that of making games—if you succeed in the collectable department then there

is a tendency to keep new players out and to drive old ones away because of escalating prices” (Garfield 2005, 551). The blind-buy, random distribution of CCGs may be industry standard, but these are not necessary or defining traits of card gaming.

Although the collectible model remains the dominant paradigm for card game distribution, there are alternatives, such as the card games published by Fantasy Flight Games under their “Living Card Game” (LCG) brand. Fantasy Flight’s roster of LCGs currently includes six games: *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* (2011, designed by Nate French), *Android: Netrunner* (2012, designed by Richard Garfield and Lukas Litzinger), *Star Wars: The Card Game* (2012, designed by Eric M. Lang), *Game of Thrones: The Card Game Second Edition* (2014, designed by French and Lang), *Arkham Horror: The Card Game* (2016, designed by French and Matt Newman), and *Legend of the Five Rings: The Card Game* (2017, designed by Brad Andres, Erik Dahlman, and French).¹ Other companies have utilized similar distribution models: examples include Alderac Entertainment’s *Doomtown: Reloaded* (2014-2016, designed by Dave Williams and Mark Wootton), White Wizard Games’ *Epic Card Game* (2015-present, designed by Robert Dougherty and Darwin Kastle), and Plaid Hat Games’ *Ashes: Rise of the Phoenixborn* (2015-present, designed by Isaac Vega).

1. There are also four discontinued LCGs: *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* (2008-2015, designed by Nate French, Eric M. Lang, and Christian T. Petersen), *Call of Cthulhu: The Card Game* (2008-2015, designed by French and Lang), *Warhammer: Invasion* (2009-2013, designed by Lang), and *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest* (2014-2016, designed by Brad Andres, French, and Lang). Both *A Game of Thrones* and *Call of Cthulhu* were originally conventional CCGs, before Fantasy Flight launched its LCG line in 2008.



Image 2: Examples of Fantasy Flight Games' fixed-distribution Living Card Games. Copyright Fantasy Flight Games.

The key feature of these games is fixed-distribution, in contrast to the blind-buy random-distribution of the collectible model. When a player purchases an LCG product, they will receive the same set of cards as every other consumer. Overall, the consumption patterns of a player engaged in a LCG are similar to those engaged in more traditional collectible games—both are characterized by the continual, regular process of repeated acquisition of new cards—but LCGs allow players to have access to the full card pool at a much lower price-point than collectible games. Rarity as an organizing principle for card value (either economic or strategic) is at odds with LCG design. Some products, mainly the introductory Core Sets (described more below), provide only single copies of certain cards, so players may purchase multiple sets if they want a complete set, but there is none of the scarcity or luck of random-distribution. Outside

of circumstances where a product is out-of-stock or out-of-print—which happens for new games or older product lines—no card in an LCG should be any rarer than any other.

Each of Fantasy Flight’s LCGs launches with a “Core Set,” an introductory product that provides players with the baseline card pool of around 200 to 250 cards. Expansions for LCGs are split between two different types of product. Deluxe Expansions are larger sets of around 150 to 180 cards, usually themed around one or two of a card game’s factions, that are released about two per year. Additionally, each LCG maintains a monthly release schedule of smaller packs of 60 cards. The LCG model has the effect of changing the temporal experience of collecting. Like traditional collectible card games, LCGs provide a steady stream of regularly released new cards, providing a similarly evolving and shifting game environment. But the experience of these shifts is different. *Magic* generally releases three or four large expansions a year, introducing potentially hundreds of new cards at a time; with smaller numbers of cards released more frequently, Fantasy Flight’s card games allow for more incremental development and refinement of the card pool.

