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For Play and Gaming: Robert Kroetsch's Ongoing Godgame

PAUL BARRETT

I was compelled to listen to the jokesters.

— Demeter Proudfoot in Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* (149)

In the life-game of postmodern consumers the rules of the game
keep changing in the course of playing.

— Zygmunt Bauman *Life in Fragments: Essays on Postmodern
Morality* (89)

I am on the side of game critics.

— Robert Kroetsch *Labyrinths of Voice* (72)

ROBERT KROETSCH'S WRITING is so expertly polysemous that it should come as little surprise that his depictions of play have been interpreted through a wide range of critical paradigms. Extant criticism of his novels and poetry has considered notions of play as instances of the postmodern play of the signifier, the carnivalesque, and Kristevan notions of excess (to name only a few interpretations).¹ Yet perhaps it is this very polysemous nature of Kroetsch's writing, and his ceaseless juggling of the multiple signifiers of nation, history, desire, language, the body, and sex, that have led critics to focus singularly on his attention to play rather than his stated interest in "the literal use of game in daily life" (*Labyrinths* 49). Kroetsch's work includes numerous references to games, sports, jokes, riddles, and parodic rituals. Games are ubiquitous and ongoing in Kroetsch's work and they function both as metaphors for acts of signification and as mechanisms for narrating a social order that is increasingly organized according to the logic of the game.

Kroetsch's poetic sensibilities enable the distinction between game and play to remain blurry, marked by a postmodern notion of a "double thing." He describes how "there is a double thing that goes on. . . .

The two words contradict each other in a signifying way. *Play* resists the necessary rules of the *game*" (*Labyrinths* 50). Kroetsch suggests that game occupies the disciplinary end of a binary that play is forever resisting. Yet, as with all things Kroetschian, the binaries do not hold, and games, in Kroetsch's work, become more than merely a "necessary" set of rules for the player to subvert. Games offer metaphors for the social order; they are spaces in which social mores are satirized and received binaries are inverted. Furthermore, by breaking out of their designated spaces, Kroetsch's games are also a mechanism for subverting the broader social order. This latter sense of gaming, as a mechanism for not merely depicting but also subverting the social order, is specifically informed by Kroetsch's interest in game theory and game studies. In what follows I trace the importance of games through Kroetsch's work, particularly as they inflect this "double thing" that structures Kroetsch's aesthetics more generally. With a specific focus on *What the Crow Said* and *The Studhorse Man*, I argue that Kroetsch's texts depict the confluence of "gamespace" (Wark 001) and social space to suggest that the rules of gaming can transform allegedly serious conceptions of identity, language, gender, and nation. Kroetsch thus extends the logic of gamespace to broader social spheres to reveal how language, identity, and nation are themselves games open to creative acts of subversion.

One of Kroetsch's earliest discussions of the importance of games and game theory in his work is in *Labyrinths of Voice* (1982), a book-length interview between Kroetsch, Shirley C. Neuman, and Robert Rawdon Wilson. The second section, entitled "Game," focuses on the importance of games in Kroetsch's fiction, poetry, and criticism. Kroetsch explains,

Years ago I read *Homo Ludens* and that influenced me. Though it's a pretty conservative theory. . . . I was interested in the literal use of game in daily life. In a small town, in a rural area where card playing especially is very central, I was influenced by the old women in the community who would read cards. I had two aunts who on occasion would read cards . . . with an ambiguous sense that it was just playing but at the same time that it was serious. That ambiguity intrigued me to no end. I think that even in the most elaborate games, like religion, there is that double sense. The notion of necessary fiction really relates to that, doesn't it? (49-50)

