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Scruples, Rules of Play: A Lacanian Détournement of Scrabble¹

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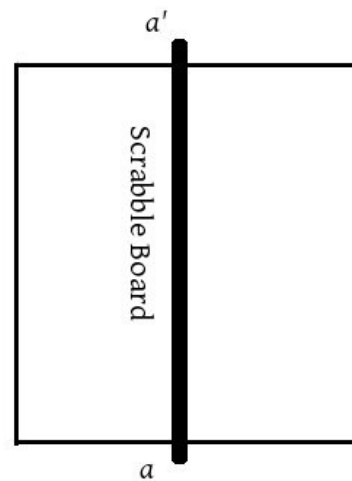
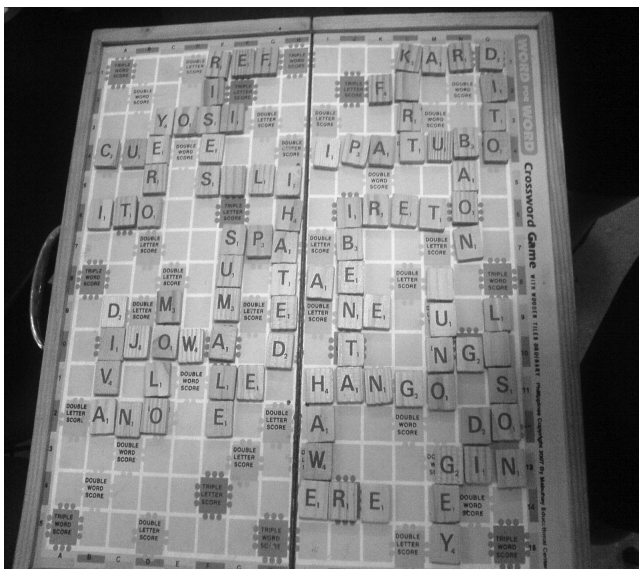
“Reread Clausewitz. The true war is always defensive.
Lacan was very strategic, and he led a defensive war in order
not to be marginalized or eliminated.”
—Phillipe Sollers

Charles Heinemann’s digitized rendition of Jacques Lacan’s prison problem (1997)² introduced two pervasive inadequacies in the mechanics of contemporary games of war: (1) the moment of hesitation, and relatedly (2) the topological knotting of the three orders (Real-Symbolic-Imaginary). The importance of this latter feature becomes particularly conspicuous in the traditional game of Scrabble when, in the case of recent advancements in digital architecture, players “perceive the game as being played in real-time” (2009).³ Against this compulsion to unknot the symbolic from the imaginary, the opportunity to re-veal the centrality of logical time inherent to all games of war (as against the hysterical repetition compulsion of ‘wars of position’)⁴ presents itself in the détournement of traditional play. For the purposes of this article, which ought to be considered an entry into the possibilities offered by such speculation, I shall attempt to keep its concomitant theory in short supply.

Lacan’s twenty-second seminar has been the cause for much confusion – one ought to give mind to the argument that there was a certain consistency of theory from the first seminar to the last.⁵ Particularly important for our purposes is the insistence that Lacan made about the

interconnection of the three orders of the Borromean knot. Lacan unequivocally stated to his listeners that the knot, that is, the topological model itself, was supported by the imaginary: “[I]n this [...] space, insofar as it is sensible, is found reduced to this minimum of three dimensions—that is, by its attachment to the symbolic and the real—where the imaginary is rooted.”⁶ In traditional play one frequently brings to mind the autonomy of the symbolic ring such that each tile is placed onto the materiality of the board facing the same direction without contradiction (see image for ‘Traditional Scrabble’ below; the image on the right is the disavowed imaginary relationship $a-a'$) – preliminary empirical observation might reveal, insofar as the tiles in symbolic arrangement are to be read according to the linearity of the horizontal and vertical axes, that, in an effort at compromise, players traditionally have the arrangements face at a right-angle from each of the two opponents. Furthermore, it might be considered unfair and unbalanced to have the linearity of the axes assume the imaginary of either one of the players at the expense of the other(s). It is this former, Lacanian, model—which arguably runs throughout all of his work, beginning with the ‘L schema’—that must be taken up in the détournement of traditional play. What traditional gamers resist, or perhaps even disavow, during play is the urgency to ‘put the imaginary back into the mix’.

