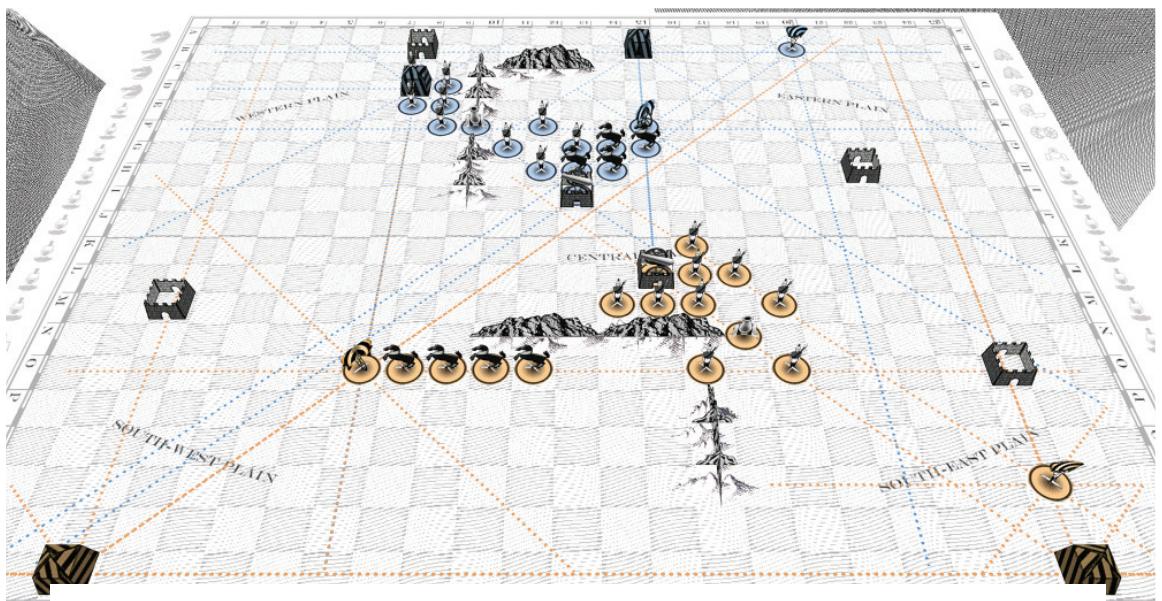




Kriegspiel

In 1978 the French Situationist Guy Debord designed and fabricated a board game called “The Game of War.” Thirty years later RSG resurrects this largely forgotten work, translating the game rules from French to Java and releasing it as a free online computer game.

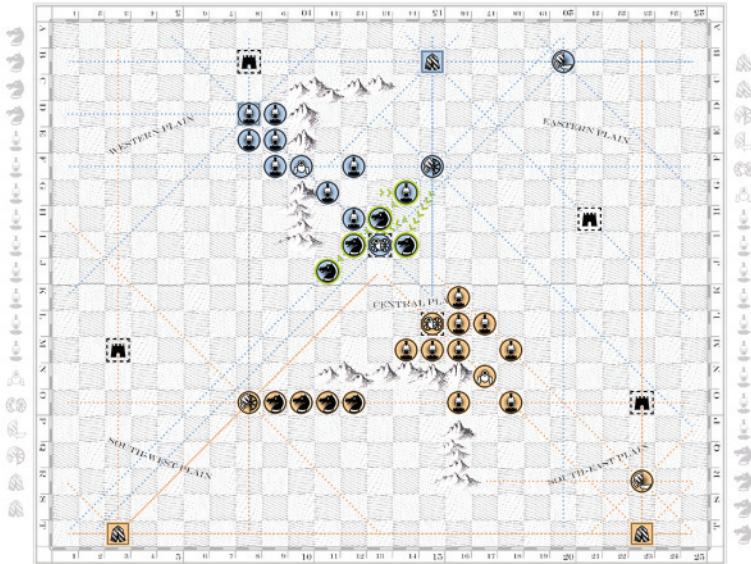
We present here documentation of a typical match, including description and running commentary.



The Match Begins

The opening reveals both players massed strong in the center of the terrain.

The Game of War is a two-player board game. Each side may position its pieces secretly in advance. As the match opens the arrangement of the two armies is revealed. The goal of the game is to win by either eliminating all enemy forces, or by destroying the enemy's two arsenals.

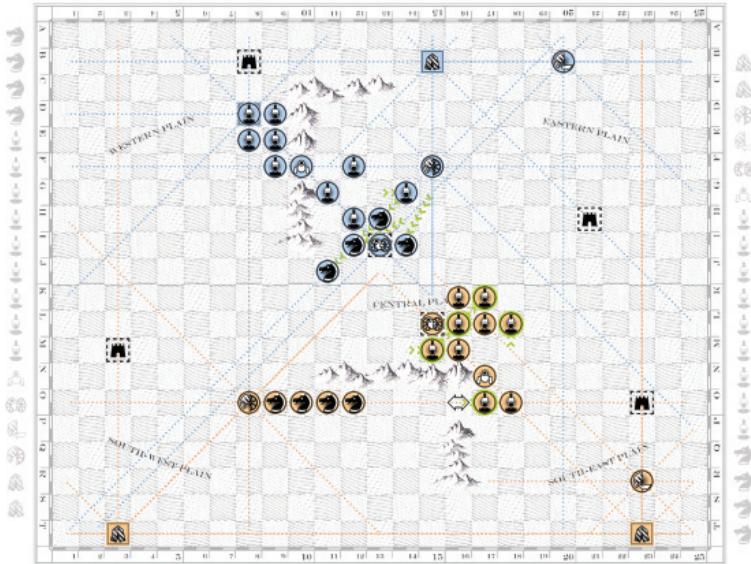


Turn 1 (North)

North begins to advance quickly toward the Southwest Plain.

A player may move up to five units each turn, followed by a single attack against an enemy unit. Units can move either one or two squares per turn, based on their type.