Kroetsch refers to Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1931), perhaps the first book-length study of the social function of games and arguably the foundational game studies text. Kroetsch's work accords with Huizinga's central thesis that "in the absence of the play-spirit civilization is impossible" (101), yet for Kroetsch the "play-spirit" of gaming produces a "double sense," particularly evident in "the most elaborate games, like religion." The doubleness of games refers to the capacity of play to subvert and transform the rules of the game as well as the capacity of the gaming to transform other forms of sociality, such that the games of the "old women in the community who would read cards" undermines the authority of "elaborate games, like religion." This doubleness generates the "ambiguity" between explicit gaming acts and the "serious" world; this ambiguity leads Kroetsch to identify Huizinga's theory as too conservative for his notion of gaming. Huizinga argues that games occur in the social space of a "magic circle" where the acceptable rules of society do not apply, allowing for an exceptional space where taboo and carnivalesque expressions and behaviours are permitted. For Kroetsch, however, the transformation of identity and signification within the game extends beyond gamespace, dispersing this "play-spirit" into other forms of sociality and thus rendering the difference between game and the broader social sphere deeply ambiguous.

Game theory emerged out of mathematics and economics departments in the early 1950s, particularly in the work of John Forbes Nash Jr., John Von Neumann, and Robert McNamara. It offers a mathematical supplement to the sociological game studies work of Huizinga and others; Rubinstein defines game theory as the "analysis of the concepts used in social reasoning when dealing with situations of conflict" and "an abstract inquiry into the function and logic of social institutions and patterns of behavior" (909). Game theorists have critiqued Huizinga's magic circle, particularly as game theory is seen as an increasingly relevant model for understanding a wide variety of social relationships. They challenge "Huizinga's famous account of play as a quasi-sacred 'autotelic' activity, conducted purely for its own sake, in a space and time ritually segregated from everyday life" (Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter xxxiv), arguing instead that the logic of gaming extends well beyond the space of the game. **The inherently competitive relationship** between actors in a variety of forms (citing such diverse examples as stock trading, the Cuban missile crisis, evolution, and healthcare)

enables game theory to effectively model the interests and behaviours of diverse actors and scenarios.² Thomas Lemke's argument that "neoliberalism encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form" (202), like Henry Giroux's analysis of neoliberalism as having "heralded a radical economic, political, and experiential shift that now largely defines the citizen as a consumer" ("Neoliberalism"), indicates the manner in which contemporary subjectivity can be increasingly conceived of in the terms of economic and competitive game theory: as self-optimizing agents or *homo economicus*.³ Where Lemke, Giroux, and others lament the neoliberal transformation of all social relationships into forms of competition, strategy, and profit-maximization, game theorists have heralded the emergence of these rational, strategic, and predictable forms as they are particularly suited to the analytic strengths of game theory and game studies.

The expansion of game theory's purview has resulted in some application of game theory to topics in the humanities, and specifically literary texts.⁴ Yet this confluence between game theory, game studies, and literary analysis remains inadequately theorized from either a game theory or digital humanities perspective. Steven J. Brams's *Game Theory and the Humanities* (2011) suggests the fertile grounds for analysis that arise out of applications of game theory to narrative. He argues that game theory offers a "a structure for clarifying strategic issues in plot design and character development that literary theories often ignore" (3-4) and that "game theory helps one unravel the mystery, at least in literary works in which there is a plot and the characters indicate reasons for acting the way they do" (5). Brams usefully applies game theory concepts such as the Nash equilibrium and Theory of Moves to tragedies, Biblical narratives, and other texts. Despite the strength of Brams's argument, his analysis remains strictly at the plot level as he attempts to understand the actions of characters according to possible strategic outcomes. Furthermore, he completely ignores narrative ambiguity, does not combine game theory with meaningful close reading, and cannot account for the relationship between narrative and form and the means by which genre and other formal elements transform the models he applies.⁵ His reliance on verisimilitude and unexamined notions of realism leads him to conclude that "plotless or surrealistic works, while they may have aesthetic appeal, are least amenable to this kind of analysis" (5).

I disagree that plotless, surrealist, or postmodern texts are ill-suited to literary analysis informed by game theory. There is a productive and revealing relationship between the postmodern play of the signifier and the elements of play, gaming, and strategy in a number of texts, including some that Brams cites. Additionally, postmodern texts both thematize the relationship between games and meaning and identify the increasing importance of games as heuristic models under the conditions of postmodernity. As such, Kroetsch's work offers an exemplary case for the application of game theory to texts, not only in his explicit depiction of gaming as metaphor but also in the relationship between games and the transformation of signification, place, and identity within postmodernism. Kroetsch's depiction of games merits detailed attention because his work depicts the manner in which games escape Huizinga's magic circle and subverts the meaning of serious labour and identity. His texts offer a rejoinder to game theorists who see play as mere strategy rather than a transformation of the rules of the game itself while also demanding that literary critics attend to postmodern play and games in all their forms.

