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Defending the Property of an Anti-Property Marxist Scholar

By [ANDREA L. FOSTER](#)

Guy Debord, the Marxist and French philosopher who died in 1994, may be rolling over in his grave.

A lawyer representing his widow has threatened Alexander R. Galloway, an associate professor of culture and communication at New York University, with legal action. Mr. Galloway said the lawyer sent him a letter demanding that he cease and desist from distributing his online war game, claiming it infringes on the copyright of the Debord estate. The philosopher had created a similar war game.

But copyrights and intellectual property were anathema to Debord, said Mr. Galloway. The Situationist International movement that Debord founded in 1957 is a mix of anarchism and Marxism. Its followers scrawled, "Abolish copyright" on building walls during the May 1968 student uprisings in Paris.

The irony of defending the property rights of Debord, a Marxist, has not been lost on scholars, who have publicized the case on their blogs.

Mr. Galloway does not deny that the two-person computer game he developed is based on Debord's board game, the Game of War. Debord, who was an avid student of war strategy, released a few handcrafted copies of the board game in 1978. The goal of the game, which resembles chess, is to corner and destroy the opponents' pieces. Debord wrote a book about the game, with his wife, that was translated into English last year.

One of Debord's games, cast in silver and copper, is on display at Columbia University's Buell Center for the Study of Architecture, alongside Mr. Galloway's online version, called Kriegspiel. The goal of Kriegspiel, German for a generic 18th-century war game, is the same as Debord's game.

A computer programmer, Mr. Galloway said he spent about a year designing the [digital game](#), which can be downloaded from the Web for free. "It's part of my scholarly research into how antagonism is simulated in war games and computer games," he said. "It's also part of my research into the work of Debord."

Despite the similarities between his creation and Debord's, Mr. Galloway disputed that he was breaking the law. "I don't think I'm infringing on anyone's copyright in the creation of this game," he said. He declined to discuss his legal quagmire further.

John Beckman, a spokesman for New York University, said the university received a similar cease-and-desist letter. The university responded to it, he said, but he declined to elaborate.

Wendy M. Seltzer, a fellow at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society who is familiar with Mr. Galloway's case, believes the Debord estate is overreaching in accusing Mr. Galloway of copyright infringement.

The idea for a game is not copyrightable, she said, only the expression of a game. Mr. Galloway's game used the idea of Debord's game, she added, but it did not duplicate the artistry and detail of Debord's board game.

Ms. Seltzer, who is also a visiting assistant professor at Northeastern University School of Law, sees similarities between Mr. Galloway's case and one involving the Facebook word game, Scrabulous. In the latter case, the owners of the board game, Scrabble, have accused the developers of Scrabulous of infringing on their copyright. Ms. Seltzer believes that infringement claim is without merit as well.

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