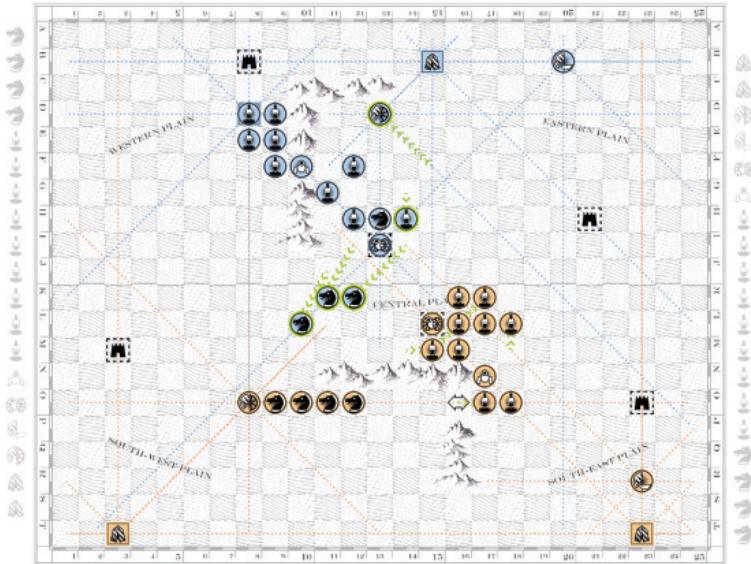
Each player's two immobile arsenals radiate lines of communication vertically, horizontally, and at 45 degree diagonals. This communication network must be maintained and protected. The mobile relay units can reflect any line of communication aimed at them.



Turn 1 (South)

South begins by tailoring its formation for a push toward the Eastern Plain.

All units must remain in direct connection with their own lines of communication, or be adjacent to a friendly unit in communication. If not, the unit goes offline and becomes inert. Lines of communication can be severed by the enemy and thus are crucial to strategy.



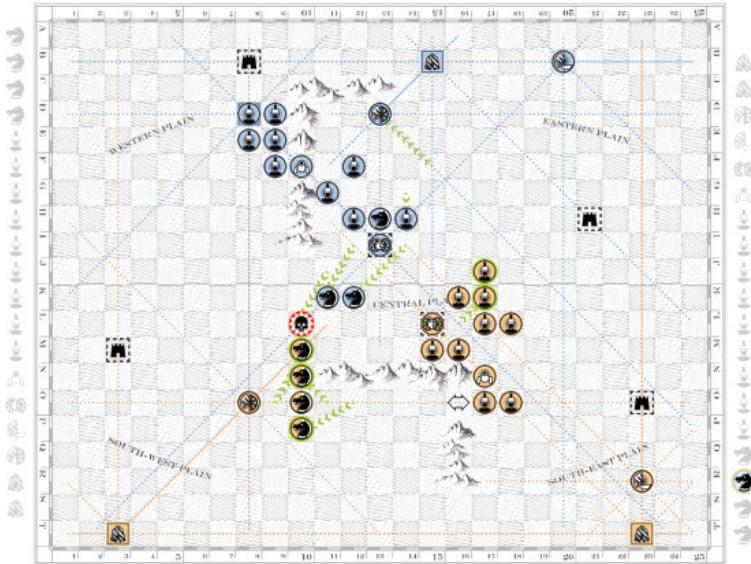
Turn 2 (North)

North's cavalry units continue to move quickly toward the southwest. Like a vanguard, they move rapidly and are the most deadly units on the board. Keeping them safe is paramount.

Several fortresses also appear across the territory. They are unaligned with either side and offer a defensive bonus to any piece that occupies them.

The two mountain ranges offer protection. They are impassible and block attack. However each mountain range contains a single mountain pass to allow for transit across the mountains.

Lines of communication are blocked by mountains and by enemy units. However communication passes freely through mountain passes.

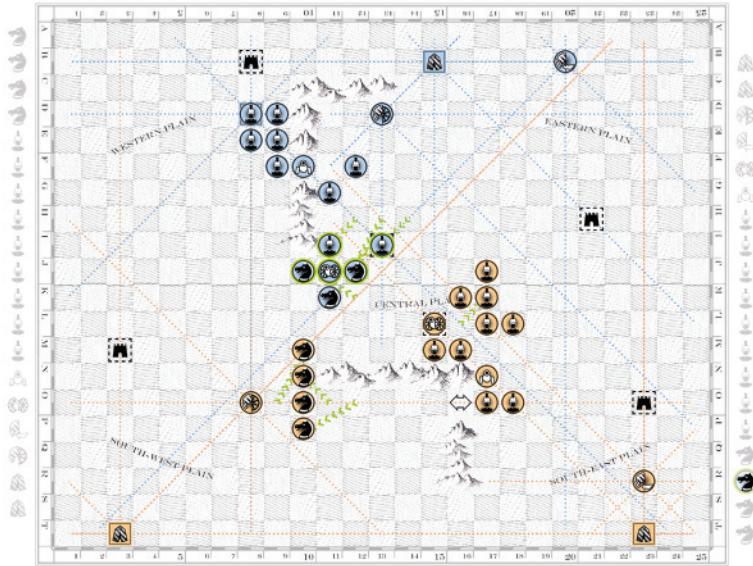


Turn 2 (South)

Catching North off guard, South's cavalry executes a “charge” and is rewarded with an early kill. However in attacking, South also necessarily dilutes its defensive strength, precipitating a possible counterattack.

Combat works as follows: if the aggregated offensive power aimed at a unit is larger than the aggregated defensive power supporting that unit, the unit may be captured and removed from the board.

Cavalry have a fairly standard base attack and defensive power, and their range and movement are limited to two squares. However in addition cavalry possess a special “charge” ability, which nearly doubles their attack power when adjacent to the enemy. The charge can stack with multiple cavalry in a column making the cavalry extremely deadly in addition to being fast.



Turn 3 (North)

Stung after the loss of a cavalry, North chooses not to counterattack but instead regroups into a star formation around its cannon. This formation offers solid defensive protection while still allowing its forces to advance.