In *Labyrinths of Voice*, Kroetsch outlines his critical interest in gaming and its relationship to language and narrative. He explains, "*Game theory is the conception of language as a serious game, picture theory of language as identical with reality. Now I think at various times in literature, we've emphasized one or the other. . . . In our own time there's been this tremendous move to language as game*" (73). Kroetsch invokes Wittgenstein's vocabulary of a picture theory of language, which he opposes to "*the conception of language as a serious game*"; in doing so he blurs the distinctions between Huizinga's game theory and Wittgenstein's language games.⁶ Yet Kroetsch is perhaps more interested in the spirit of both Wittgenstein's and Huizinga's conceptions of games, particularly their capacity for subverting and playing with identity and meaning, than in their precise ideas of what constitutes a game.⁷ While the specific manner in which Kroetsch takes up Wittgenstein's work is beyond the scope of this essay, his interest in language games suggests that he conceives of language as a set of rules open to acts of creative subversion — a conception reflected both in his own language games and in the explicit depictions of gaming in his work. Kroetsch's notion of game theory challenges the mimetic relation between reality and language and is a suitable metaphor for narrative that replaces the "picture theory of lan-

guage.” Further, games offer Kroetsch an appropriate metaphor for the conditions of postmodern writing, with the positions of the author and reader played in a strategic and dialogic game of meaning. Yet games are not just metaphors but also effect a broader transformation of broader institutions and social spheres in Kroetsch’s work.

In making the link between writing and games, Kroetsch draws on John Fowles’s notion of a godgame (Fowles’s original title for *The Magus* [1966]), which Wilson describes as “a game-like situation in which a magister ludi knows the rules . . . and the player does not. The term godgame may be extended to include all instances of a certain kind of literary illusion . . . which a victim within a confusing, shifting web of incidents attempts to think his way out or through (that is, discover the rules)” (*Labyrinths* 67-68). Fowles’s *The Magus* provides a prototype for the godgame as a narrative form, particularly as Maurice Conchis enacts a series of increasingly bizarre trials, plays, psychological tests, theatrical performances, and life-threatening challenges upon Nicholas Urfe. As Conchis’s godgame unfolds, Urfe is increasingly unable to separate reality from performance, identity from mask, and history from fiction. Kroetsch’s interest in Fowles’s godgame leads to his deciding “upon this analogy: The action of the literary work takes place in a definite field; let the types and masks, the cast of the contemporary theater, correspond to chess figures. Plots will correspond to gambits, i.e., to the classic options, variations of which are played by the players. The tasks . . . correspond to the opponent’s moves” (81). Kroetsch’s games are not merely metaphors for language and the struggle for meaning; he also conceives of fiction as a game where the structure of the narrative constitutes a field of play and the quest corresponds to a series of moves. Furthermore, Kroetsch recasts Fowles’s godgame under the conditions of postmodernity, removing the all-knowing Magus and leaving only the game. There is no escape from Kroetsch’s godgames, but rather it is in playing the game that meaning is generated. Indeed much of Kroetsch’s work can be described as a postmodern game in which reader and character attempt to discover the rules of a “shifting web of incidents” and the author looms as an absentee game master.

