

UCI CYBER ATTACK • DOJ LIVE NATION INVESTIGATION • MAYORAL ETHICS COMPLAINT

IRVINE WEEKLY

FEBRUARY 9, 2024 • VOL. 6 • NO. 2

NET RUNNING

HOW A DEFUNCT TRADING CARD GAME IS MAKING WAVES IN THE INDUSTRY'S UNDERBELLY
BY ISAI ROCHA



FEBRUARY 9, 2024 VOL. 6 NO. 2

CONTENTS

NEWS: 2

Greater Irvine Chamber announces resignation of President & CEO.
BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

NEWS: 3

Irvine Mayor, Vice Mayor subject to ethics complaint in December.
BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

ENTERTAINMENT: 4

Net Running: how a defunct trading card game is making waves.
BY ISAI ROCHA

NEWS: 7

DOJ investigating antitrust violations in potential Irvine, Live Nation partnership.
BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

NEWS: 8

Cyber attacks at UC Irvine prompt FBI response.
BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

GREATER IRVINE CHAMBER ANNOUNCES RESIGNATION OF PRESIDENT & CEO

BRYAN STARR HAS SERVED AS PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE GREATER IRVINE CHAMBER SINCE 2017.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

After six years and nine months as President and CEO of the Greater Irvine Chamber of Commerce, Bryan Starr announced his resignation in December,

according to a letter released by the Chamber.

On Monday, Jan. 8, the Chamber released a letter praising Starr's leadership throughout his tenure. The letter, obtained by Irvine Weekly, indicates Starr informed the chamber staff that he would seek a new opportunity in January. No further details regarding his next opportunity were provided.

"Bryan's service has had an undeniable impact on Irvine's economy. His work helped bring global companies – and their jobs and investment – to Irvine. During the pandemic, he guided the Chamber skillfully through the crisis. And he was an advocate for all Irvine businesses," the

letter read. "We're also proud that, under Bryan's leadership, the Chamber was honored with Five-Star Accreditation by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (the highest possible rating), the President's E-Award for

Export Service from the U.S. Department of Commerce, the U.S. Small Business Administration's Community Excellence Chamber Award and numerous chamber industry awards."

Starr, a graduate of San Diego State University, as of Monday, Jan. 22, added the position "Partner at Rialta Alliance" to his LinkedIn profile. Starr does not list a

company website or contact information for Rialta Alliance.

Starr's LinkedIn also indicates that he joined the Greater Irvine Chamber of Commerce in May 2017 after spending five years as Senior Vice President of the Orange County Business Council.



BRYAN STARR
PHOTO: GREATER IRVINE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



IRVINE MAYOR, VICE MAYOR SUBJECT TO ETHICS COMPLAINT IN DECEMBER

THE IRVINE CITY ATTORNEY SAID THEY FOUND NO WRONGDOING BY EITHER COUNCIL MEMBER, WHO WERE ACCUSED OF MISUSING CITY RESOURCES DURING AN IRVINE CITY COUNCIL MEETING.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

The Irvine City Attorney reported finding no ethical violations by Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan or Vice Mayor Larry Agran following an ethics complaint filed after an Irvine City Council meeting in December.

The complaint, filed on Dec. 22, alleged that comments from the Mayor and Vice Mayor, regarding local impacts brought on by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, equated to a misuse of city resources.

During the City Manager's report at the Irvine City Council meeting on Tues. Jan 9, Irvine City Attorney Jeff Melching explained the complaint specifically called out a three-pronged set of violations in the city's ethics and municipal codes.

The first alleged violation, Melching explained, was that the comments occurred during a city council meeting. Melching added that the second violation was "two-fold" in that the city's ethics code prohibits the council from discussing non-municipal items during a meeting and that council members must follow the city's laws.

"The first piece is a claim that it was a misuse of city resources because those statements took place in city council chambers and because there was ample police security in city council chambers," he explained. "Our second set of allegations was sort of twofold. One was that the argument that the Irvine Municipal Code forbids discussion of non-municipal issues by city council members in public meetings, and two – that the ethics ordi-



PHOTO: JAKOB RUDENER VIA UNSPLASH

nance requires that city council members abide by city laws and therefore, the first item would then trigger a violation of the ethics ordinance."