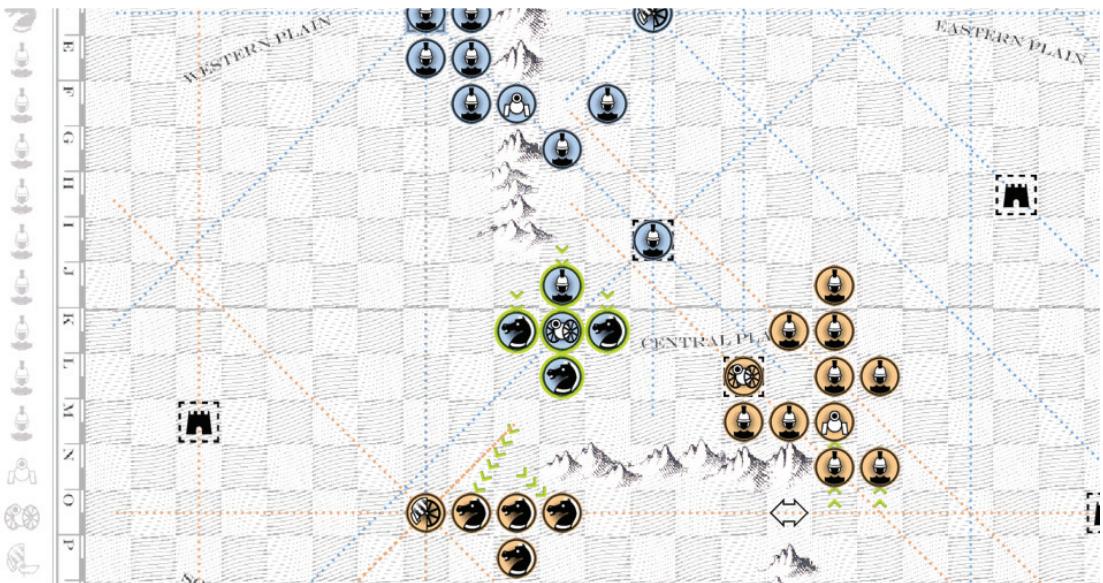
With the release of the Game of War in 1978—eleven years after publishing Society of the Spectacle and six years after disbanding the Situationist International—Debord was standing at a crossroad. “The cinema seems to me to be over” he wrote in March of that year. Disillusioned with cinema and frustrated by the reactionary trend in French political life, Debord began to turn away from representation and toward simulation. With his friend and patron Gérard Lebovici, Debord founded a game company called Strategic and Historical Games. This “Kriegspiel,” or “Game of War,” was its first product.



Turn 3 (South)

South retreats slightly in the face of superior strength by the north.

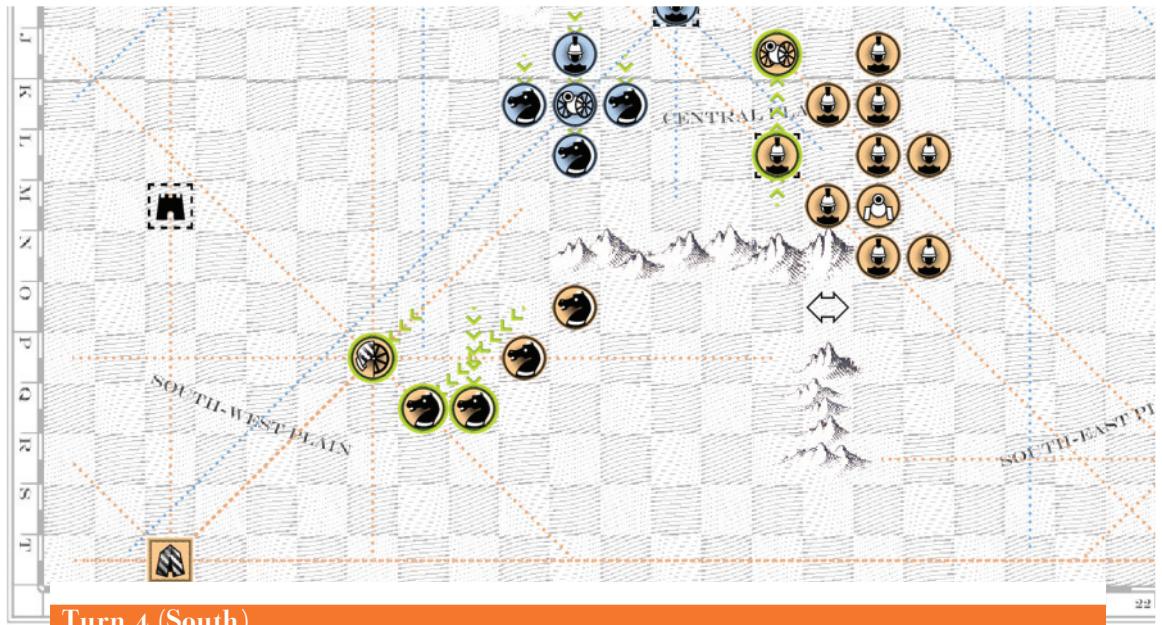
That same year, Debord also released his final film, *In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni*. In the film Debord incorporated footage from Michael Curtiz's 1936 *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, a Hollywood depiction of the notorious and bloody defeat of the British Cavalry in 1854 during the Crimean War. Debord crosscut the cavalry footage with images of the Game of War, his own simulation of warring cavalry.



Turn 4 (North)

Cautiously but with the advantage of superior strength, North pursues its quarry toward the Southwest Plain.

The game is a screen on which one might project a series of historical transitions or lapses. First is the incompatibility between the “knights of old” and the kind of antagonism modeled in a game like chess, which Debord dismissed for being too deterministic. The shift from this type of medieval warfare to that of Napoleon and Clausewitz is dramatic: from complex patterns of relation, to massified, symmetrical armies arrayed across a terrain of battle. It was the second approach that guided Debord’s design of the Game of War.



Turn 4 (South)

Realizing that its communications relay is vulnerable, South flees ahead of the advancing enemy. To remain effective, the relay must stay connected to the communication line emanating from its westerly arsenal. Thus, with its movement somewhat restricted by the relay, South's cavalry units fan out, finding partial protection in the shadow of the mountains. At the same time South moves his swift cannon up the middle, putting pressure on North's increasingly thin midfield.