For the majority of Fantasy Flight’s LCGs, fixed-distribution is relevant only at the point of purchase. Once a player owns the cards for *Game of Thrones* or *Legend of the Five Rings*, building a deck and playing a game are not far removed from the familiar patterns of more conventional CCGs. *Star Wars: The Card Game*, which I examine for the remainder of this essay, offers the most unconventional approach to deckbuilding of any LCG, and the ways that *Star Wars*’ decks are constructed and games are played emerge from design decisions that rely on the game’s non-random distribution

DISTRIBUTION, DECKBUILDING, AND GAMEPLAY IN *STAR WARS: THE CARD GAME*:

In both CCGs and LCGs, deckbuilding is not a strictly necessary

component of the orthogame. Most companies produce starter decks that are playable out of the box; a prefabricated deck is unlikely to provide a player with the greatest competitive advantage, but the game can be played. Deckbuilding is an activity that lies outside the orthogame, but can represent a significant time-investment. Deckbuilding is a curatorial process: players select cards from their collection, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of each card in order to prepare for future gameplay. In the majority of card games, players are provided many options in constructing their decks—the rules dictate a deck-size, and players choose that many cards for their deck. There may be some restrictions, either rules-based—a player cannot play both Light Side and Dark Side characters in the same deck, for instance—or strategically—some cards do not synergize well, and thus would not be used together—but generally deckbuilding is a combinatorial puzzle that provides players with significant freedom.

Star Wars still provides players with deckbuilding options, but with dramatic restrictions. A player's deck has two components: the first is a 50-card deck from which the player will be drawing, containing cards that will be used throughout the game, representing *Star Wars* storyworld features like characters, ships, and locations; the second is a 10-card deck of "objectives." Objectives provide each player with their resources, and destroying an opponent's objectives puts a player closer to victory. Outside their role in *Star Wars*' win-conditions, the objectives are also central to deckbuilding. Each objective that a player chooses to include is tied to five cards that then must be included in the draw deck; in choosing 10 objectives, you also determine the 50 cards for your draw deck. The deckbuilding rules for *Star Wars* thus significantly shift both the number of decisions players make in deckbuilding and the relative importance of each of these choices: in most card games, a player effectively makes as many decisions as the size of their deck, but

in *Star Wars*, players instead only make ten decisions, with each one of those having a much greater effect on the power, synergy, and consistency of their deck.



Image 3: Light Side (left) and Dark Side (right) objective sets for *Star Wars: The Card Game*. Photo by author.

Objective sets are important beyond just their role in deckbuilding—they also have a major impact on the distribution of cards themselves. The original card pool of the game, released in the Core Set, consisted of 36 different objective sets. Cards are split between the Light Side and Dark Side of the Force, with the Core Set primarily including cards from two affiliations on each side, Jedi and Rebel Alliance, Sith and Imperial Navy. *Star Wars'* first Deluxe Expansion introduced new objective sets for the remaining two affiliations, Smugglers and Spies (i.e. Han Solo-

types) and Scum and Villainy (i.e. Boba Fett-types). Each monthly “Force Pack” contains 60 cards, or 10 objective sets, though in practice this is not 10 unique sets. Players may use two copies of most objectives, and LCG products (with a few exceptions, including the Core Set) provide players with a full playset of cards in one purchase, so a Force Pack usually introduces 5 or 6 new objective sets a month. *Star Wars*’ design would be difficult to maintain with random-distribution, but works well as a fixed-distribution product.

In the following pages, I present an example of gameplay between two players, Ben and Rey, to see the impact of distribution on multiple facets of the overall game. *Star Wars* is an asymmetrical game—every game pits a Light Side deck against a Dark Side deck, with each side having slightly different mechanics and win conditions—so players frequently compete in a best-of-two match. Ben will play Dark Side first, so he readies his Sith deck, while Rey will use her Smugglers and Spies deck.

At this point, Ben and Rey have already built their decks, reflecting both the strategic considerations and personal preferences of each player. Ben’s favorite character is Darth Vader, and his deck reflects this. Every objective set in his deck is Sith-affiliated, creating a consistent theme among the cards he is playing. Ben’s deck, then, springs from a paragonic desire to evoke and remediate the ordinary storyworld. Rey has taken a different tact: she is here to win, and her primary concern in deckbuilding has been how well her cards will synergize. Her deck’s affiliation is Smugglers and Spies, but she is only using one objective set of that affiliation, two copies of “Questionable Contacts,” which includes Han Solo. The rest of the deck is Jedi cards. Rey’s deck, from the perspective of the *Star Wars* storyworld, is somewhat incoherent—Han Solo, an avowed Force skeptic, fighting alongside Obi Wan and Yoda is a bit of a mismatch—but her deck is strategically powerful and effective.



