DEBORD'S NOSTALGIC ALGORITHM
Alexander R. Galloway

'I await the end of Cinema with optimism', Jean-Luc Godard announced in 1965. And indeed the end was near. 'The cinema seems to me to be over', was Guy Debord's blunt assessment by the spring of 1978. Much happened in those intervening years, with the progressive explosion of the middle to late sixties engendering a crisis and retrenchment in the early to middle seventies. The transformation was evident in a number of events and pseudo-events: student revolts in Paris and elsewhere, the French left's flirtation with Maoism and other militancies, the oil crisis of 1973 and 1974, a painful renovation in the economic base of developed societies coinciding with the rise of information networks, and the concomitant changes in the role of the individual in society.

Guy Debord never recovered from the crisis of the 1970s. His late life was beset by chronic illness brought on by an ever growing gluttony in food and drink. He deserted the capital city and grew more introspective in his work, mixing manifesto with memoir. By March 8, 1978, Debord's former glory as a radical filmmaker and author had faded. 'The cinema seems to me to be over', he wrote in a letter. 'These times don't deserve a filmmaker like me' (2005: 451).

These times were times of crisis. On March 16, 1978 - eight days after Debord's dalliance about the cinema being 'over' - the world awoke to a dramatic turn of events. The long-time Prime Minister of Italy, Christian Democrat Aldo Moro, had been kidnapped during a brazen intervention by the far left communist militant group the Red Brigades. In Italy the progressive militancy of the sixties had metastasized during the following decade into an actually existing low-level guerrilla war. Moro was held for 54 days. During the hostage period, Moro appealed to the Christian Democrats to acquiesce and negotiate with what both the newspapers and government officials alike called terrorists, that newly evolved form of political actor so closely associated with the late-modern period. Held in secret and sentenced to death in a so-called people's trial on

or about April 15, Moro received little solidarity from his former government colleagues, and sensing the immanent culmination of events, the presumed future president of Italy stipulated that no Christian Democrat leaders should be present at his funeral. There were none.

Moro's body was discovered in the trunk of a red Renault R4 hatchback; he had been shot ten times. The police report was wistful: 'The cuffs of his trousers were full of sand as if he had been walking on a beach or been dragged across rough soil shortly before his death' (*The New York Times*, 1978).
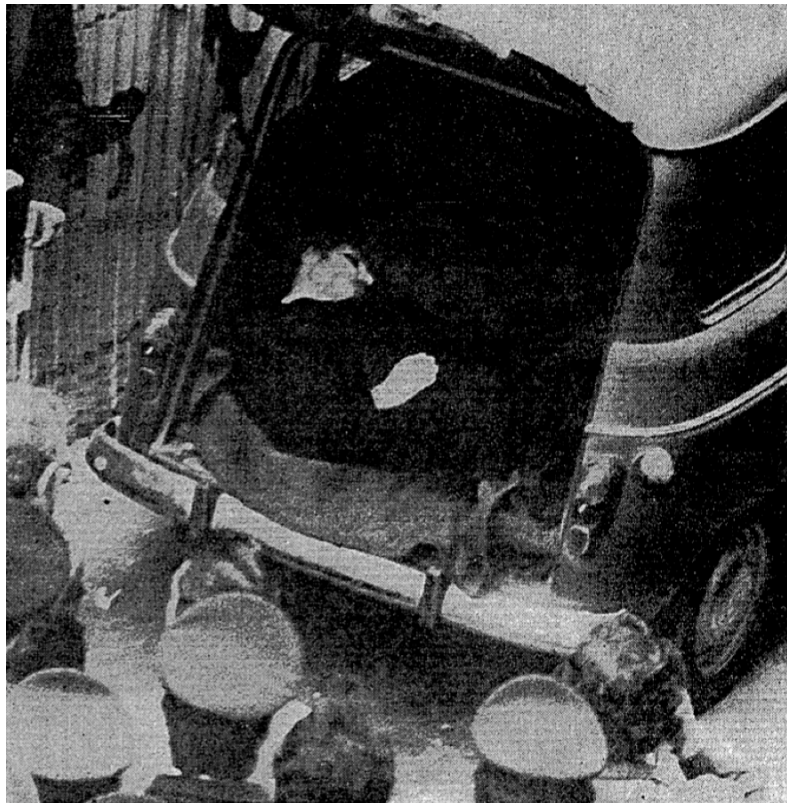

Fig. 1: The death of Aldo Moro (*The New York Times*, 1978)

The decade of the seventies was long in Italy. It 'began in 1967-68 and ended in 1983', recalled Antonio Negri, the man scooped up by the police in April 1979 and indicted for the Moro events, then exonerated, then indicted again and hounded in various forms for the next twenty plus years.[1] 'In 1967-68, as in all the developed countries, the student movement took to the barricades. However, the breadth and impact of this part of the movement was not as extensive as in other European countries: in Italy... May 1968 was

not a particularly significant moment' (Negri, 1998).

Much has been said about Debord being at those May barricades, certainly in spirit if not also in the flesh, with Situationist graffiti festooning the pediments of respectable French society. But a front line militant he was not, and Debord soon left Paris to settle in one of the hexagon's more remote outposts, the rural Auvergne. There he stayed for much of the rest of his downhill life, watching the passing parade from a safe distance. The new social movements of the sixties, having swollen in importance, were soon met by an iron fist and eventually crushed by the freshly transformed post-Fordist economies of the middle to late seventies. If the sixties represented a certain triumph, the seventies were a decade of defeat. 'The first to be defeated were the social movements', remembers Negri. 'Having cut themselves off totally from the representatives of the traditional left..., the social movements were thus dragged into the abyss of an extremism that was becoming increasingly blind and violent. The kidnapping and killing of Aldo Moro was the beginning of the end' (1998).