The second lapse is the historical gap between Napoleon's time and that of Debord (the middle to late twentieth century). With the Algerian war shaking the French republic to its core, the nature of warfare was changed in Debord's time away from the Prussian model and toward new threats: counter-insurgency, urban conflict, the growing inability to distinguish between civilians and enlisted soldiers, and all the other complexities of postmodern warfare.

Yet, there is a third transition, which of course Debord might never have predicted. This is the migration into network-centric warfare taking place today, in which soldiers are reorganized into flexible, interconnected pods, and networks themselves are deployed as weapons on the battlefield. In this way, it is possible to "version" the game—to borrow terminology from the field of software development. That is, it is possible to iterate the design of the game into new contexts and new models of antagonism. We will return to this in a moment.



Turn 5 (North)

Ignoring the enemy's feint at midfield, North advances at full tilt toward the southwest, hoping to trap its opponent.

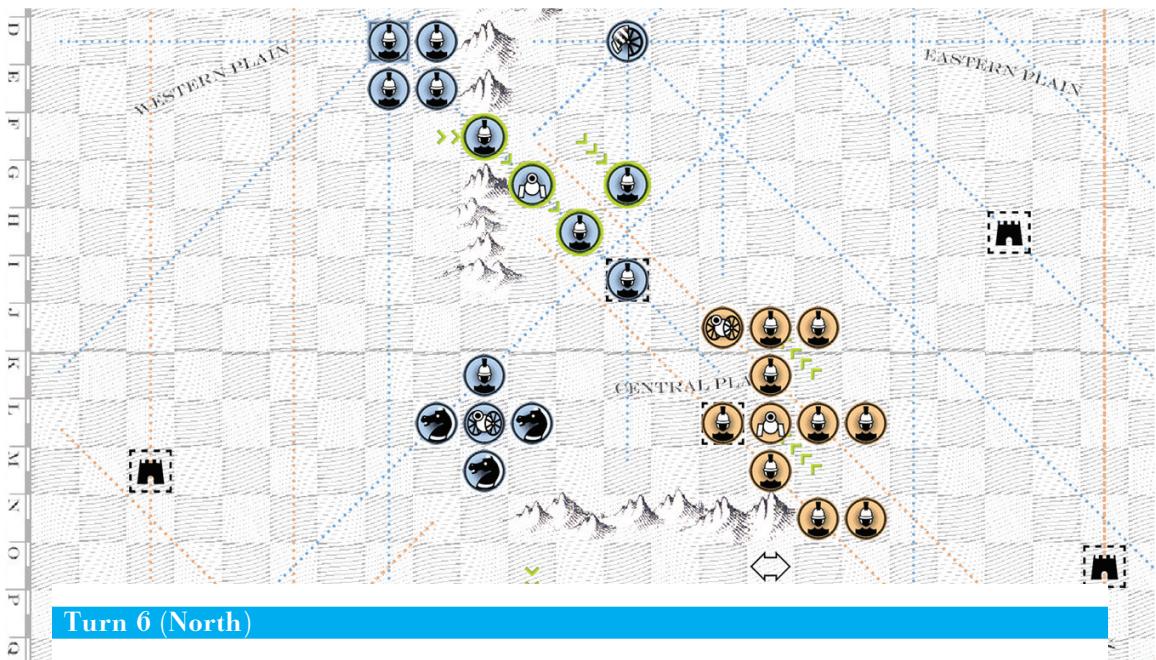
Instead of looking to the twentieth century, Debord looked back. He kept his game resolutely in the tradition of Napoleonic warfare. But why? A sympathetic reading might say that he was trying to establish simulation (and gaming) as a theoretical practice for studying the nature of armed conflict in general. And that it was necessary in this development to proceed historically, step by step. Thus after the medieval style of warfare best simulated in chess, one moves to the modern style best typified by Clausewitz and Napoleon. Such a reading might explain why Debord avoided dealing with the various asymmetric struggles happening around him, turning instead to history. In the same way that software is “versioned,” Debord may have realized that the model of antagonism simulated in a game like chess must pass through a second revolution, or version, in order to lay the historical and evolutionary foundation required to perfect simulation as an academic tool for studying the nature of conflict in general.



Turn 5 (South)

Determined to stay out of attack range, South retreats further. Yet at the same time, South is able to advance a few additional troops toward the center of the board.

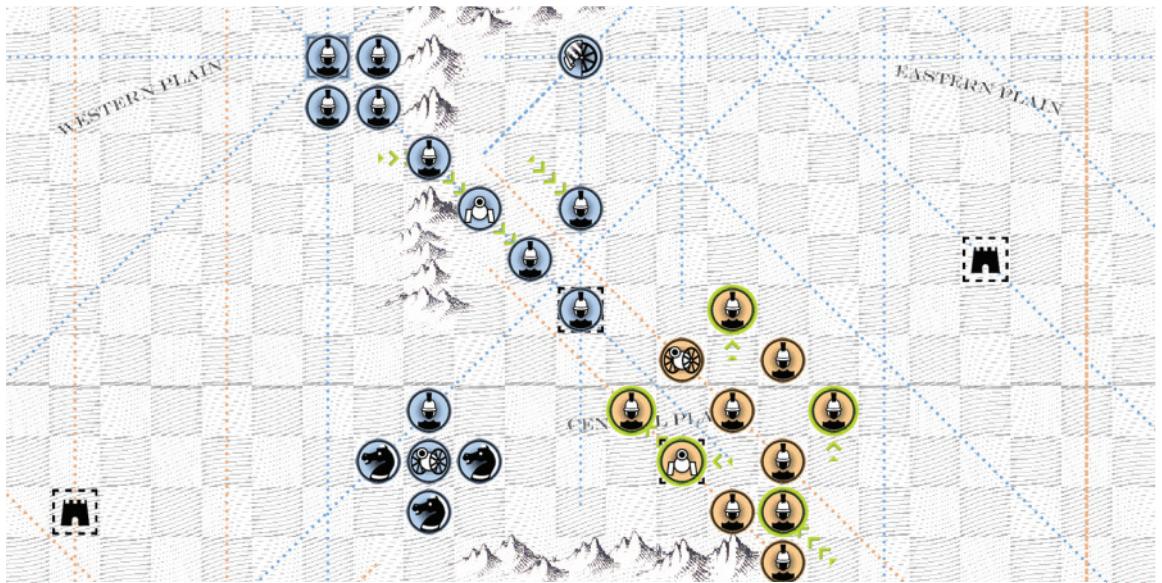
But perhaps Debord's interest in the Game of War bordered on obsession. "One may assert," he wrote, "that the [game] exactly reproduces the totality of factors that deal with war, and more generally the dialectic of all conflicts." A bold promise from a modest parlor game. Such an ambitious claim contrasts with the political climate of Debord's own times, rife as they were with new types of conflict both at home and aboard, as well as the growing ability for military computers to model antagonism with new sophisticated models. At the same time, claiming that the game reproduces "the dialectic of all conflicts" seems to run up against Debord's earlier work, which was often focused on tearing down the grand pronouncements of cultural and social "simulations."