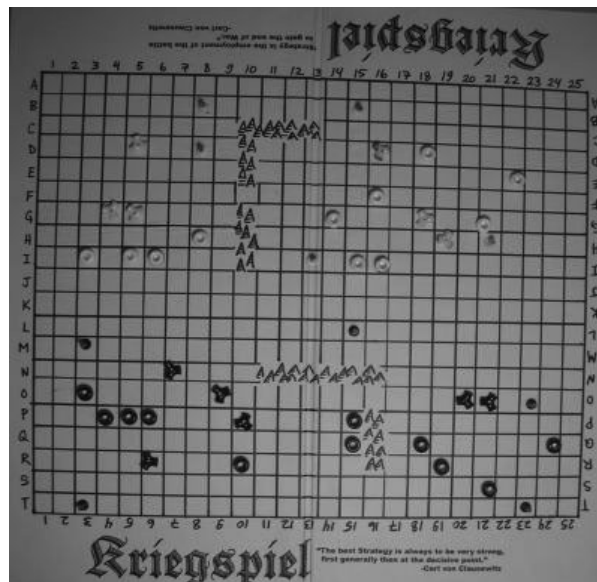
Figure 1: Traditional Scrabble



Guy Debord’s *Kriegspiel* (see image of “Kriegspiel” below)—a game he could not pull from the commodity market quick enough—centred upon the importance of transparent/linear communication between units. In this game communication *must* remain intact for advancement

to occur. Each team defends an arsenal that acts as the centre for communication: the arsenal emits rays which run vertically and horizontally across the board. These ‘communicative rays’ may be obstructed by the activity of the opponent. Mobile relays are provided which allow for these ‘communicative rays’ to be deflected into new directions with the proviso: only those units within one’s own unobstructed ‘communicative rays’ may advance. This necessitates a battle for position whereby orders pass, not from the arsenal, but from the disavowed transcendental player of the act through to the armies below and their own internal communicative networks. Debord considered this to be the most faithful replication of the circumstances of battle, but he did not consider the interconnection of the imaginary with the symbolic: where, here, does the subject receive her or his message back in an inverted form? Rather, one is expected to revert back to the hegemony of traditional play – as Debord has put it, “the outcome of a tactical engagement over just one square may have major strategic consequences”: the game plays as a battle of position within a communicative network under the commandment of the transcendental subject. In a real game of war one must account for that secret enemy harboured within. Debord removed the player of the act from the battlefield, Scruples puts the player back onto the battlefield.

Figure 2: Kriegspiel

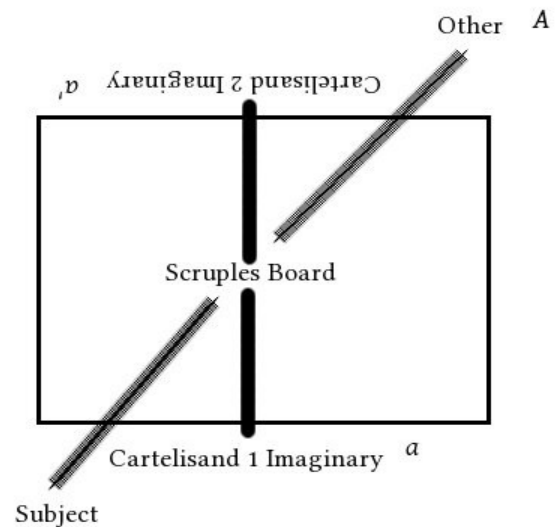


(A handmade version of Kriegspiel, made and sold by Little Black Cart)⁷

Scruples is a game played between two cartelisands. An additional cartelisand may assume the

role of the plus-one (or a computer program may assume this role). The plus-one bears some responsibility as analyst – although still in its infancy, Scruples may be suitable for clinical work, our game intends to replicate session work at a very superficial level. The plus-one’s role consists of validation (through direct observation and interrogation) of anticipatory symbolic arrangements by the cartelisand of the act; for this, a dictionary must be on hand or a computer program may be constructed to perform this function. If prompted by the plus-one, the cartelisand of the act is required to announce the anticipated symbolic arrangement of the current play.