Although Debord had declined to engage significantly with Negri or Moro, he had indeed monkey-wrenched with the Italian political scene by helping Gianfranco Sanguinetti author his August, 1975 hoax pamphlet 'The True Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy', as well as translating the text from Italian to French. Contrast this with other French philosophers who were much more vocally involved with the Italian situation, such as Gilles Deleuze, who intervened with his September 20, 1977, tract against repression of Italian leftists, 'Nous croyons au caractère constructiviste de certaines agitations de gauche' ['We Believe in the Constructivist Quality of Leftist Militancy']. (Deleuze also published two short pieces in 1979 lobbying for Negri's freedom, and would later more formally affiliate himself by writing the preface to the 1982 French edition of Negri's influential book on Spinoza, *The Savage Anomaly* [Deleuze, 1977: 149-150; Deleuze, 2003: 155-161, 175-178].) When he did finally address Moro and the Red Brigades, in his 1979 preface to the fourth Italian edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord spat on the guerrilla movement, claiming that the Red Brigades were in fact unknowing pawns of the state Stalinist forces. Writing to Sanguinetti before the killing, Debord predicted that Moro would be 'suicided' by his own government, thus allowing the state forces to consolidate power (known in Italy as the 'historic compromise') around the common fear of terror and anarchy.

'Italy epitomizes the social contradictions of the whole world', warned Debord (2007: 96). Moro was an emblem of the newfound asymmetrical conflicts plaguing developed nations, from France's Algerian uprising in the 1950s, to scores of militant splinter groups, bombings, and airplane hijackings. The tactics are called 'asymmetrical' or 'unconventional' because they no longer resemble the customs of so-called civilized, oppositional conflict, in which professional armies meet in known theatres of conflict to thrash out victory in blood and arms. With his life obscured today by the romantic mist of apotheosis, it is easy to forget that Debord was something of a fading violet when it came to actual conflict. He preferred the mischievous pot-shot to the Molotov cocktail. But the raw heroic drama of militancy forever excited him. Like many political thinkers, it was the thrill of revolution that was so seductive, of the possibility that this depraved life might one day be cast off and refashioned anew. 'I am very interested in war', Debord confessed unapologetically in his late autobiographical work, *Panegyric*, amid glowing citations from Carl von Clausewitz on the emotional intensity of going to battle. 'I've thus been studying the logic of war. And I even had some success, already some time ago, in realizing the essence of these processes in the context of a simple chessboard' (1993: 69-70).

While his fascination with war was not ironic and indeed perhaps uncritical, it's plausible to assume that Debord knew of Engels' famous assessment of Clausewitz, contained in an 1858 letter from Engels to Marx. Clausewitz's approach to philosophy was 'odd', cautioned Engels, but '*per se* very good'. More than anything else, war resembles commerce, he told Marx. 'Combat is to war what cash payment is to commerce; however seldom it need happen in reality, everything is directed towards it and ultimately it is bound to occur and proves decisive' (Marx & Engels, 1929: 241).[2]

So as Moro lay in the trunk of the Renault R4, Guy Debord was at his rural home playing board games and toying with the idea of fashioning one of his own. The backdrop of European militancy in the seventies makes Debord's penchant for playtime all the more delicious. One such game was Djambi. Djambi is a distinctly late-modern game. It is played on an extruded chess board of nine by nine squares. It proceeds, not bilaterally as chess, but multilaterally with four players. The game tokens are not modelled on the medieval court of kings, queens, knights, and bishops, but instead on the various political actors that make up our advanced liberal democracies: the news reporter, the provocateur, the activist

militant, and the assassin. If the Moro events were to be distilled and simulated in the form of an intellectual diversion, as chess did for feudal skirmishes - and of course in doing so anesthetizing the player from any immediate knowledge or experience of political realities - Djambi would be it.

'Thanks for Djambi', Debord wrote on May 7, 1978, to his friend and benefactor Gérard Lebovici, in a letter otherwise disdainful of the game. 'As long as the only goal of the game is to eliminate all the others, there can exist but one absolute mode of winning, which can't be shared in any way, to the point that in this game of trickery, you can't trick anyone. The rules suffer from a contradiction between the game's totalitarian goal and its representation of the struggles of an "advanced liberal democracy"' (2005: 462). The ridiculous subtext of Djambi was clear to Debord: How could a board game ever correctly model the types of complex political dynamics encircling France, or Italy, or what Lyotard in his book on postmodernity would soon call 'today's most advanced societies'? What is to be done, when the power elite goes global in order to hide itself from the base of society? What is to be done, when control and organization are no longer hierarchical or repressive, but instead have migrated into flexible, rhizomatic networks?

In fact at that moment, Debord was intensely focused on trying to work through the challenges of advanced liberal democracy, and particularly how armed struggle could be simulated in the form of simple parlour games. The cinema was over, he had concluded. A new format was required. So in the winter of 1977, after having been a filmmaker and author, Debord did something rather unconventional for a leftist intellectual: he formed his own company for making games.[3] Not chess exactly, but a variation of his own design, dubbed first in his notes the Kriegspiel and later more formally The Game of War.

'I insist on the opportunity to throw the Kriegspiel into the stunned world as soon as we can', Debord wrote to Lebovici. 'It's quite obvious that its time has come' (2005: 451).[4] In January 1977, the two founded the company 'Strategic and Historical Games' and set out to produce an edition of the game. Debord's 'The Game of War' is a Napoleonic chess-variant played by two opposing players on a game board of 500 squares arranged in rows of 20 by 25 squares; by comparison, a chess board is eight by eight, while a 'go' board is nineteen by nineteen. Like chess, The Game of War contains game tokens of varying strengths and speeds that one must manoeuvre

across a grid landscape in an attempt to wipe out one's enemy. Unlike chess, one must also maintain 'lines of communication' that crisscross the terrain, keeping all friendly units within transmission range of one's home bases. (Debord reportedly also finished a naval warfare game called Jeu de la bataille navale, however the game was never committed to paper and is now lost.) 'The surprises of this Kriegspiel seem to be inexhaustible', he confessed later in his memoir *Panegyric*. 'It might be the only thing in all my work - I'm afraid to admit - that one might dare say has some value' (1993: 70).

Fig. 2: Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord playing The Game of War (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2007)

In his letters and notes Debord referred to the game as the 'Kriegspiel', borrowing the German term meaning 'war game'. But when the game was fabricated and released in France, Debord officially titled it 'Le Jeu de la guerre'. A short discussion on the most appropriate translation of the game comes in Debord's letter of May 9, 1980, to Lebovici. After reviewing the English proofs, the last question remaining was the English title: 'The Game of the war' or 'The Game of war'? 'We must choose the more generalizing and glorious title', he insisted. 'Even if *kriegspiel = wargame* is the most "linguistically" exact, it doesn't fit at all historically. *Kriegspiel* connotes "a serious exercise by commanders", but *wargame* connotes "an infantile little game played by officers"' (2006a: 55-56).