Turn 6 (North)

Seeing the shift in troop placement, North draws more of its forces toward the battlefield in the Central Plain, for the moment forestalling any further confrontation in the southwest. A defensive axis created between the mountain pass and the fortress offers good protection.

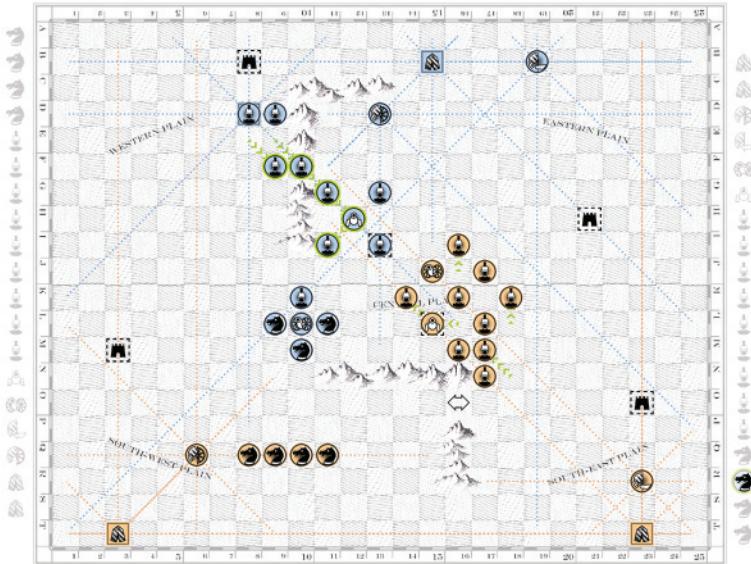
The game requires that each player weigh and anticipate the enemy's future movement so that one's actions do not facilitate a counterattack. However the game requires a quick mathematical calculation to determine the outcome of any combat encounter. This is one way in which Debord's game deviates from chess. Performing these calculations without the aid of the computer, as simple as they are, would nevertheless certainly have had an effect on the player's ability to think in a purely strategic way. It begs the question: Is Debord's game helped or hindered by a computer?



Turn 6 (South)

The sudden change in momentum toward midfield allows South to amass its forces into a powerful lattice formation, advancing slightly toward the north.

Another historical shift concerns the lines of communication. In Debord's original game there was no mechanism for displaying the lines of communication. The players themselves had to superimpose these lines using their imaginations. The computer game deviates from this approach. In the default setting, all lines of communication are drawn and updated automatically. Like the auto-calculation of combat, the drawing of the lines of communication also changes game play significantly. Not only are unintentional mistakes curtailed, there is also a more overt and strict enforcement of the rules. Each player is more likely to think of the game board in terms of a topological space, outlined by zones of conflict and lines of flight.



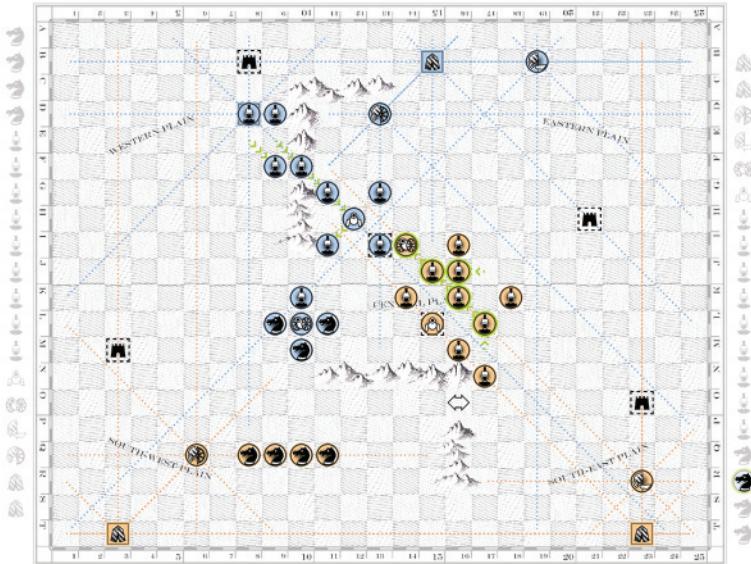
Turn 7 (North)

Both players continue to assemble “crystalline” structures on the board. These crystalline formations are desirable because they maximally optimize the combat coefficients specified in the rules of the game.

Whether or not communication lines and the combat calculations were automated, playing the game in the 1970s with pencil and paper would certainly have required an entirely different play style. Computers force a specific way of thinking. The computer establishes a system of rules, and thus it rewards any player who can exploit the system to its fullest. Game play then quickly becomes a method of achieving maximal exploitation.

For example, in the southwest of the board South must always stay at least two squares away from North's advancing cavalry. If not, it risks a strike. In this way, patterns tend to appear on the board: cross shapes, ladders, or lattices, often surrounded by invisible demilitarized zones. The rules of the game thus materialize in visible form creating shapes and relationships.