Kroetsch’s games include, but are not limited to, games of significations and the godgame of the subject attempting to discover the rules of the text. He argues that games necessarily raise “one of the functions of art: to put us into situations where we apprehend the rules only up to

a point. . . . We are all in games where we can't quite perceive the rules. **We are in the godgame situation**" (*Labyrinths* 68). Kroetsch's narratives generate a "possibility space," wherein, according to Ian Bogost, readers "explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the symbolic systems the game provides. The rules do not merely create the experience of play — they also construct the meaning of the game" (121). If gaming is an appropriate metaphor for the struggle for meaning in Kroetsch's work, this metaphor undergoes a postmodern inversion such that the vehicle transcends its function within the metaphor, occupying the space of the tenor. One plays Kroetsch's games simply to play and not for some concluding revelation or illumination. He explains, "Games are so much a part of life that when the critics turn them into the sum total of literature, they are missing part of the game. . . . They are getting out of the game by claiming too much . . . part of the game is the connection between model and the raw material of life" (83). Kroetsch admonishes critics who miss the game, conceiving of it as just "the sum total of literature" rather than recognizing "the literal use of game in daily life" (49). He calls on critics not merely to engage in the godgame of the text but also to recognize the importance of playing the game itself in a manner that shifts the relationship between the game and other social spheres.

Perhaps the clearest relationship between the godgame of the text, the explicit act of gaming, and the transformation of the social sphere according to the conditions of the game occurs in Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*, in the 151-day-long game of schmier played by the men of Bigknife, Saskatchewan. Beginning as casual recreation on a Sunday afternoon, the game extends over many months and moves from Tiddy Lang's kitchen into numerous sheds, shacks, moving vehicles, and church basements. In a novel concerned with the limits of language, the trouble with meaning and silence within postmodernism, and the desire to name and be named, the schmier game provides a metaphor for these struggles for representation while simultaneously transforming the structures of meaning outside the game. Liebhaber first recognizes "the seriousness of their game" (*What the Crow Said* 93) when Old Lady Lang interprets their cards:

Old Lady Lang looked and shook her head, 'Ach ja.' The men . . . looked anew at the worn cards, at the worn numbers, the worn pictures. They had never seen their cards in quite that way before. . . .

They knew, those men, studying their cards in the presence of Old Lady Lang, they knew there was no meaning anywhere in the world.
(94)

If we believe Kroetsch when he says, "I take a card game very seriously. For me, a card game is a model of life" (64), then the meaninglessness of the card game reflects a broader condition of meaninglessness in the world. Yet, the card game is not merely a "model of life" but also a mechanism by which Kroetsch transforms the conditions of making meaning in the spaces outside the game. Old Lady Lang's revelation, that "there was no meaning anywhere in the world," recalls Wittgenstein's critique of the picture theory of language, particularly its insistence that "every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (2). If the picture theory of language asserts a correlation between meaning and word, Wittgenstein's language games illuminate the revelation of the schmier game: "there was no meaning anywhere in the world." Yet within these conditions, the men must decide how to play the game: do they live in a world wholly devoid of meaning, or do they live in a world in which meaning does not reside but must be actively produced? If, as David G. Stern argues, a "key paradox that occurs over and over again . . . throughout the first two hundred sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* is that nothing is intrinsically meaningful, for all determination of meaning, by such means as definitions, rules, thoughts, or images, is dependent on interpretation" (20), then the schmier game does not reveal the absence of meaning as such but rather stresses the manner by which meaning is produced through the act of playing the game.

Old Lady Lang's revelation contradicts Kathleen Wall's argument that the ongoing schmier game in the novel offers a stable set of rules and predictable results in an otherwise unstable and seemingly random world. Wall argues that the game indicates "the lengths to which Liebhaver and his crew will go in order to confine themselves to a microcosm that has definable rules. . . . Playing schmier, the men separate themselves from the world they cannot control. . . . Moreover, the rules of the game structure their lives in a way the rules of the godgame . . . cannot" (96). Perhaps the game begins that way, but its vast duration, the devotion that the men dedicate to continuing to play, and the physical and emotional toll that the game takes on them all suggest that the order offered by the game becomes wildly bent and exagger-

ated. The revelation of the game, that “there was no meaning anywhere in the world,” inverts Wall’s argument such that the arbitrary rules of schmier extend outside the space of the game to undermine meaning in the broader social sphere. As with Skandl’s lighthouse, which failed to deliver its promised affluence or impose a patriarchal order onto the chaotic space of Bigknife, the schmier game does not provide a separate space where rules and meaning are known but rather reflects back the postmodern godgame the men thought they had escaped.