Melching reported finding no violations, adding that despite the distance between the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Irvine, the council has the responsibility to "alleviate tensions" within the community.

"It has to be acknowledged that the conflict in the Middle East is happening thousands of miles away. It must also be acknowledged that hundreds of people are showing up at protests and dem-

onstrations in the city of Irvine – and hundreds more that are coming to city council chambers," he said. "Tensions are high in the community. And it is a legitimate objective of the city council to try and find ways to address and alleviate and allay those tensions."

Since October, hundreds of public speakers have attended city council meetings, some demanding the council pass an emergency resolution for a ceasefire, while others proclaim their support for Israel.

119 people came to speak on non-agendized items on Tuesday, Dec. 12. The

number of public speakers grew to 150 at the most recent meeting on Tuesday, Jan. 9. Nearly all of the speakers addressed the Mideast conflicts.

Both meetings were interrupted by opposing sides becoming unruly toward each other, with Khan threatening to vacate the council chambers if the audience could not be respectful toward other speakers.

Tension has also been high outside of city hall, where several public demonstrations between Gaza supporters, supporters of Israel and protesters of violence in general have taken place. Irvine City Manager Oliver Chi reported that more than a dozen demonstrations have occurred in Irvine since October, adding that some gatherings have attracted up to 3,000 people.

Chi acknowledged, however, that despite "the intensity of emotions" between those in attendance at large demonstrations in Irvine, the Irvine Police Department has not reported any arrests or citations related to those gatherings.

"Kudos go to our police department and our community for the way in which we've engaged and allowed everyone, no matter what their opinion is, to have space to be able to share their thoughts," he said. "Those rallies have varied in size from 50 people to as many as 3000 people. Just incredibly thankful – that all members of our community have demonstrated in such a way that we haven't had to make any arrests or citations or engage in any uses of force, despite all of the intensity of emotion surrounding the issues at hand."

ENTERTAINMENT



PHOTO COURTESY DAVID LAIRD

NET RUNNING

HOW A DEFUNCT TRADING CARD GAME IS MAKING WAVES IN THE INDUSTRY'S UNDERBELLY

BY ISAI ROCHA

Gathered in a modest warehouse in Barcelona, Spain, with paint peeling off the walls and the sun peeking through a long glass panel ceiling, more

than 200 loyal card gamers anxiously awaited the final round of the 2023 Netrunner World Championship last October. The championship showdown was between a pair of players skilled in

the art of strategic deception, with William Hoang, AKA Sokka in Netrunner circles, taking the victory in the 3-day tournament and crowned as the best in a game played in the shadows.

The trading card game industry is currently dominated by popular games such as Yu-Gi-Oh, Pokemon, and Magic: The Gathering. However, Netrunner stands as an anomaly, carrying a small but mighty fanbase that has carved its own lane since the late 1990s. Using chat apps such as Discord and sometimes location-specific Facebook groups, Netrunner communities organize tournaments and conventions with a digital underground feel that aligns

with the game's dystopian influence.

Built with thematics related to the Cyberpunk 2020 role-playing game that was first released in 1990, the Netrunner game involves hackers (Runners) fighting back against a worldwide mega-corporation (the Corp), attempting to steal information and data that can foil further expansion by the power-hungry Corp. It is a two-player game, where the player who takes the Corp side must fulfill their given agenda without being thwarted by their opponent, the Runner. The Runner will try to jumble the Corp servers by building the proper software and hardware. There is an option to attempt to "flatline" the Runner with cards



PHOTO COURTESY DAVID LAIRD

that dish out damage, while the Runner also has the option to try and stall the Corp long enough that their plans are unsuccessful. Unlike many other card games, where you can log on to eBay and buy yourself the strongest deck of cards, Netrunner is set up so all players are on equal footing, with equal access to all decks, meaning you cannot buy a victory. You must rely on strategy and a little bit of luck.

The popularity of Cyberpunk, which has carried out multiple iterations of its game throughout the last 30 years, would lead one to believe that Android: Netrunner would hold a much larger piece of the trading card game world than it does. The Netrunner design also had a strong foundation, as it was developed by Richard Garfield, who also invented Magic: The Gathering. Still, there was one problem: the printing of cards and coordination of tournaments abruptly stopped in 2018, with little explanation from its developers at Fantasy Flight Games, outside of the expiring licensing agreement with Wizards of



PHOTO COURTESY DAVID LAIRD

the Coast publishing.