The narrow avoidance of the commodification of the act (foresight for which Debord lacked in his game of war) occurs through the *détournement* of traditional play. The traditional models pursued symbolization at the expense of, rather than in tandem with, the revelation of the imaginary. In games of war the imagination must be centrally knotted with the symbolic arrangement and the materiality of the board such that play occurs as if by faithful replication of identification between cartelisands. Symbolic arrangement occurs around the stumbling blocks



(“[n]ow this hole, we have one at the heart of each of these rounds. Without these holes, it would not even be thinkable for something to be knotted”) and the stumbling blocks are to be placed onto the board before play by each cartelisand respectively. By this latter concept we presuppose a barred cartelisand in the position of agent. Our invitation thus extends primarily to hysterical cartelisands whose *sinthome* continuously skirts the problematics of imaginary identification. Here, a word should be said about the hysteric’s position in games of war: by hysteric we consider the agents of reform and revolution – as Nietzsche wrote of *ressentiment*, ‘this plant grows nowadays among anarchists’. By contrast, this game is a tool for insurrectionaries and analysts alike – as Max Stirner put it: ‘Revolution and insurrection must not be looked upon as synonymous. The Revolution aimed at new arrangements; insurrection leads us to no longer let ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on institutions.’ It is forever my ambition, as it was Lacan’s ambition, to make insurrectionaries out of anarchists and analysts out of hysterics.

The question posed by the hysterical cartelisand has always been: ‘Who Am I?’ In a discussion of the Turing test, H. Katherine Hayles re-framed the question as ‘What Am I?’ (cf.,

How We Became Post-Human). The inversion occurs, as through the 'L Schema', from the question-answer synchrony inherent to the discourse of the hysteric: the message, sent from *a* to *a'* on the imaginary axis, blocks the symbolic identification from the subject to *A* on the symbolic axis. 'What Am I' gets sent to the imaginary other and returns: 'I am Cyborg'. With the Turing test we have the impossibility of distinguishing between man and woman or the human and machine – in purer form, the question is reposed: 'Am I machine or human?' The hysterical cartelisand thus 'identifies with the structure of speech, the synchrony of which is question-answer'.⁸ The subject finds herself constituted by the answer-implication whereby cyborg substitutes knowledge from the place of anxiety. Moreover, while Hayles provided the much sought after answer, from the place of knowledge, she did not provide the moment of hesitation crucial to the discourse of the analyst (one concrete example in clinical experience is the variable session). The crucial move thus resides in the re-injection of the moment of hesitation into the game of war through the re-knotting of the imaginary and symbolic elements of play. Lacan makes this abundantly clear: "[w]hen one begins to take words as one's vehicle, one finds oneself quickly in a trap, because my so little as you imagine it puts the imaginary back in the mix. With the imaginary, you have every chance of getting bogged down. With the imaginary, one has departed for the infinitesimal, and it is a real pain getting out of it." Paradoxically, in game mechanics, it is precisely by getting too bogged down in the imaginary that one might approach the traversal of the fantasy of identification.

