

GUY DEBORD'S WARGAME IN SITU

Video Games -- "Kriegspiel" is the adaptation of a work created by the writer in 1965
by *Sébastien Delahaye*

"C'mon!" you say to yourself. "A video game inspired by Guy Debord? What'll they come up with next to get Libé's attention?" No, really: a Debord game. A war-like game. Kriegspiel is a genuine computer wargame, with two armies engaged in a battle to the death. The game appeared on the Internet ten days ago, and it's not finished yet, but a playable beta version is already available (1).

Kriegspiel's roots go back a few years: in 1965, the author of *The Society of the Spectacle* invented his own wargame, a two-player game entitled *The Game of War*, and filed a patent for it. It's a serious game, judging from the description: "All the tactical and strategic relationships embodied in the game are consistent with the principles laid down in Clausewitz's theory of war, grounded in classical eighteenth-century warfare and further developed during the periods of the French Revolution and Empire." With a purpose: "We may say that this game accurately portrays all the factors at work in real war, and, more generally, the dialectics of all conflict."

In 1977, a very limited edition of the game was released with a board made of fabric and pieces carved by an artisan. It quickly sold out. The game was not reissued, but Debord, along with his spouse Alice Becker-Ho, released a book in 1987 that restated the rules of the game (2). In 2007, the book was translated into English for the first time.

This is how the New York-based digital art collective RSG (Radical Software Group) found out about the game. "The idea came from an enduring interest in the work of Guy Debord, his political thought, his acerbic character, his relentless critique," explains Alexander Galloway, spokesman for RSG. "The computer game is a work of historical and scholarly research. Our computer version is an attempt to translate Debord's themes into contemporary language, and in doing so, find new relevance and a deeper understanding of his legacy. When Debord originally designed the game, personal computers didn't yet exist. The computer game is both an homage to Debord, but also a transformation at the level of code."

The game consists of a rectangular, virtual game board of 500 spaces, on which one places impenetrable mountains, fortresses and combat units (infantry, cavalry, artillery...). Each player must manage the movements, attacks, and defenses of his units in the most effective way possible. The players must especially take into account communications: the ability of the units to receive orders, given their position on the board.

EASTER EGGS. The rules of the *Game of War*, even if they're not very complex, are lengthy and precise, and create innumerable tactical possibilities. Kriegspiel functions identically to Debord's game. The developers have even refused to imagine the possibility of playing alone against the computer: "Debord fashioned the game as a tool for learning strategic thought in the face of real antagonists. Hence the computer edition is played online against a single opponent." But this apparent faithfulness hasn't stopped RSG from taking some liberties with the original game: "We're currently including in the game some easter eggs that players will be able to discover," confided Alexander Galloway. "We would like to add an easter egg that transforms gameplay significantly. The reasons are entirely historical: Debord wrote in his letters that his game was a simulation of warfare

as it existed in the 18th Century. War today is very different. Thus we have toyed with the idea of refashioning the game around the principles of asymmetric war that so dominate the world at the turn of the new millennium--urban combat, unconventional weaponry, cellular organization, guerrilla tactics."

OPEN SOURCE. To illustrate the terrain and units, RSG called on Israeli artist Mushon Zer-Aviv (3), who has given the game a unique and surprising style, mixing video games and board games. His clear and sober graphic style functions wonderfully during combat. The collective of American developers don't know when the final version of Kriegspiel, half work of art, half war game, will be available, but they intend to open the source code to all, so that each person can modify it and so that it will remain free of charge.

(1) <http://r-s-g.org/kriegspiel/>

(2) *Le Jeu de la guerre*, Guy Debord et Alice Becker-Ho, Gallimard, reissued in 2006.

(3) <http://www.shual.com/>