"With the announcement of the end of the Android: Netrunner product line, I'm sure many of you are wondering why," Head of Studio at Fantasy Flight Games, Andrew Navaro, said in a statement. "While I cannot speak to the specifics, I would like to provide as much insight as I can, and hopefully lessen the consternation that this announcement has undoubtedly caused.

With the success that Android: Ne-

runner has enjoyed over the last six years, I don't think there would ever have been a good time to end it in the eyes of many fans, and in the eyes of many of us here at the studio, but the license agreement has reached its conclusion, and so the product line must do the same."

As Netrunner picked up steam in the 2010s, with new card sets rolling out consistently and fans clamoring for tournaments, it came to a complete

stop and was abandoned by its publishers. In its final days, the words of the Netrunner team reverberated through the souls of its fans, with Navaro saying, "Just because we won't be printing it anymore doesn't suddenly turn it into a game that's not worth playing."

Echoing Navaro's sentiment, Lead Developer Michael Boggs said, "I hope and believe the community will keep it alive for years to come."

That is where the "Original 8" at a UK-based nonprofit called Null Signal came into play, not only keeping the spirit of Netrunner alive, but also physically creating new cards that not only picked up where the original Netrunner left off but continued to do so, five years later.

"I was devastated, as were a lot of people," Serenity Westfield, former Vice President of Engagement at Null Signal and one of the original eight Project Nisei members, told L.A. Weekly. "That's when Null Signal was born basically because there was a group of people who just said 'No, we're not

ENTERTAINMENT

accepting this.”

Null Signal Games was a product of passion meeting execution. Merely weeks after Fantasy Flight Games announced the death of Netrunner, Null Signal on-boarded several of Netrunner’s original artists for their, and in a life-imitates-art moment, hacked its way into the game world, forming the collective that at the time was called Project Nisei, which roughly translates to “second generation” in Japanese.

“Within three days, the first conversations about taking over the game had started,” Westfield said. By August the original eight people in the organization and the original eight board members had been selected and we’d started recruitment on our teams. The moment the license ended, we posted a series of seven articles detailing our plans for taking the game forward from that point. As far as we’re concerned, there was a three-day drop in signal between [Fantasy Flight Games] running it and us starting up, then we took over pretty much the moment the license ended.”

Reaching out to the Netrunner fanbase, Project Nisei had to nail their attempt at making new cards that not only met the previous standard of cards, but were compatible with the original decks.

The organization succeeded and the new, fan-made cards were immediately accepted by the community and deemed the new standard for Netrunner games around the world.

While Netrunner shares a smaller piece of the pie, the trading card game industry has seen a mainstream surge in the last five years.

There is a pop culture moment happening where celebrities have more outwardly expressed their geeky sides and are seeing an embrace instead of the teasing of walking around with a deck of fantasy-based cards produced in times past. It is no longer unusual to see a celebrity such as YouTuber and podcaster Logan Paul, make public appearances with a \$5 million Pokemon card hanging from a chain on his neck.

Similarly, for \$2 million, pop star Post Malone famously purchased a 1-of-1 Magic: The Gathering collaborative card with the Lord of the Rings fran-



PHOTO BY DAN BUCHARD

chise. For Post Malone, it was not a vanity purchase, as he is arguably the most famous fan and player of Magic: The Gathering and those \$2 million were “life-changing money,” for Brook Trafton, the card’s previous owner, who posted a TikTok video about his experience meeting Post Malone and going through with the sale.

“This is my dream come true,” Trafton said. “Meeting Post Malone and him buying the One Ring card from me is literally a moment straight out of a fairytale.”

While Netrunner may not have global stars flashing exclusive cards, it may be the best trading card game that collectors do not know is still running.

The Frank & Son Collectible Show in the City of Industry is among the largest hubs for all things related to comic books, trading cards, video games and more. It is geek heaven. Post-pandemic, the number of trading card posts at Frank & Son has increased to the point where they added a room dedicated to rare cards from Pokemon, to Magic: The Gathering and even the up-and-coming Disney card game, Lorcana. The 5,000-square-foot warehouse

houses more than 200 vendors and as you make your way toward all the card vendors asking about Netrunner, you may get nostalgic responses such as, “Man, I haven’t heard that name in a long time,” or see raised eyebrows followed by, “Those are impossible to find these days.”