With the assistance of Lebovici, Debord produced the game in a limited edition of four to five during the summer of 1977. The edition included an 18 by 14 1/4 inch game board and player tokens fashioned in copper and silver metal. The game was fabricated by a certain Mr. Raoult, a Parisian artisan whom Debord trusted implicitly, referring to him as the 'intrepid Raoult', and admiring him for his 'politeness, rationality, and capacity to recognize what is essential in the matter at hand' (2005: 426; 2006a: 26-27). By the end of June, 1978, after a setback due to poor health, he finished drafting a written copy of the game rules. 'I am sending you soon the rules for the Kriegspiel', he wrote to Lebovici. 'Its main section, given over to a juridico-geometric writing style, has cost me innumerable headaches' (2005: 466). As illustrated also in his jab at Djambi, Debord was thus intimately aware of the true reality of games, that they are a conjunction of two elements: the 'juridical' element, meaning the spheres of politics and law, and the 'geometrical' element, meaning the realm of mathematical processes and spatial logics. This was no longer an intervention in spectacle or in narrative, as were his films, but now an intervention at the level of a 'juridico-geometric' algorithm, that is, at the level of a finite set of rules that, when executed, result in a machine able to simulate political antagonism.

The game board is divided into a northern territory and a southern territory, each with a single mountain range of nine squares, a mountain pass, three forts, and two arsenals. In addition each faction has nine infantry, four cavalry, two artillery (one footed and one mounted) and two transmission units (one footed and one mounted). Each combat unit has an attack and defence coefficient, and may move either one or two squares per turn depending on the type. The forts, arsenals, and mountains are welded to the game board, and thus immobile. The combat and non-combat units are mobile and may be positioned in any desired formation prior to the beginning of a match.

Arsenals radiate lines of communication vertically, horizontally, and diagonally. In addition, transmission units propagate any line of communication aimed at them. All units must remain in direct connection with their own lines of communication, or be adjacent to a friendly unit in communication. If stranded, a unit goes out of communication and becomes inert. The lines of communication are immaterial constructs, and thus have no game token to represent them. Instead they must be mentally projected onto the game board by each player. Like the 'knight's tour' in chess, the lines of

communication are in essence a network of patterns superimposed onto the basic grid of squares, helping to determine where and how each piece may move. As the game unfolds, these patterns can and will shift, adding to the complexity of possible games and possible strategies.

The metal game of 1978 is stunningly modernist in its formal simplicity and reduction of ludic function into plain, abstract shapes. The cavalry units, far from aping a horse, are represented by a tall wire spike, mounted on a hexagonal base, while the infantry are represented by an upright, snubbed peg, affixed to a square base. To indicate their communicative duties, the transmission units sport a crisp flag, protruding at ninety degrees. The artillery are equally spare: a horizontal hollow tube to indicate a cannon barrel. The most representational design is reserved for the mountains and the forts, the only two elements not aligned to a faction: the mountains are hulking chunks of metal, appealingly chiselled to bring out miniature crevices and peaks; the forts resemble gallant storybook parapets, hexagonally cut for the North faction, and solidly square for the South. The mountain passes have no representational form at all, but are merely the absent spaces residing at gaps in the mountains. None of the pieces displays any sort of ornament, or additional engraving or colour. All of them conform to an extremely muted, almost ascetic, formal design.
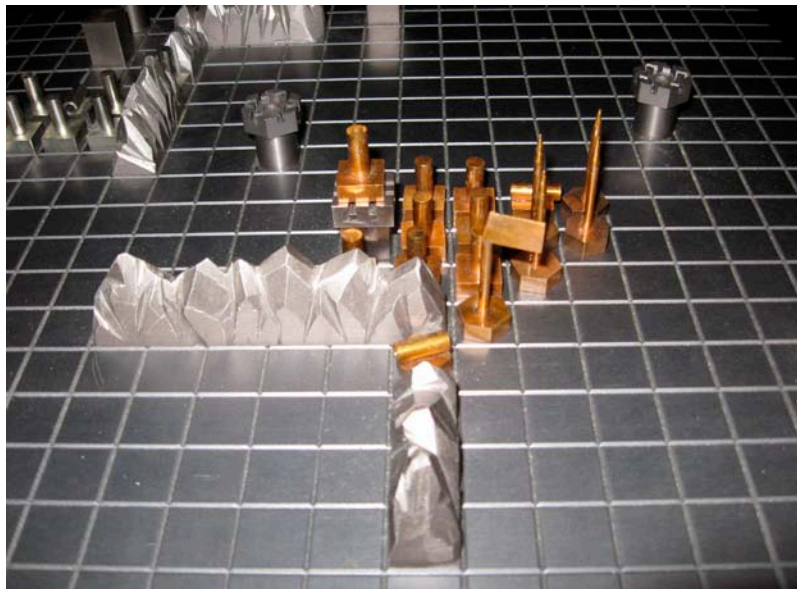

Fig. 3: Guy Debord, The Game of War. Photograph by Alexander R. Galloway

The game proceeds in turns. A player may move up to five units each turn, followed by a single attack against an enemy unit. An attack is determined by summing all the offensive power in range of an enemy target square, then subtracting this number from a summation of all the defensive power supporting the same target square. Offensive and defensive power emanates from a unit in a straight line, either vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. If the offensive power is less than or equal to the defensive power, the unit resists. If the offensive power is two or more, the unit is destroyed.

Like the lines of communication, which require a certain amount of mental energy to be maintained in the imagination of each player, the combat mechanic for the game requires a nontrivial amount of player arithmetic, particularly as multiple units are involved in attack and defence at any given moment.

A player wins the game by either (A) destroying all enemy combat units, or (B) destroying the enemy's two arsenals. Although not mentioned in Debord's rulebook, it is possible to deduce one additional win state: a player wins if the enemy's two relays are destroyed and all enemy combat units are offline. Alternately, if both sides agree to quit, the game is a draw.