Image 4: The “Questionable Contacts” objective set featuring Han Solo. Photo by author.

Before the game begins, each player draws four objectives from their objective deck, and selects three as their opening objectives. Beyond their organizational role in the LCG’s distribution, objectives serve several functions in the orthogame itself. First, they provide players with resources: the number to the right of the objective’s name shows how many resources each objective provides, with each player’s affiliation card also providing one resource. Resources are tied to affiliations; as the rules explain: “When a player plays a card from his hand, at least one of the resource-providing cards used to generate the required resources must match the affiliation of the card being played” (*Rules of Play*, 16). Ben is less constrained here, as his deck is entirely Sith or neutral cards, so any of his opening resources can pay for any of his cards. Rey must be more mindful of her resources, as 8 of her 10 objectives cannot pay for Smugglers

and Spies cards. This is why Rey's deck uses the Smugglers and Spies affiliation despite being majority Jedi cards: to always have at least one resource to pay for cards like Han.

Objectives are also central to the win conditions of *Star Wars: The Card Game*—attacking and destroying objectives is the key to victory for both sides of the Force, though there is some asymmetry in how this contributes to each side's victory. The Dark Side player uses a "Death Star Dial," a small cardboard representation of the Death Star, with numbers from 0 to 12. At the beginning of each of the Dark Side player's turn, the dial will go up by at least 1 (with several effects in the game accelerating this turn-by-turn increase), and destroying the Light Side player's objectives also contributes—the first destroyed objective advances the dial by 1, the second by 2, and so on. The Dark Side player wins if the dial reaches 12. For the Light Side, their win condition is simpler: if they destroy three Dark Side objectives, they win. For the Dark Side, this asymmetry means that in a long enough game, they will always win, giving the player the choice to play either aggressively or defensively; for the Light Side, they must play aggressively and proactively to strike at their opponent's objectives.

The objective set design of *Star Wars* demonstrates one of the key ways that deckbuilding impacts the orthogame: deck consistency, or how a deck performs turn-to-turn and game-to-game once randomized through shuffling and drawing. In a card game that allows for card-by-card deckbuilding, the player will aim to hone their decks in ways that limit, as much as possible, the negative impact of this randomization. *Star Wars* and its objective sets change how a player will approach this process. It is not a question of "Is this card right for my deck?" but "Is this set of six cards right?" Rey wants to use Han Solo, but in deckbuilding Rey could not just decide to include Han; she has to weigh the value of Han alongside the rest of his objective set. Including two copies of Han's objective set in her deck could

negatively affect her consistency: if she ever has both copies of “Questionable Contacts” as active objectives, she will have difficulty paying for the Jedi cards that make up the majority of her deck, but Rey has decided this risk is worth it. Deckbuilding in *Star Wars* asks players to make fewer but more impactful decisions, evaluating cards not on a one-by-one basis but in relation to their respective objective sets and how that assemblage of cards functions within their deck as a whole.

Returning to Ben and Rey’s game, let’s see how players engage in combat in *Star Wars*. Ben goes first, and in his opening turn plays two units, Dark Side Apprentice and Advisor to the Emperor. During the first turn, the Dark Side player cannot attack, so we move on to Rey’s turn, in which she also plays two characters, Han Solo and Twi’lek Loyalist. Rey may now initiate the first engagement of the game. She declares which objective she is attacking, choosing “The Emperor’s Web,” and who will be attacking, choosing Han Solo. Ben decides that his Advisor to the Emperor will defend alone, leaving Dark Side Apprentice available to defend if Rey launches a second attack with her Twi’lek Loyalist.