Yet the few in the know can quietly find Netrunner meetups in L.A. County at card shops such as Odyssey Games in Pasadena, or the Game Cellar in El Monte, with out-of-towners finding their way to get a few games in.

It is not unusual for a player to visit other cities and seek out other players through Discord chats. While global, the community is tight-knit, and Westfield says it is why Null Signal has successfully kept Netrunner alive.

“You can have the best card game in the world, but if your community is not welcoming, people won’t be coming back and this is something I hear a lot,” Westfield said. “You need people on the ground to be organizing local tournaments... like, over here in the UK, we have something we call ‘Pubrunner’ where you meet at the pub with your friends and play Netrunner. You



PHOTO BY DAN BUCHARD

need enthusiastic and happy people to do that for you and if you don’t have a bunch of people who love the game, you’re not going to get that, your game is going to suck.”

Although no mega-corporation backs Netrunner, the runners continue to fight in the shadows, which Null Signal is OK with.

“Aside from loving the community, I firmly believe that Netrunner is the greatest card game ever made,” Westfield said. “I don’t see it ending anytime soon.”

DOJ INVESTIGATING ANTITRUST VIOLATIONS IN POTENTIAL IRVINE, LIVE NATION PARTNERSHIP

THE ANTITRUST DIVISION HAS OPENED AN INVESTIGATION REGARDING THE POTENTIAL LESSENING OF COMPETITION IN CONCERT PROMOTION AND TICKET SALES IN IRVINE.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

The Department of Justice has opened an antitrust investigation and is seeking information from the City of Irvine regarding the city's potential partnership with concert promoter Live Nation.

In Nov. 2023, Reuters reported that the Department of Justice was seeking information regarding "any restrictions in the deals Live Nation offers" that would yield "anticompetitive agreements with venues and artists."

Last month, the DOJ's Antitrust Division issued a Civil Investigative Demand to Irvine, specifically requesting all documentation concerning the potential development of a new music venue and "the City's potential partnership with Live Nation."

The CID, filed on Dec. 11, also indicates the DOJ is seeking information regarding violations of the Sherman Act, which may have led to a potential lessening of competition regarding the city's ticket sales and concert venue promotion.

"This civil investigative demand is issued pursuant to the Antitrust Civil Process Act, in the course of an antitrust investigation to determine whether there is, has been, or may be a violation of Section 1 or Section 2 of the Sherman Act, by conduct, activities, or proposed action of the following nature: agreements and other conduct that may reduce ticketing and concert promotions competition," The CID states.

For context, the Sherman Act is a 134-year-old antitrust law, defined by the Federal Trade Commission as a



FIVE POINT AMPHITHEATRE
PHOTO: EVAN J. LANCASTER

criminal law that aims to preserve "free and unfettered competition as the rule of trade."

The CID established a one-month compliance window for the city of Irvine, which is set for Friday, Jan. 11.

In July of last year, the Great Park Board of Directors voted to terminate its negotiations with Live Nation.

In a 3-2 vote, board members agreed to a motion suggested by Great Park Director Larry Agran that effectively ended the city's previous design, construction and operation agreement (DCOA) with Live Nation, and directed Irvine City Manager Oliver Chi to present options for a timeline and process on the steps forward.

Specifically, in their vote to end negotiations with Live Nation, the directors were seeking a pathway toward an 8,000 to 10,000 seat amphitheater, as a complementary component to the Great Park Framework plan.

The city is currently researching a third-party operator to manage the yet-to-be-built venue.

In October, Irvine's temporary FivePoint Amphitheater, which was managed by Live Nation, closed abruptly due to FivePoint's residential development in the area.

At the time, Irvine City Manager Oliver Chi explained that the closure of the temporary venue was out of Irvine's control.

Chi explained that the decision to

close the 12,000 seat outdoor amphitheater in the Great Park came as the result of the expiration of a private contract between FivePoint Development and Live Nation – a contract that the city of Irvine was not involved with.