While stressing the symmetrical quality of Clausewitzian warfare, Debord at the same time noted that the terrain of the game board should be asymmetrical. Here is revealed Debord's talent for game design. His aim was to achieve balance through asymmetry, such that the game would not lapse into predictable strategies and styles of play. Thus while certain approaches are better than others, there is no 'optimal' overall formation in the game. Instead, one plays through a series of compromises, always having to adjudicate between 'contradictory necessities' (2005: 352). For each offensive movement of aggression, one's rear flank becomes that much more vulnerable. This dialectical tension was part of what Debord aimed to achieve with the game. Thus, the two mountain ranges in the game are arranged asymmetrically: North's mountain cleaves the terrain sharply between east and west, inhibiting lateral movement but leaving a cramped passage across the top; South's mountain is a wall expelling downward advances and making any penetration into its territory difficult. But more important is the placement of the arsenals. South's two arsenals are split wide apart and held flush to the baseline, while North's two arsenals are staggered closer to the middle. This makes for two very different styles of play. South must run a split defence, or else sacrifice one arsenal and bunker down

with the remaining one. North, on the other hand, can use the terrain to its advantage, gaining protection from the mountains (which block fire) plus a defence boost from the mountain pass in range of its westerly arsenal.

Ten years after the game first appeared in limited edition, it was mass-produced on cardboard with wood tiles. In that year, 1987, Debord and his wife Alice Becker-Ho also published a book devoted to the game. An unconventional text, the book consists of over a hundred annotated diagrams showing snapshots of the game during each round of a complete match played by the duo. At the end are appendices containing the game rules and strategy tips. In 1991 Debord ordered all his published works destroyed, including this book. But after Debord's death and under Becker-Ho's stewardship, the French publisher Gallimard reissued the book in 2006 as *Le Jeu de la Guerre: Relevé des positions successives de toutes les forces au cours d'une partie*. After remaining untranslated for twenty years, an English edition of the work appeared a year later from Atlas Press, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, an ex-Situationist with whom Debord had kept in touch over the years.

In 1986, as his publishing house was suffering hard times in the wake of the death of Gérard Lebovici, Debord suggested a scheme to Floriana Lebovici, the daughter, to relieve the publisher's debts by commercializing The Game of War. It was merely a business matter, Debord wrote, like Monopoly. 'Or is my judgment of the strategic, and thus economic, value of this Kriegspiel distorted by a certain indulgence? We shall see' (2006a: 448-449). But while Debord and Lebovici had originally formed a company around the game (Strategic and Historical Games), it is unclear how serious they had ever been about making the game commercially viable. Debord never trusted Kessler, the intellectual property lawyer hired to assist with the game. 'You worry me greatly by bringing up "strange things about Kessler"', he wrote in 1985 to Floriana Lebovici. 'Of anyone in the world, Kessler is in the best position to swindle us' (2006a: 306). In the end the game was never commercialized in any serious way.

While distilled to a simple essence, Debord believed that The Game of War represented in gamic form all the necessary principles of war. He did admit, however, that three things were missing from his near perfect simulation: climate conditions and the cycles of day and night; the influence of troop morale; and uncertainty about the exact positions and movements of the enemy. 'That said', he continued, 'one may assert that the [Game of War] exactly reproduces the

totality of factors that deal with war, and more generally the dialectic of all conflicts' (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2006: 151). Debord's ambitions for the game were grandiose. By evoking the 'dialectic of all conflicts', he was appealing backward to the power of 1968 and the days of the Situationist International, but also forward to the game's future potential in training and cultivating a new generation of militants.

But the game was missing more than just climate conditions. In fact viewed against the silhouette of Debord's other work, it is surprisingly square. The spirit of 'wandering' or 'hijacking', from the Situationist days, is absent in the game. There is no mechanism for overturning society, no temporary autonomous zones, no workers' councils, no utopian cities, no imaginary landscapes of desire, no cobblestones, and no beach, only grids of toy soldiers fighting a made-up war in a made-up world.

It begs the question: Why was this game relatively unadventurous, while Debord's other work so experimental? Can this be explained away through an analysis of media formats; that Debord had a certain panache for radical filmmaking and critical philosophy, but lapsed back into the predictable habits of the bourgeois parlour game when he tried his hand at game design?[5] Did Debord simply lose his radical zeal late in life, his Hegelianism finally winning out over his Marxism? Why, when the guerrillas were staging assassinations in Italy, was Debord playing with toy soldiers in France?

Was there a link between Moro's killing and Debord's late work? Of course there was none, nothing more than a coincidence of dates. Yet this very incompatibility frames in stark relief a crisis within the work: Why an *objet d'art* instead of a cobblestone?

A number of explanations are possible. For example, it is possible that the abrasively anachronistic Debord was simply restaging the same Trojan Horse logic he had used many times before. He was well known for masquerading inside the very thing he found most repulsive. For example, the 'reactionary' form of cinema was taken up by Debord precisely in order to critique that same medium of spectacle. Perhaps now he was merely making a 'reactionary' game in order to explode the logic of play from within.

Alternately it is plausible the game was never intended by Debord to be a theoretical proposal, and therefore should not be evaluated as

one; the game existed simply to train militants. Thus if, in Debord's view, *any* tactical training helped unlock radical consciousness, then it mattered little that The Game of War stresses Clausewitz (instead of Sun Tzu), or the legacy of the Napoleonic wars (instead of Parisian street revolts).

Debord admitted that the game was bound to an historical period: 'This doesn't represent wars of antiquity, nor those of the feudal period, nor modern warfare refashioned by technology after the middle of the nineteenth century (railways, machine guns, motorization, aviation, missiles)' (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2006: 149). In other words the game refers to warfare as it was practiced in the early and middle modern periods up to about 1850. The 'classic equilibrium' of the eighteenth century was his model, a mode of warfare best represented by the Seven Years' War, and characterized by symmetry, regularity, professional armies, the preciousness of personnel, and the importance of supply stockpiles (Debord, 2005: 351). So The Game of War is indeed historically specific. But it is historically specific for a century long past, not the century in which Debord was living. (As Philippe Sollers quipped later: Debord wasn't interested in the twentieth century.) In comparisons made between the game and chess he accentuates the question of historical specificity. He positions chess firmly in what the French term the 'classical' period, consisting of kings and corporal fiat, while The Game of War belongs to a time of systems, logistical routes, and lines of communication. In chess 'the king can never remain in check', but in The Game of War 'liaisons must always be maintained' (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2006: 165-166). Spatial relationships between pieces are indeed paramount in chess, the 'knight's tour' serving as a classic mental projection of pattern and recombination. Debord preserved this spatial relationship approach, but he stepped it up a notch. The 'liaisons' in The Game of War are not simply the projections of possible troop manoeuvres, but a supplementary layer linking far off fighters back home. In this sense chess's king is an intensive node, one that must be fortified through the protection of its allied footmen. But Debord's arsenals are extensive nodes; yes, they too must be protected, but they also serve as the origin point for a radiating fabric of transmission. The body versus the liaison - this is not unlike the sorts of historical arguments made about the shift from early modernity to high or late modernity (i.e. the 'disciplined' modern body as opposed to the postmodern 'line of flight'). Chess presents a set of challenges in proximity to a consecrated corpus, a prize, but The Game of War is a game of