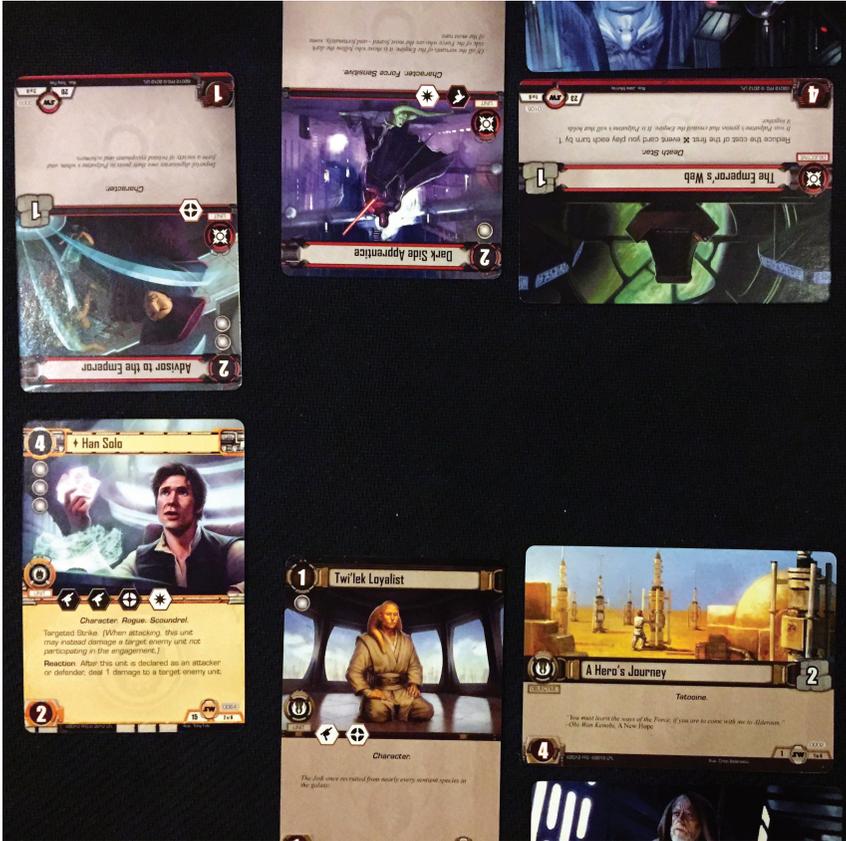


Image 5: Rey's Han Solo attacks and Ben's Advisor to the Emperor defends. Photo by author.

With the participants of this engagement chosen, the game now moves to the edge battle, which the rules describe in-universe as “the combatants maneuvering for position, gathering intelligence, and engaging in sabotage, infiltration, or other heroic or insidious endeavors before the physical battle is fought” (*Rules of Play*, 18). Most cards in *Star Wars* have a number of “force icons” in their upper left corner, with the number of icons roughly corresponding to the narrative importance of the represented character or object in-universe—the non-descript Jedi in Hiding character has only one icon, while Emperor Palpatine has five. Thus, every card in your deck has some value

for its force icons. During the edge battle, each player, starting with the attacker, may place one card from their hand facedown in front of them; once both players have passed, the cards are revealed. Some cards, called fate cards, can only be used in edge battles, and will add additional effects to the combat if used. The player who has committed more force icons wins the edge battle, and gains several benefits, including attacking first. The cards used for the edge battle are put in each player's discard pile.

In the edge battle, Rey goes first, and places one card in her stack. Ben places a card in his stack, and then Rey passes; Ben decides to play one more card, and when Rey passes again, he decides to pass as well. They reveal their cards: Rey has played Yoda, giving her five force icons, while Ben has played Emperor's Royal Guard and Nightsister for only four force icons. Rey wins the edge battle.



Image 6: The results of the edge battle: Rey wins, 5 force icons to Ben's 4. Photo by author.

Rey's Han Solo will attack first now, and she places a focus token on Han, which prevents Han from being used again until the token is removed in her Refresh Phase in her next turn. Han has four combat icons, representing three different types of combat effects. Han's first three combat icons are normal icons, useable in all conflicts; his last icon, with its inverted color scheme, is edge-enabled, meaning this icon can only be used when its player has won the edge battle. "Unit Damage" (the blaster symbol) deals damage to units participating in the conflict.² Rey deals two damage to Advisor to the Emperor (whose damage capacity, the number in the lower left corner, is only 1) destroying Ben's unit.