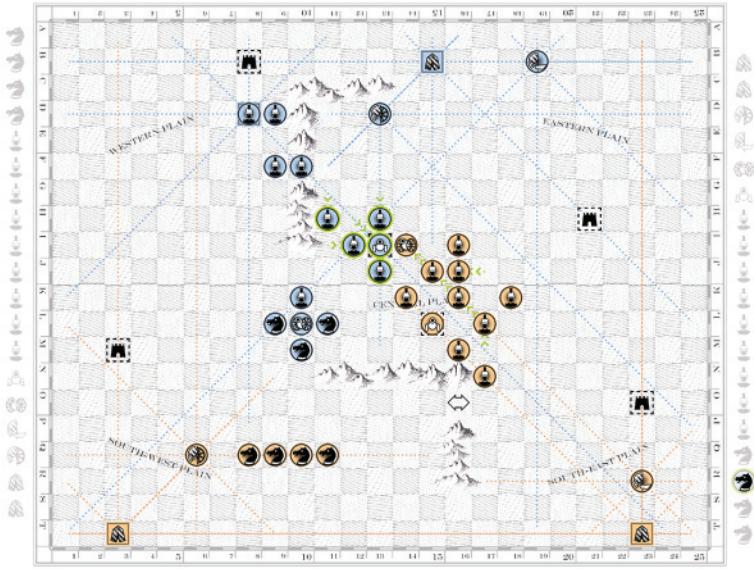
Such “crystalline” artifacts can be interpreted as an exploit of the game rules. They are conventions of behavior that grow directly out of an investigation into the rules of the system. In the case of computer games, the investigation into the system and the playing of the system merge into one thing: the practice of game play.



Turn 7 (South)

Seeing that the opponent's communication line is vulnerable, South edges northwest hoping to gain a tactical advantage during the following turn.

The field of simulation, practiced by game designers and software engineers alike, requires a top-down approach. The question is often: What are the global rules of the system, and how can these rules be modeled? This approach involves abstraction, generalization, and the construction of algorithms. It is the work of the strategist, the army general, the law-maker, or the ruler.



Turn 8 (North)

North replaces the infantry with the cannon in the center of the attack, making it much more risky for South to advance against North's diagonal communication line.

On the other hand, within the realm of simulation, or within the rules of a system, there often emerges representational forms such as the practice of game play, writing, or image making. Contrasted with the realm of simulation or other globalizing, rule-based environments, representation is more often a bottom-up practice. It involves the participation of normal users, artists, storytellers, and activists.



Turn 8 (South)

South performs a sneak attack against North's swift relay using the long reach of its cannon. The loss of the relay is not fatal, but it impedes North's ability to move easily across the territory.

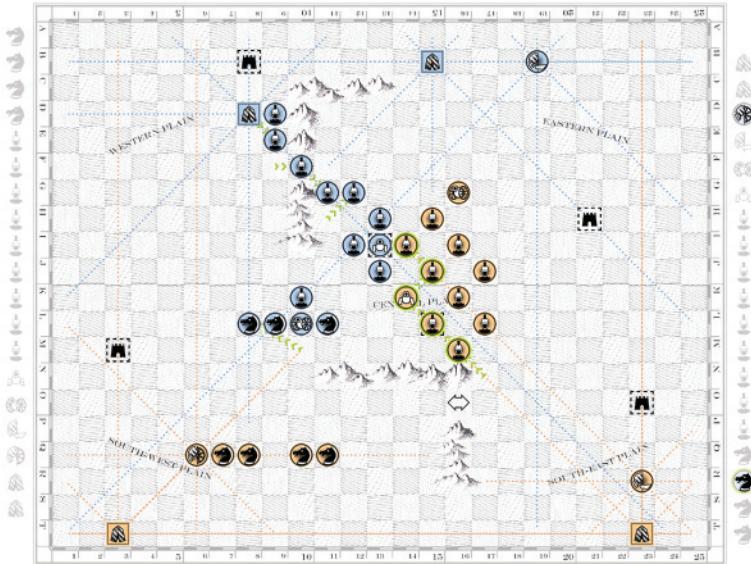
As a game designer, Debord was attempting a double gesture. On the one hand he wished to intervene within the realm of simulation, while on the other he wished to find the exploits within his own set of rules, thereby perfecting game play. Debord understood, in essence, that one must first lay the rules and then immediately learn how to excel within them.



Turn 9 (North)

North consolidates its position, focusing on the mountain pass.

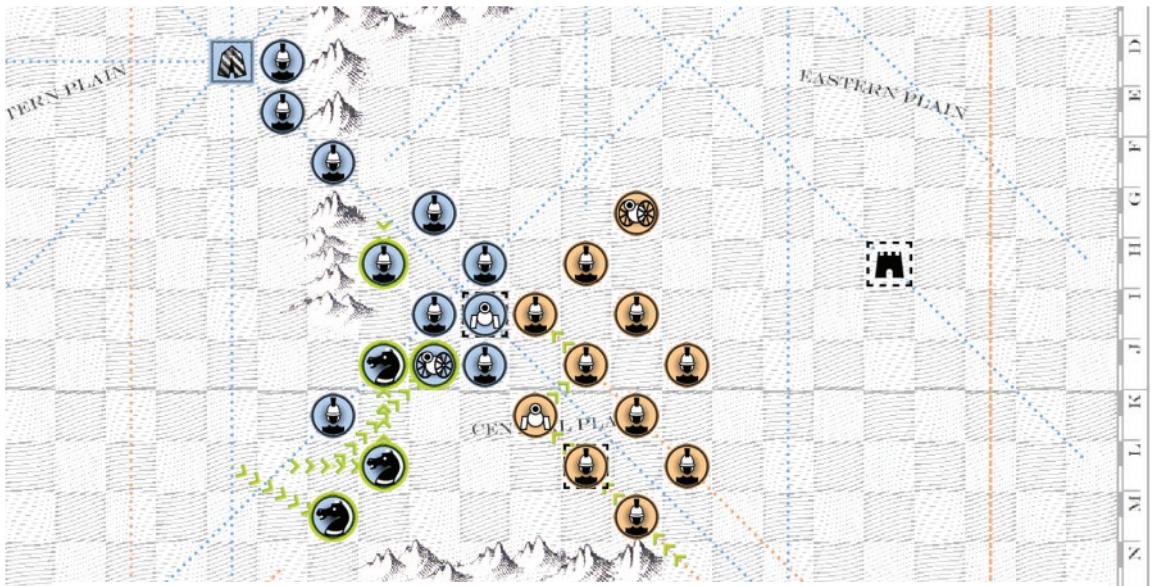
In fact several lapses in the rules were found in the book on the game that Debord and his wife published in 1987. These lapses could be interpreted as an example of imperfect practice existing within a set of “perfect” rules. It illustrates the tension between rule making and rule exploiting. So even though Debord wished his rule book to embody the “dialectic of all conflict,” this turned out to be difficult to achieve during the actual execution of a match. Games are both abstract totality and empirical practice. A game designer is always a legislator, an enforcer, but a game player is always something of a hacker.