decentralized space itself, the assets of war strung out in long lines and held together by a tissue of interconnection.

Seen in this light, the game seems less nostalgic for bygone eras. The key is the network of lines of communication, a detail of game design entirely lacking in a game like chess. Superimposed on the game board, the lines simulate the communication and logical chains of campaign warfare; Debord's rules stipulate that all pieces on the board must stay in contact with a line, else risk destruction. (Even Go, a game that is largely about spatial patterns and relationships, lacks the concept of an extended ray or any sort of network phenomenon.) 'This "war" can be fought as much on the plane of communication as that of extensible space,' writes McKenzie Wark on The Game of War (2008). Thus while perhaps tenuous, a sympathetic reading of Debord would be to say that the game's communication lines are Debord's antidote to the spectre of Napoleonic nostalgia. They are the symptomatic key into Debord's own algorithmic allegory - or allegorithm, if the term is not too clunky - of the new information society growing up all around him in the 1970s. In short, Debord's The Game of War is something like 'chess with networks'.

Chess required intense strategy, but it was ultimately too boring for Debord. The Game of War 'is completely contrary to the spirit of chess', he explained. 'Actually it was poker I was trying to imitate. Less the randomness of poker and more the powerful sense of battle' (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2006: 166). Chance has no place in The Game of War; after an opening coin toss to determine who moves first, the game plays out dice-free.

But ultimately what attracted Debord to The Game of War was not an argument about historical periodization. In his view a game can only ever be about general principles, and thus abstract war simulations like chess were more apt than the actual historical re-enactments of specific Napoleonic campaigns. Knowing precisely how Prussia fell was uninteresting to Debord. But knowing the abstract, general rules of antagonism, that was the key. Still, 'abstract and general' did not mean 'theoretical', for Debord. He considered theory to be an inferior form, one beholden to passing fancy, to perpetual obsolescence. This is why Debord was so enamoured with war. 'War', for Debord, means 'not theory' (just as for Napoleon war meant 'not ideology').[6] War is that thing which is non-vague. It springs from the heart and from a sensible and practical empiricism. It finds presence in the execution of things. War is the opposite of

the absolute. War is *contingency* - that special term so dear to late-twentieth century progressive movements.

'I'm not a philosopher', Debord confessed to Giorgio Agamben, 'I'm a strategist' (Agamben, 2006: 36). Or as he put it in *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, his final film which was produced concurrent with the game: 'no vital periods ever began from a theory. What's first is a game, a struggle, a journey' (Debord, 1999: 26).

Fig. 4: Michael Curtiz (director). *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, 1936. Film still.

 In *In girum...*, Debord incorporated footage stolen from Hollywood scenes of epic pitched battles. One such film sampled by Debord was Michael Curtiz's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* of 1936, a movie adapted from the Tennyson poem of the same name, which itself mythologized the notorious and bloody defeat of the British Cavalry in 1854 during the Crimean War. What does it mean to hijack such horse-mounted heroics and crosscut them with footage of The Game of War? As Debord wrote later with only a hint of irony, 'in a very heavy-handed and congratulatory way, *The Charge of the Light Brigade* could possibly "represent" a dozen years of interventions by the Situationist International!' (1999: 66). This 'representation' takes centre stage in The Game of War, in the form of the cavalry game tokens, the most powerful units in the game due to their elevated speed and special 'charge' ability resulting in compounded, focused damage of up to 28 attack points. Through the game he was able to relive, in a mediated environment, the types

of heroic monumentality attained in his previous interventions. But what a cruel narrative arc, that what started on the streets of Paris must end in an abstract plane of combat coefficients and win-loss percentages. 'The SI is like radioactivity', he joked in a letter to one of his Italian translators. 'One speaks little of it, but detects some traces almost everywhere. And it lasts a long time' (2006a: 45-46).

A game is a machine, but a book is never a machine. Of this Debord was certain. 'No matter how often one would want to replay them', he wrote in the preface to the 1987 book devoted to the game, 'the operations of game play remain unpredictable in both form and effect' (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2006: 7).[7] In Debord's view there is a stark difference between The Game of War and the pastime of military re-enactment, wherein a specific historical battle is restaged with little unpredictability in its outcome. The re-enactment of a specific historical event was uninteresting to Debord. His desire was not that of a nostalgia for a past event. Rather, he sought to model, in a generic and universal way, antagonism itself. 'Those who are well-versed in strategy', he wrote, 'will see in operation here an actual model of warfare' (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2006: 7).

The 1987 book is a meditation on losing. But who lost the match, Alice or Guy? Unfortunately no explicit answers exist in the text as to who played the North faction and who played the South. But one may say with precision: Debord played the South. He is the one who perishes in the end.

How is it possible to make such a claim? To explain it I must detour slightly toward a matter of some delicacy. It concerns a number of mistakes that exist in the Becker-Ho and Debord book of 1987, mistakes which largely persist in both the 2006 French reprint of the book and in the 2007 English translation.[8] In addition to a few minor graphical errors, the book contains one patently illegal move, plus five additional moves that, while more subtle in nature, are also illegal given a proper interpretation of the game rules.[9] The first illegal move concerns turn 9' (turns are numbered 1, 1', 2, 2', 3, 3', etc.). A southern infantry unit moves to position I17. However, infantry can only move one square at a time, and thus the book would require that one of the infantry units move two squares. The five additional illegal moves are as follows: the K15 infantry in move 14'; the L12 cavalry in move 17'; the I9 infantry in move 35'; the J10 infantry in move 36'; and the J14 infantry in move 46'. In each of these instances, the unit in question would be thrust out of communication during the course of the player's turn. However,

according to the game rules, non-communicable pieces are inert and cannot move. Thus there is an impasse: in order for these five moves to be legal, one would have to overlook one of the game's rules governing the 'online' and 'offline' nature of units. So, assuming that all game rules must be followed, these five moves must be marked illegal.