This extension of gamespace into other forms of sociality is evident later in the novel when the schmier game moves into the basement of the church. Father Basil’s statement that “God is our jailer” (105) echoes the postmodern godgame yet also takes on separate meanings for the congregation upstairs and the schmier game below. Basil’s sermon concludes as follows:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”
The effect in the basement was uncanny. Liebhaber, at that instant, for the first time in his life, cheated at cards. He withheld an ace and Marvin Straw, finally, counted two points. . . . A couple of the men at the table had noticed Liebhaber’s gesture: and they too began to understand. A man’s life was at stake. (105-06)

The “uncanny” relation between the game in the basement and the sermon above is extended when Father Basil joins the game and the thirteen players positioned around the table connote an inverted Last Supper. The life that is at stake in the game of cards is that of Jerry Lapanne, who is to be executed by Marvin Straw in three days. The men thus conspire to keep Straw in the game so long that he misses the execution, thus saving Lapanne’s life. It is paradoxically in a world in which “there was no meaning” that the game becomes the site of religious parody, meaningful struggle, and serious play. If the symbolic system of the schmier game contains no meaning, then it is the act of playing, of continuing the game, that provides meaning and renders the game serious. Where the schmier game is played in a barn which reeks of “the stench of death” and in which “the carcass of a dead horse stank to high heaven” (98), the men’s continuous playing to save Straw’s life becomes a form of salvation from the lack of meaning in the world. Therefore, where Wall sees games in the novel as “antidotes or relief from the godgame” and the world of unstable meaning, I argue

that Kroetsch posits a continuity between the possibility space of the card game and the godgame. The game of schmier does not offer respite from a social godgame where rules and meaning are unstable but, instead, shows that meaning emerges from the continuous playing. Yet the game is not singularly a metaphor for life under postmodernism but also thematizes the transformation of life itself into a kind of game. In order to save Lapanne, the men must continue to play, and within the collapsing binary of play and seriousness, "They were playing to win, and to win they had to lose" (108).

Kroetsch's attention to ongoing games and the extension of gamespace into other social spheres differentiates his conception of games from Bakhtin's. Certainly, his depiction of jokes, feasts, bawdy humour, and bodily excretions in *What the Crow Said* draw on Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque in Rabelais's work.⁸ Kroetsch repeatedly draws on Bakhtin's analysis of Medieval and Renaissance folk cultures in their explicit depictions of violence, carnival, jokes, and the body to offer his own notion of "grotesque realism" (Bakhtin 18). The schmier players, for instance, are described as having "pissed themselves; two, unashamedly, shat their pants. . . . The smell of urine and excrement . . . hung in the streets of Big Indian throughout the entire day" (113). Descriptions such as these pervade Kroetsch's novels, and this bodily and grotesque realism is integral to Kroetsch's playing with the relationship between the body, language, and desire. In both Kroetsch's work and Bakhtin's analysis, this grotesque realism is deeply "ambivalent": both "humiliating and mortifying" and reviving and renewing. This ambivalent grotesque realism gives rise to a "pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the 'inside out,' of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear" (Bakhtin 11). Kroetsch's interest in the "double thing," of collapsing binaries or holding opposite ends of binaries in tension with one another gives voice to, in Bakhtin's words, the "second life, a second world of folk culture" (11) and "this double aspect of the world and of human life" (6).⁹

A Bakhtinian reading of Kroetsch's work is compelling in a number of ways, particularly as it provides a framework for understanding Kroetsch's efforts to unite "the positive and negative poles of becoming (death-birth)" (Bakhtin 150). Yet, there are limitations to the Bakhtinian interpretation,