At the beginning of the act, the cartelisand chooses a random letter from the sack and places it anywhere on the board. S/he must take care to ensure that the letter is legible from his or her own imaginary such that all the letters are to be read from left to right and top to bottom. The other cartelisand must do the same such that the tiles *do not* read from left to right and top to bottom in the imaginary of his or her partner but rather only from the imaginary of her or himself. In so doing the imaginary axis *a-a'* is short-circuited and the symbolic axis subject-*A* is brought into view. Each play begins with the 'coin-toss' and ends with the opportunity to 'punctuate' any word on the board (if desired and if the opportunity is available). Cartelisands alternately place the randomly assigned letter from the coin-toss onto the materiality of the board. Upon reception, the cartelisand of the act must use the letter immediately by placing it anywhere around the stumbling blocks. Words shall become anticipated according to the imaginary of each unique cartelisand – symbolic arrangement may continue so long as this arrangement anticipates a dictionary word. Arrangements which do not anticipate a word (or words), from the imaginary of the cartelisand of the act, are invalid plays – the plus-one must actively validate plays. Formation of the arrangement may continue until a 'full' symbolic

arrangement (with sense) is formed, at which time the cartelisand of the act may decide to punctuate or leave the arrangement in play.

Figure 3: Scruples

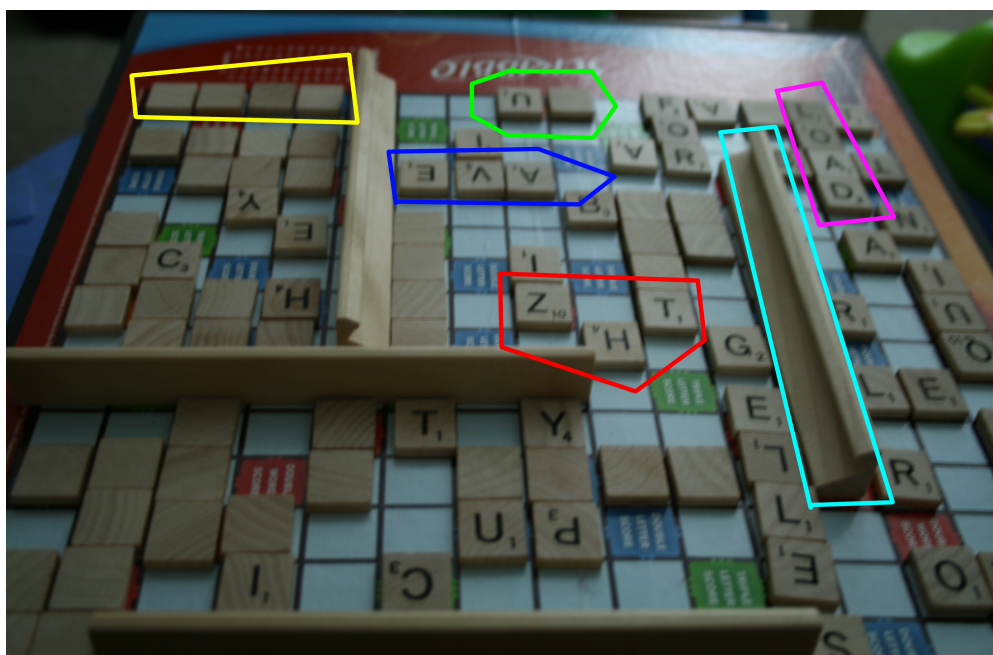


A stumble is a strategic play by the cartelisand of the act who, by imagining the symbolic arrangement of her or his partner, places the result of his or her own coin-toss onto the square immediately after the space adjacent to the letter of the arrangement anticipated by her or his partner's imaginary (one space must be left open, otherwise a violation of the rule of anticipation occurs). In this way rapport departs: "The idea that one can reproduce it [rapport or a principle of harmony as a war of 'position'] with words, that words are destined to make sense [...] there are still people for whom this makes sense." However, the cartelisand of the act should take care, by virtue of this stumble, to preclude the further extension of the symbolic arrangement beyond the confines of the stumble. In this latter case, the partnering cartelisand may benefit from the play.