"Live Nation's agreement with FivePoint to facilitate the temporary FivePoint Amphitheater expired, and given construction-related priorities that FivePoint has to execute, the parties couldn't facilitate access into the temporary FivePoint Amphitheater to allow for an extension of the temporary venue," Chi wrote via text message.

Chi did not respond to Irvine Weekly's request for comment regarding compliance with the CID.

NEWS

CYBER ATTACKS AT UC IRVINE PROMPT FBI RESPONSE

UNIVERSITY-AFFILIATED DISCORD CHANNELS BECAME THE TARGET OF A CYBER ATTACK THAT OVERWHELMED SERVERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, WASHINGTON STATE AND UC IRVINE.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER



PHOTO COURTESY UCI FLICKR

A cyber attack targeting university-affiliated Discord channels sent thousands of obscene videos and transphobic rhetoric during a days-long attack that impacted college campuses in Washington State, Los Angeles and Irvine.

At UC Irvine, on the evening of Tuesday, Jan. 9, approximately 500 university-affiliated Discord servers became the target of an organized attack, which flooded Discord servers with thousands of videos depicting death, violence and necrophilia.

In detailing the context of the attack, community Discord moderators at UC Irvine said the videos included the torture of animals and humans, and other “clearly illegal” acts.

UC Irvine does not own or regulate its Discord servers, which are guarded by independent moderators.

After the attacks occurred at UC Irvine, the university directed questions about the attack to Alina Kim, an independent moderator within UC Irvine’s Discord community.

Kim was one of the first responders during the Jan. 9 attack. She estimates that UC Irvine has approximately 500 affiliated Discord servers, which represent approximately 7,500 users. Kim said the independent moderators at UC Irvine defend the school’s virtual Discord community with scarce outside resources.

Kim said the attack was executed by an alt-right hate group but did not name a specific organization.

“They began systematically going through every Discord server that was actually affiliated with UCI and just flooding them with graphic, gory videos. These videos played automatically. There wasn’t really much you can do

to avoid seeing them if you were online at the time,” She explained. “We think at least 3,000 people would have been exposed to the videos. This estimate is based on the number of people who were online.”

Kim reported the attack to the UC Irvine Police Department, but the department declined to investigate, directing the moderators to contact Discord.

“The police told us that they weren’t interested in the case and that we should just contact Discord,” she said. “I think they weren’t sure that any crime has been committed.”

In an email response, obtained by Irvine Weekly, the UC Irvine Police Department sent the following statement to the independent Discord moderators at UC Irvine.

“We are taking information reports and have determined no crimes have been committed, we are referring them to

contact Discord and providing them with campus resource information.”

After contacting Discord directly, Kim explained that the platform removed the server in which the attackers were operating.

She explained that Discord – a voice, video and text communication platform – introduced a feature that allows users to create accounts by registering via a student’s university email address. Users can also join with a phone number.

Users can then create Discord channels for classes, events or any other topic.

Kim said the attackers did not hack into Discord but rather deployed a bot to obtain fraudulent phone numbers to create alias accounts. The attackers were able to use the alias accounts to join the UC Irvine servers.

To stop the attack, Kim and her team of independent Discord moderators developed a new defense system that will prevent these online attacks in the future by going after the believed perpetrators.

“Some of our students infiltrated their servers, just so we could get forewarnings of attacks, and we discovered that they were affiliated with groups that were selling child porn,” Kim said. “And so this case has been upgraded to the FBI.”

While the Federal Bureau of Investigation declined to detail the scope of the ongoing investigation involving the Discord attacks at UC Irvine, an FBI spokesperson did confirm that the agency was offered assistance to the UC Irvine Police Department regarding the issue.

In acknowledgment of the attack, UC Irvine released a statement reiterating UC Irvine’s goal to protect all members of the community, both on campus and online. The statement also pointed to resources for the university’s best “cyber hygiene” practices.

“UC Irvine does not manage the Discord servers, the account activity, nor the security settings around them – they are independently managed,” the statement read. “However, we take seriously our commitment to protecting members of our community. The university offers information security training and resources, and encourages members of the community to engage in cyber hygiene best practices including use of strong passwords and awareness of phishing attacks meant to harvest confidential credentials.”