particularly as critics have tended to interpret all of Kroetsch's games, jokes, pranks, tricks, festivals, celebrations, parodies, and bawdy moments as instances of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin is only partially useful in explaining Kroetsch's interest in games, as games in Kroetsch's work are not always instances of the carnivalesque or grotesque realism. Randall is correct, for instance, in identifying how Kroetsch uses festive laughter to give voice to the intertextual quality of his work. However, he extends his argument, suggesting that the game of schmier is situated between two feasts, and therefore locates the game within Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Yet the first would-be feast, the Sunday dinner at Tiddy Lang's house, never happens precisely because of the game, and the second feast marks the conclusion of the game. While the game of schmier is bookended by two potential feasts, the game is not enabled by, nor is it an element of, the feast in Bakhtin's sense,¹⁰ and thus Kroetsch's games inscribe a different space than that discussed in Bakhtin's work. Bakhtin's games occur in a prescribed space of the carnival or feast whereas Kroetsch's games are ubiquitous and, in their ongoing form, transform the social spaces that attempt to circumscribe them. Bakhtin argues that "games drew the players out of the bounds of everyday life, liberated from usual laws and regulations" (235) and that "games are extra-official . . . governed by rules contrary to the current laws of life" (259-60). As with Huizinga's magic circle, this conception of the game occurring within the space of the feast, and thereby isolated from "usual laws and regulations," is too "conservative" for Kroetsch's depictions of games. The schmier game in *What the Crow Said* exceeds the prescribed boundaries of the game and transforms the institutions that attempt to control it. Religion, the family, birth, and death are all parodied and interrupted by the ceaseless game. Bakhtin argues that "images of games were seen as a condensed formula of life and of the historic process" (235). Kroetsch, however, treats games not merely as metaphors or images, but as elements of life. Thus, while Bakhtin's work provides a convincing theoretical framework for interpreting Kroetsch's attention to jokes, the body, feasts, and carnival, Kroetsch differs from both Bakhtin's and Huizinga's understanding of the social import of games, particularly as Kroetsch's games exceed the prescribed spaces of the feast or the magic circle. His work thus predicts the observation of McKenzie Wark and other game theorists who argue that the "atopian arena" of "gamespace" (Wark 001) has become ubiquitous, transforming other social structures.

It is in *The Studhorse Man* (1970) that Kroetsch most explicitly depicts the erosion of the division between the possibility space of the game and the broader social sphere. Robert Lecker stresses that, along with *Gone Indian*, *The Studhorse Man* marks “a watershed in Kroetsch’s development as a novelist,” singling out his

growing preoccupation with postmodern thought, by the intensification of his struggle with history, by his increased concentration on the tensions between mimetic and expressive theory, and by his movement toward more complex patterns of inversion and paradox designed to undermine traditional notions of causality, narrative presentation, and closure. (47)

This heightened attention to the ontological and aesthetic concerns of postmodernism is also manifested in Kroetsch’s attention to games. The opening section of the novel reads like instructions for Hazard LePage’s quest: “Hazard had to get hold of a mare. . . . He was a desperate man. Extinction or survival” (*Studhorse* 7). As in the schmier game, the conditions of Hazard’s quest have “serious” implications of life and death. Further, Hazard’s very name suggests the ongoing forms of risk and strategy that he must engage in to accomplish his goal of breeding his horse, Poseidon. Hazard’s name also connotes the god-game of *The Magus* as Conchis repeatedly tells Urfe that “everything, including you, including me, and all the gods, is a matter of hazard. Nothing else. Pure hazard” (185-86). If Hazard LePage’s name evokes Conchis’s philosophy of hazard, randomness, and chance, then the plot of *The Studhorse Man* can be conceived of as a multi-tiered godgame in which Hazard’s goal is to breed Poseidon, Demeter’s goal is to narrate Hazard’s life, and Martha’s goal is to marry. While these positions shift and there are multiple sub-games within the narrative, Demeter and Hazard are opponents somewhat akin to Conchis and Urfe within the narrative-as-game metaphor. Their position as opponents within a godgame of meaning is evinced by the fact that the simplest path for Hazard’s accomplishment of his goal results in Demeter’s failure. If the lifeblood of Demeter’s narrative project is the numerous diversions and obstacles that Hazard encounters, then Hazard’s success results in Demeter’s failure. Demeter, like the reader, “is going on an adventure by reading the book” (*Labyrinths* 54), and, as Hazard explains, “a perpetual game was in progress” (*Studhorse* 45). Thus, the meaning of the god-