Turn 9 (South)

With caution in mind, South inches forward while maintaining a grid formation for maximum defensive power.

Would it be possible to develop a practice that encompasses the lapse between these two approaches? Is it possible to revisit the type of play proposed here, to replay the game, and even to rewrite the rules? Are there new exploits as yet unseen? Are there new play styles as yet unknown?

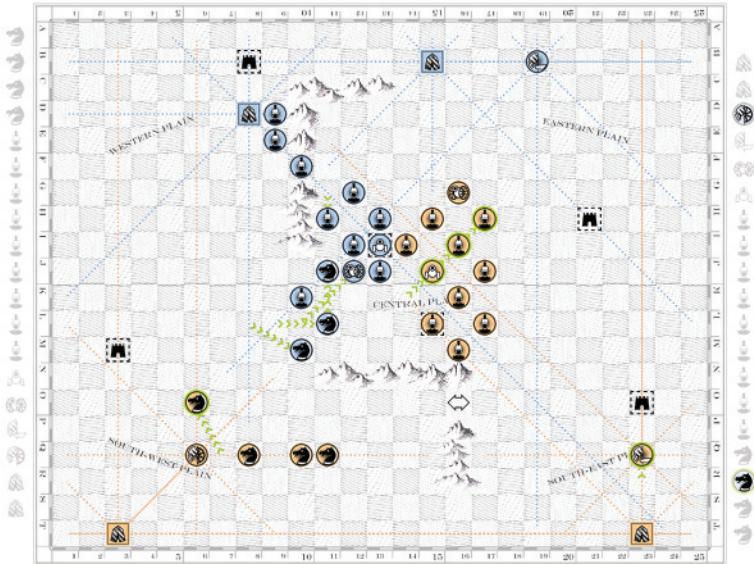


Turn 10 (North)

The detached cavalry group rejoins North's main army, strengthening its position in midfield.

Debord's Game of War, and the Napoleonic warfare it simulated, involved two centralized networks fighting each other. This kind of network diagram produces a symmetric game balanced between similarly equipped and equally powerful opponents.

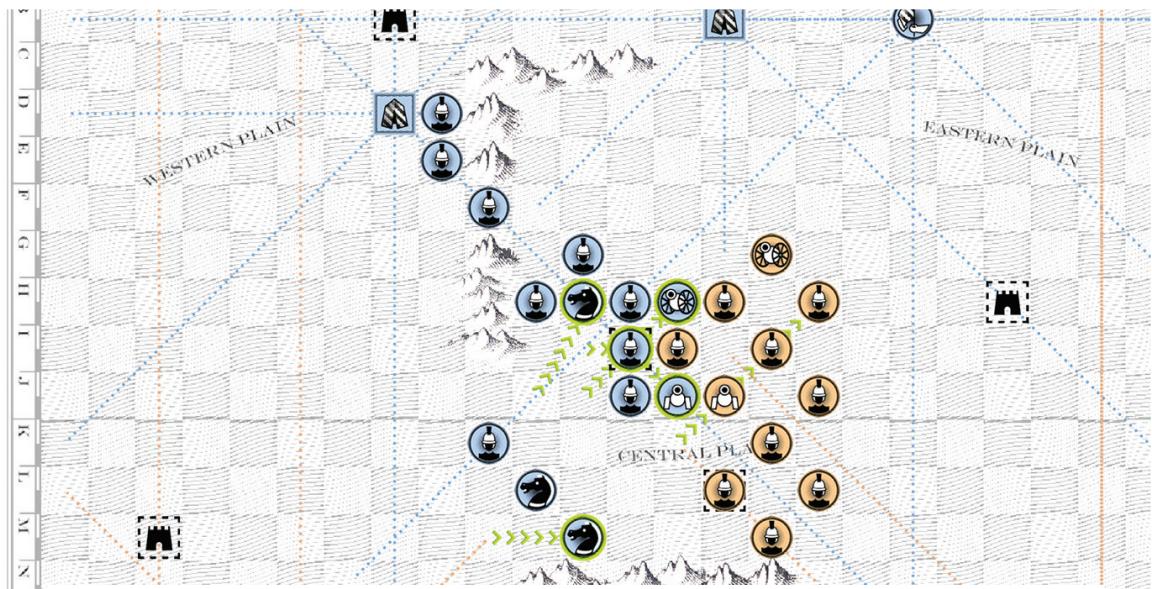
But the nature of warfare has changed since the nineteen century. The first half of the twentieth century saw two world wars and a massively decentralized form of warfare. In recent decades conflict has largely transitioned into a more distributed form. Contemporary warfare is more often asymmetrical in nature, and may often involve proxy wars like the U.S.'s so-called "War on Terror." So today one must reconsider whether Debord's game is still an effective way to study the nature of conflict?



Turn 10 (South)

South continues to advance up the Eastern Plain, however its mobility is limited in that direction because of how the Southern communication lines are positioned. As a feint South sends a single cavalry up the west side, hoping to lure some of North's units away from the battle about to take place at midfield.