There are two final details worth underscoring. First, all of these mistakes are committed by the same player, the southern player; North commits no fouls. Second, (almost) all of these mistakes remain unremedied through multiple authorial and editorial stages: Becker-Ho and Debord's original playing of the match in question; Debord's documentation of the match and his writing of the annotations contained in the book; then three subsequent rounds of editorial oversight, in 1987, 2006, and 2007. Yet after all that, roughly one out of every eight full turns documented in this book contains an error. How could this be? How could so many mistakes pass through five rounds of scrutiny? Would we forgive him if *Society of the Spectacle* contained a nontrivial mistake in logic on every eighth page? What can explain this blindness?

Let me stress in passing that the identification of these mistakes is not meant to be a mere schoolmarmish act of one-upmanship, pointing out that Debord and Becker-Ho failed to publish a typo-free book. It is much more than that. What must be understood is that the identification of these mistakes reveals a very different sort of textual 'fact' than one might reveal in the identification of a typo, a misspelled word, or even a minor grammatical blunder in a work of literature. These mistakes are not orthographical or even simply syntactical in nature. They are algorithmic. Which is to say, they deal not with a relatively localized condition of correct writing (in, for example, the case of a misspelled word), but with the correct execution of rule-bound action. The correct execution of rules is rarely ever localizable; it implies dramatic repercussions in the diachronic progression of the artefact in question, be it a game or other action-based text. Traditional texts are not executed - I will happily allow the Derrideans in the room to blanch at such a claim - and therefore the status of a fault in an algorithmic text is of a very different order than the status of a fault in a traditional text. For example, a false move or an incident of cheating in a game will essentially invalidate the game from that point onward. As any school child knows, cheating taints a game to such a degree that any outcome will 'not count'. One is obligated to 'start over'. Thus I would not think it too dramatic to assert that the Becker-Ho and

Debord book of 1987, in some basic sense, does not count. We must call for a 'do over'. (But is this not in the end the most Derridean claim of all, that the text is, in some actual, demonstrable way, flawed to the core?)

Let me summarize: first there is a hypothesis on the table (that Debord played the South), and second there is a set of exegetical observations (that the Becker-Ho and Debord book of 1987 contains a number of nontrivial mistakes). Where does this lead?

A common assumption that people make when learning of the mistakes in The Game of War book is that Debord must have played North. The argument goes roughly like this: since Debord was the game designer and had been playing the game, or some form of it, since the middle 1950s, he would be so intimate with the game rules that he would not break any of them. This line of reasoning locates Debord as the northern player, and Becker-Ho the southern.

While such an argument is somewhat persuasive, I want to offer a different argument that strikes me as ultimately more persuasive. I want to suggest that instead of relying on a psychological rationale (what Debord did or did not know, what he did or did not intend, etc.), it is more productive to rely on a structural - or we might even say an algorithmic - rationale. The mistakes are not so much a red herring as they are decoys for what is actually happening. Instead of a style of mind, therefore, let us speak instead of a style of code. Let us speak of algorithmic and structural aesthetics.
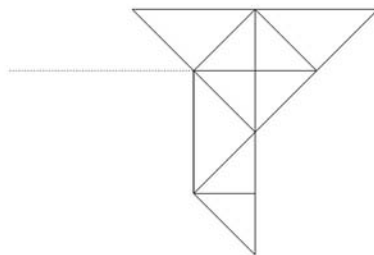

Fig. 5: Visualization of combat relationships for the southern player in Guy Debord's The Game of War, 'Explanatory Diagrams, Figure 5' (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2007: 33).

Visualization of combat relationships for the
southern player in Guy Debord's The Game of
War, "Explanatory Diagrams, Figure 6."
Source: Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord, *A
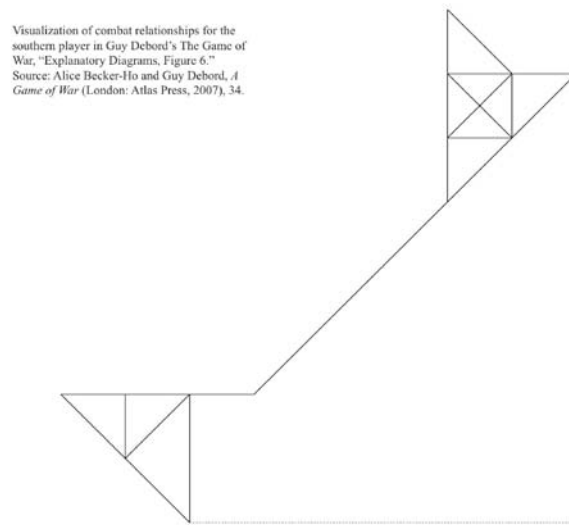Game of War* (London: Atlas Press, 2007), 34.

Fig. 6: Visualization of combat relationships for the southern player in Guy Debord's The Game of War, 'Explanatory Diagrams, Figure 6' (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2007: 34).