2. Han has the keyword "Targeted Strike," which allows him to damage non-participating units. This is one reason Han is such a powerful card, though Rey chooses not to use his ability here.

“Tactics” (the crosshairs symbol) places a focus token on one of Ben’s cards. Rey chooses Dark Apprentice. “Blast Damage” (the sunburst symbol) deals damage to the enemy objective. Rey deals one damage to the objective “The Emperor’s Web;” as the Advisor to the Emperor was destroyed, Rey also deals one extra damage as an Unopposed Bonus. Had Ben won the edge battle, his Advisor to the Emperor would have attacked first, and used its Tactics icon to disable Han before Rey could attack.

The edge battle is a fundamental component of the *Star Wars* orthogame, dictating the pace and momentum of combat. This provides every card in your deck with an alternative strategic value, and in some cases, this may be the card’s primary value: fate cards can only be used in edge battles, some low-value or situational cards may be best used here, and even some high-cost cards, such as Yoda, may be more valuable for their force icons. One additional feature of *Star Wars* helps further cement the importance of the edge battle and encourage players to more liberally use their cards for this purpose: the game’s unusually generous Draw Phase. In many card games, players only draw one or two cards a turn, so only a small portion of a deck is seen in any game. In *Star Wars*, players instead have a hand size of six cards (by default, effects can increase or decrease this number). During the Draw Phase, players will ensure their hand contains this number of cards. If above six cards, the player discards, but more frequently, the player will be under their hand size, and draw back up to six. Additionally, players may discard one card at the start of the Draw Phase, allowing them to ditch an unnecessary card to try to draw something better. *Star Wars*’ Draw Phase improves the consistency of any deck (drawing more cards will reduce random variance) and incentivizes players to be proactive in using cards for edge battles. In a game that forces players to take small constellations of cards in deckbuilding, the rules are tailored to give every card some strategic value and

allow players to see a significant portion of their deck in every game.

I have endeavored here to highlight some of the ways the design of *Star Wars: The Card Game* explores alternatives to the norms of card gaming that are made possible (or at least made more feasible) through the Living Card Game fixed-distribution model. It must be acknowledged, though, that however novel some features of *Star Wars* may be, the game does not radically redefine the scope of this type of tabletop game. It simply adds some new wrinkles and nuances to the card game formula. Other LCGs similarly venture outside the established norms of card games, albeit in sometimes limited ways. *Arkham Horror*, one of Fantasy Flight's two co-op LCGs (alongside *The Lord of the Rings*), fuses elements of card gaming and roleplaying. In the course of gameplay, players earn experience points, used to purchase and upgrade cards for their deck, and depending on how they perform in the game's Lovecraftian scenarios, cards with negative effects are added to reflect the mental and physical condition of their characters. In "Terminal Directive," a "campaign expansion" for *Android: Netrunner*, a single product offers some deviation from the norm: in addition to cards for use in competitive *Netrunner*, "Terminal Directive" provides a narrative experience as players race to solve a murder mystery within the game's cyberpunk storyworld. Fantasy Flight's LCGs may not redraw the boundaries of card gaming, but many of these games demonstrate the novel possibilities of fixed-distribution.

CONCLUSION:

Regardless of the distribution model used, cards games are driven by continual and regular expansion. These games encourage an ongoing economic relationship between producers and consumers, with players participating in the acquisition of the serially released components of the game, the cards

themselves, over timespans of years. As a game grows, so too does the scope of player choice and agency; new cards add to the curatorial and combinatorial exercise of deckbuilding. A detailed analysis of a card game's orthogame can only see so much. Engaging with the full range of what Carter et al describe as "game and non-game activities, as well as *more-game* and *less-game* activities" (Carter et al. 2012, 11) is necessary to appreciate the interconnectedness of collecting, deckbuilding, and playing. Companies like Fantasy Flight Games have taken the "collectability" out of their card games, and a game like *Star Wars: The Card Game* demonstrates, even in its modest divergences from the norms of conventional CCGs, the ways that fixed-distribution opens up the design space of card games.

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