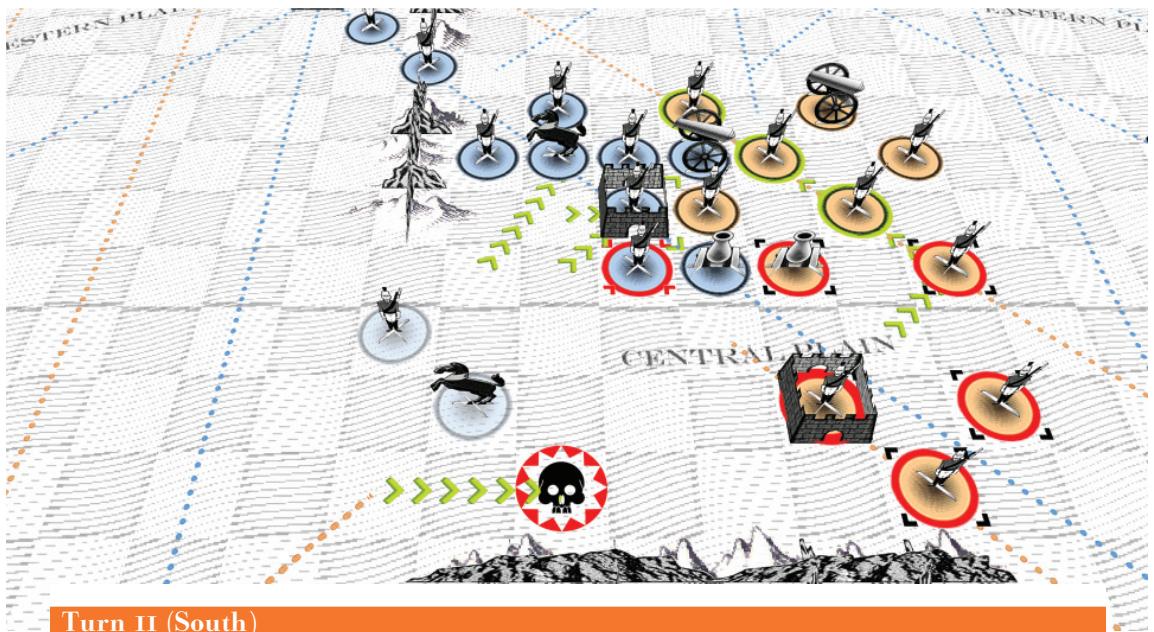
What it would mean to have a more rhizomatic or distributed version of the game? What would be the network diagram for such a game? In Debord's original rules there is a strict division between the combat units and the communication units. But what if there was an option to make each and every unit a communication unit?



Turn II (North)

Seeing the enemy dangerously close to its north arsenal, North moves as rapidly as possible to the northeast, hoping to block its adversary.

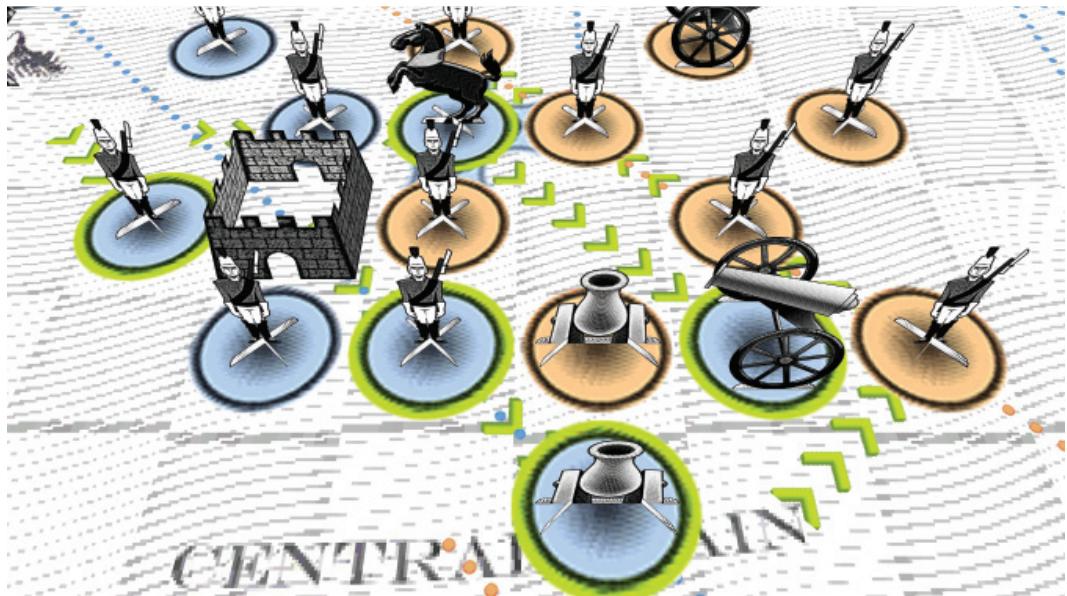
Would this make the game more rhizomatic? Possibly. The introduction of networking as a more active element in strategy would certainly put a stress on the rhizomatic virtues of flux, flight, recombination, and extension. However, new power differentials would certainly arise. We can imagine a “phase shift” option in which connectivity, not combat, became the operative force. In this instance, the ability for units to lend connectivity would outweigh their abilities as combat units. Connectivity itself would be a kind of weapon.



Turn II (South)

South severs a line of communication, forcing three enemy units offline and making them vulnerable to attack. The tide has turned.

But let us consider the question of “offline units” in greater detail. What would happen to the game if a new rule were introduced, that offline units could transform themselves into “sleeper cells”? What if offline units were granted additional abilities, shedding their factional loyalties and slipping into a rogue faction of their own? New rules would have to be devised over and above Debord’s original game. But nevertheless we can imagine a modification of the game that included rogue agents, operating autonomously or within an alternate realm of semi-autonomy.



Turn 12 (North)

With its army in disarray, North attempts a risky move toward South's rear communication connection.

Game rules are inherently open as they must be legible and intelligible to any players wishing to play. “Open sourcing” the Game of War and releasing it to the network provides a new opportunity to negotiate the rules and reestablish Debord’s theoretical practice of conflict simulation.



Turn 12 (South)

South continues to advance and captures North's second relay, while physically blocking its opponent's ability to compromise its communication lines to the rear. With its last hope gone, North surrenders the match.





Web site: <http://r-s-g.org/kriegspiel>

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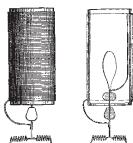
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