Important to this algorithmic aesthetics is the concept of optimization, that is, the notion that in any rule-based system there is always an optimal state of affairs in which the structure at play is exploited to the fullest. In the case of The Game of War, optimal troop formations are identified by crystalline shapes such as lattices, ladders, X-formations, crosses, and wings. The reason for this is straight forward. The game rules (which are an algorithm of a certain sort) define states of affairs. In particular they define things like attack coefficients and defensive coefficients, plus the commutativity of these power coefficients to both friendly and enemy players across the grid of the game board. Since attack and defence propagate in straight lines, the game tends to privilege formations with strut shapes, such as lattices and crosses. These structures can be described as crystalline in the sense that they offer a highly organized, local micro-structure (for example, a cross) that may be iterated multiple times to create durable material forms. 'Crystal' aesthetics, then, is an aesthetic of the superego: it mandates optimal material behaviour through the full execution of rules. If an algorithm is sufficiently simple, the point of maximal exploitation may be known. If a gamer is sufficiently experienced with the rules of a game he or she will learn the point of maximal exploitation and, since it is in his or her interest, will enact these techniques of optimal exploitation as often as possible. For example, in The Game of War, this crystal aesthetics appears via unit formations in the shape of crosses, ladders, and wings. Figures 7-8 demonstrate the southern player's affection for such formations. The same southern

formations are also seen in figures 5-6, which derive from the 'Explanatory Diagrams' section of the game rules (which we know were authored by Debord, not Becker-Ho), in which the southern player is the 'protagonist', even if for purposes of explanation. The northern player displays none of the same ticks anywhere in the book.[10]

The hypothesis, then, is less to indicate precisely that Debord played the south side and Becker-Ho played the north. And there is little value gained in trying to demonstrate that he was a more skilled player than she, or vice-versa. This would amount to little more than petty intra-marital speculation, and to what end? The hypothesis is that both the south player and the author of the game rules are the same person, because they both display the above described crystalline style of game play. Debord is that player and hence played South.
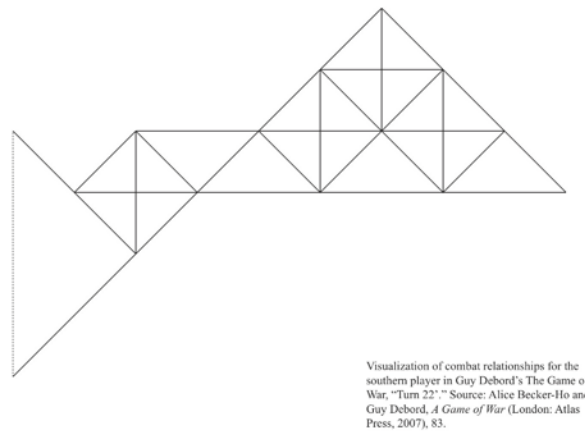

Visualization of combat relationships for the southern player in Guy Debord's The Game of War, "Turn 22'." Source: Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord, *A Game of War* (London: Atlas Press, 2007), 83.

Fig. 7: Visualization of combat relationships for the southern player in Guy Debord's The Game of War, Turn 22' (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2007: 83).

Visualization of combat relationships for the
southern player in Guy Debord's The Game of
War, "Turn 44'." Source: Alice Becker-Ho and
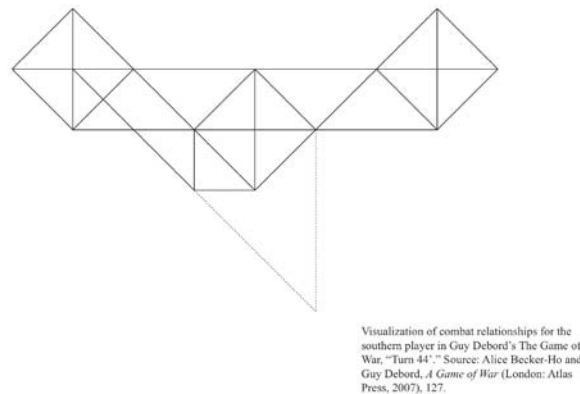Guy Debord, *A Game of War* (London: Atlas
Press, 2007), 127.

Fig. 8: Visualization of combat relationships for the southern player in Guy Debord's The Game of War, Turn 44' (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2007: 127).

So in the end the mistakes (turns 14', 17', 35', 36', and 46') are something of a red herring. In identifying play styles it is much more important to identify higher-level algorithmic skill (knowledge of how rules can be exploited for optimal game states), than it is to worry over small, largely technical mistakes.

But does this not lead to a new contradiction, that the very same crystalline player, who knows the optimal troop formation throughout the course of the match, and who displays a 'macho' algorithmic affect, is the same player who repeatedly makes small mistakes (turns 14', 17', 35', 36', and 46')? How could this be? Wouldn't this seem to invalidate the notion that the crystalline player is an algorithmic agent first and foremost?

The answer requires a sense of how algorithmic knowledge works. The answer lies in the fact that it is possible for a single individual to be skilled at upper-level knowledge of pattern formation and rule-bound behaviour, while still failing at more demanding, highly technical execution of those operations. Programmers often work in this manner: most programmers have a cultivated sense of algorithmic knowledge, and yet even the most skilled programmers are unable to identify certain bugs that for the machine are trivial to identify. There are machines and then there are machines. In the case of Debord, we have a crystalline player who is adept at the level of game play (that is, the programmer's level), but who, like most of us, is never truly a machine at the level of the Real.

So Debord plays the South. He is the one who loses in the end. But he doesn't just lose, worse, he throws in the towel, punishing himself with a stern lecture on the necessity of better strategic knowledge and planning. The final annotation of the match appears at the moment of South's concession:

> The South ceases its hostilities. It's time now for him to reflect on the operations of the campaign, recalling the unchanging theories of war, in order to understand the string of circumstances, the assumptions, and maybe also any relevant mental traits recognizable in his command, that this time led the North to victory (Becker-Ho & Debord, 2006: 127).

What are these relevant mental traits? Has he gone mad? Or worse, has she? One wonders if Debord ever really won anything, or if the entire history - the Situationist International and all the rest - was always leading up to this end and this end alone. First cinema and philosophy, and finally the bourgeois parlour game.

Certainly the domain of simulation and modelling is always something of a bitter pill for progressive movements. This is the root anxiety lurking beneath the surface of Debord's game. The left will always be deceived in the domain of abstraction. This is not to say that Spirit or the *logos* are by necessity contrary to progressive political movements. Nevertheless the lofty realm of rational idealism has always been something of a hindrance to those suffering from the harsh vicissitudes of material fact. And here one must revisit a long history indeed, of traditionalism versus transformation, of philosophy versus sophistry, of essence versus process, of positivism versus dialectics, of social science versus 'theory', and so on.

Progressive art movements are very good at beginnings, but terrible at endings. As Debord said in 1978 amidst his losses (the death of the SI, the 'end' of the cinema, his expanding waistline and vanishing sobriety): 'avant-gardes have but one time' (1999: 47).