The cartelisand of the act may choose to punctuate the entirety of a given symbolic arrangement at any point when an anticipation has been fulfilled. S/he may likewise punctuate any number of words from any *one* symbolic arrangement at the end of her or his turn (but not after an anticipation has been fulfilled). There is an order of operations: like traditional play, the

point system allows for the taking-into-account of the 'owner' of the letter (determined by the tile's imaginary) – “Certainly, when you win something somewhere, it is forcibly at the expense of something else. And in other terms, if analytic discourse functions, we will certainly lose something elsewhere.” When an arrangement has been punctuated all of the letters from the symbolic arrangement shall be turned over and play may once again operate upon the materiality of the board in zones which were once restricted by symbolic arrangement. In the event of a scansion, all remaining symbolic formations, with or without fully formed additional words, are punctuated and the points are distributed to the appropriate cartelisands.

Figure 4: Scruples



(Yellow: Punctuated Arrangement; Green: Variable/Stumble; Blue: Anticipation by Imaginary of Player Two;
Red: Block of Anticipation on Imaginary of Player One; Blue: Stumbling Block; Pink: Symbolic Arrangement)

The variable tiles are defined by a lack of inscription upon their face. Upon receiving one from the coin-toss, the tile may be placed anywhere on the board by the cartelisand of the act. If used strategically, the piece produces a stumble for one's partner. Finally, the plus-one may intervene into the game at the point of saturation or at the point at which the coin-toss exhausts itself: this results in a scansion.

I would like to conclude by returning to the epigraph. Close friend of Jacques Lacan and founder of *Tel Quel*, Phillippe Sollers remarks: “Reread Clausewitz. The true war is always

defensive.” In traditional games of war the defence of the transcendental subject serves, to borrow Clausewitz’s phrasing, “a passive purpose, as preservation.” Against the preservation of the imaginary ego as it is harboured by the transcendental subject I wish to re-insert the imaginary insofar as it becomes the site of attack and conquest. With Clausewitz we should not be fooled: “the defensive form of warfare is intrinsically stronger than the offensive.” The moment of hesitation, inserted back into the game, is best achieved when one readily stumbles at the thought that the other player may take his own words and use them against him – or, perhaps more revealing, the insurrectionary subject comes into being fleetingly at that moment when his imaginary is put in check, when the fantasy of traditional play is traversed, by the imaginary-symbolic formation anticipated by his opponent: only by precluding identification with the sense of the axis $a'-a$, are the *real points* awarded for play.

¹Notes

This game was invented in collaboration with Joady Rousselle.

² Heinemann, Charles. (1997) "Lacan's Imaginary Prisoner Game," *Enculturation*, 1(2). As Retrieved online on November 26th, 2011 from <http://enculturation.gmu.edu/1_2/heinemann/index.html>

³ De Bernardo, G., Cerdeira-Pena, A., Pedreira, O., Secon, D., & A.S. Places. (2009) "Scrabble.gz: A Web-Based Collaborative Game to Promote the Galician Language," <Conference Paper> *Advances in Computer-Human Interactions, Second International Conference*. As Retrieved on November 26th, 2011 from <http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/freeabs_all.jsp?arnumber=4782505>

⁴ An imaginary traced at length by Richard J.F. Day in his newest book. Cf., Richard J.F. Day. (2005) *Gramsci is Dead*. London: Pluto Press.

⁵ Lorenzo Chiesa makes the compelling claim that there is a systematicity inherent to Lacan's oeuvre. He delicately examines the apparently incompatible moments of Lacan's thinking and demonstrates that beneath it all there is a consistent system which both anticipates and revises old and new conceptions.

⁶ All quotes from Lacan are selected from the twenty-second seminar (R.S.I).

⁷ Cf., <<http://littleblackcart.com/Kriegspiel-pistols-drawn-version.html>> (Retrieved November 25th, 2011)

⁸ Cf., Wajcman, Gerard. nd. "The Hysteric's Discourse," *Lacanian Ink.*, As Retrieved on November 26th, 2011 from <<http://www.lacan.com/hysteric.htm>>

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