We might say something similar about leftist cultural production in general: (1) the left is forever true in the here and now, always in the grip of its own immediate suffering, but (2) it will forever be defeated in the end, even if it finds vindication there. This is why

Debord can occupy himself with both 'struggle' and 'utopia'. It is also a window into why Debord became obsessed late in life, not with street revolt, but with the sublimation of antagonistic desire into an abstract rule book. It is not that the past is always glorious and the future antiseptic. Quite the opposite, both past and future are internally variegated into alternately repressive and liberating moments. For the left, the 'historical present' is one of immediate justice won through the raw facts of struggle and sacrifice. In short, the historical present is always *true*, but forever at the same time *bloody*. But the future, the utopian imagination, is a time of complete liberation forged from the mould of the most profound injustice. In short, utopia is always *false*, but forever at the same time *free*.

Endnotes

[1] Negri was a victim of Italy's draconian Reale law of 1975 and the antiterrorist legislations of 1979 and 1980, which among other things suspended *habeas corpus*, allowing for preventative detention of suspects for a period of three years and three months without trial.

[2] I thank Richard Barbrook for bringing this letter to my attention.

[3] Of course play was at the heart of Debord's work since the beginning. 'The situationist project was ludic above all else', writes one of his biographers. 'Debord's life revolved around games, seduction and warfare, provocation and dissimulation, labyrinths of various kinds, and even catacombs where the knights of the lettrist round table played a game of "whoever loses (himself) wins"' (Kaufmann, 2006: 265). Debord's interest in games coincided with his self-imposed exile to a small town in the centre of France after the events of 1968. 'I have long tried to lead a life of obscurity and evasion so that I may better develop my experiments in strategy', he confessed in 1978. 'My research results will not be delivered in cinematic form' (1999: 50). One may assume that 'not in cinematic form' is a reference to the new ludic form of the Kriegspiel; a footnote reminds us that this was Debord's last film.

There is also an interesting overlap between the Situationist International and the work of Johan Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Constant in particular was inspired by Huizinga, as evidenced in a late interview with

Benjamin Buchloh in which the former Situationist architect aims to reconcile Huizinga and Marx: 'It is not so difficult, I should think, to make a link between Huizinga and Marx. ... Huizinga, in his *Homo Ludens*, was speaking about a state of mind, not about a new kind of humanity; of human being, but in a certain sense a state of mind, of certain temporary conditions of human beings. For instance, when you are at a carnival, a feast, a wedding party. Temporarily you become the *homo ludens*, but then the next day you can be the *homo faber* again' (Constant, 2001: 24-25). The final phrase refers to the foreword of Huizinga's book in which he evokes, first, the classical notion of *homo sapiens*, followed by the modern, industrial (and one may assume, although Huizinga resists using the name, Marxian) notion of *homo faber* or 'man the maker' (1950). Yet Huizinga's politics were more *ancien régime* than progressive revolutionary, a detail often overlooked in the frequent connections made between Huizinga and Situationism.

[4] In actual fact Debord had tinkered with the Kriegspiel in some form or another since the 1950s. The first recorded mention of the game dates to 1956, where, in a text on the 'Project for an Educational Labyrinth', Debord mentions the game by name, and describes it as a mixture of chess and poker (2006b: 285).

[5] McKenzie Wark calls the game 'Debord's "retirement project"' (2008). Tom McDonough says something similar about Debord's mature work: 'We might say that Debord was born into this class [the petty bourgeoisie] and, at the end of his life, returned to it'. In McDonough's assessment the late Debord is 'marked by the deployment and consolidation of a normative - if not archaic - conception of selfhood' (2006: 42, 40).

[6] Napoleon was responding at the time to the recent coinage of the term 'ideology' by Destutt de Tracy in 1796. Napoleon spat on the concept, calling ideology a 'diffuse metaphysics' responsible for 'all misfortunes which have befallen our beautiful France'. These quotations are cited without reference in Williams (1976: 154).

[7] The generative quality of games coincided with Debord's penchant late in life for autobiographical introspection. This new intuitive, unpredictable media format became a useful figuration of the self. 'With his "war game" Debord formalized his rules for living. It was his most *autobiographical* work, the only one that would be recognized as a work, because it was inexhaustible' (Kaufmann, 2006: 267).

[8] Over and above the fact that there exist *bona fide* mistakes in the Becker-Ho and Debord book, there unfortunately also exist deviations and mistranslations in the available English editions. First, the title and format of the book changed in translation: In the original French publication, the documentation of the match appears first, followed by the rules in appendix form; the English publication reverses the priority, with rules first and the 'record of a game' second; the French title is 'The Game of War', the English 'A Game of War'. Additionally, the two existing English translations of the game rules - Donald Nicholson-Smith's translation for Atlas Press and an inferior translation bundled at the end of Len Bracken's biography of Debord -both misstate details. Whereas Debord indicated that a charge consists of any number of cavalry in a contiguous, straight line and immediately adjacent to the enemy, Nicholson-Smith has no fewer than 'all four' cavalry in series, while Bracken allows for non-continuous series. Bracken also mischaracterizes the combat mechanic when he states that, after successful destruction of the enemy, 'the destroyer must occupy the empty square'. In fact Debord stipulated the opposite, that it is not obligatory to occupy the empty square, nor could it be, given how movement and attack function more generally in the game. Bracken inverts another rule when he states that communication units can destroy arsenals by occupying them (they cannot). See Bracken (1997: 240-249) and Becker-Ho & Debord (2007: 11-26). I thank Adam Parrish for first discovering some of these discrepancies. In fact, the publication of 1987 contained, by Debord's own admission, five mistakes in placement of pieces during various points in the game. Many of the mistakes were only pointed out by readers, one of which he acknowledged in a letter of March 9, 1987 (2006a: 458-459).

[9] I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Stephen Kelly and Jeff Geib, who first pointed out some of these mistakes to me and also helped refine and clarify in my mind the manner in which these mistakes appear in the book. Those wishing a more detailed summary of errata should consult the following web site: http://r-s-g.org/kriegspiel/errata.php.

[10] The highly structured, crystalline forms displayed here are all the more interesting when compared to the unstructured, wandering topographical forms featured in much Situationist work. See, for example, Guy Debord's famous map from the late 1950s titled 'The Naked City'.

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