game is emerging from the *process* of playing rather than its conclusion. If we “are all in games where we can’t quite perceive the rules,” then it is not that there is “no meaning anywhere in the world,” but rather that the desire to play the game and to comprehend the rules generates its own meaning. The absence of rules does not render the game of meaning unplayable or meaningless but instead it is the desire to play that generates meaning.¹¹ As Kroetsch explains, “One of the curious things about desire is that it is often based on an absence” (Hancock 35-36). The absence of rules, of a mare, of meaning, of Hazard as a biographical presence, and of an appropriate language for writing the prairies all give meaning to the desire to continue playing the ongoing godgame.

In addition to these structural elements of gaming, *The Studhorse Man* includes a number of implicit¹² and explicit references to gaming. The most explicit reference to gaming is the “perpetual game” of rummy that occurs “in the furnace room of the Home for Incurables, run by the Sisters of Temperance” (45). The hellish location of the game, played by religious figures and incurables alike at a five-sided table, suggests again the religious parodying at work. Furthermore, Sister Raphael explicitly links, via the logic of the game, the five players at the five-sided “pentagonal” table to the “five vowels” of language. As in *What the Crow Said*, the ongoing card game blurs the distinction between the play of the game and the “serious” games of language and religion; yet, in this card game, the play of probabilities, chance, and rules is undermined by the fact that Hazard wins every hand. Where Liebhaber must lose to win, Hazard’s endless winning is a form of losing that undermines the game. Hazard berates fellow player Torbay for his inability to play: “You don’t even *try* to win, Torbay. You pick up the wrong card. You throw cards away I need. Damn it, man, this isn’t a game at all. I haven’t got a chance. I haven’t got a ghost of a chance” (48). He complains that “all he had to do was go on winning and winning and winning” (53), a situation that results in “straight stinking boredom. Win win win win win. I’m human too, you know” (54). Is Hazard in the position of Marvin Straw, being allowed to win in order to be kept in the game, or is he simply a loser whose endless winning undermines the pleasure of the game, robbing it of the desire and process that give it meaning? Hazard does not play to win but rather to play, just as Kroetsch does not write to conclude or to arrive at meaning but to “Begin,” “Begin again” (“Play and Entrance” 117), and “constantly . . . experience the

need to begin.” (“Fear” 54). For Hazard, as for Kroetsch, winning robs the game of its energy to generate meaning in process, and it is in the act of playing, rather than winning, that the meaning of the game is established. Kroetsch explains:

Hazard gets into a problem. They want him to win all the time which . . . destroys the game, doesn't it? It would destroy life too. . . . Hazard has to play both to lose and to win. . . . A serious writer who can always win is bored and boring just as it was boring for Hazard to win in that rummy game. We push to a point where we risk losing. (*Labyrinths* 50)

Thus, Hazard's repetitive complaint of “winning” recalls Kroetsch's own repetition of “The writing the writing the writing” (“Continuing Poem” 82). For Kroetsch, these ongoing games offer a metaphor for “the writing” and the need to “Begin again.” Yet Kroetsch's interest in the paradox of winning by losing and losing by winning evokes his ongoing drive to occupy the precarious and contradictory position of the player in the postmodern godgame. Lecker argues that “deferring closure . . . is not only to embrace desire but also to assert a political and aesthetic subversion of any finite system or syntactical end” (15). The game provides a suitable metaphor and mechanism for this subversion, enabling Hazard and Kroetsch to defer closure and to continue the process of generating meaning.

References to ongoing gaming that defers closure pervade Kroetsch's work. In *Gone Indian* (1973), for instance, Jeremy Sadness is fixated on the Jack Shadbolt painting “Bush Pilot in the Northern Sky” (1962), and his repeated description of the painting as “labyrinthine” (11) suggests again that structures of gaming are not restricted within gamespace but are palimpsestically layered onto the text and the broader social godgame.¹³ The labyrinthine image of the painting recalls the games that Hazard and Liebhaber play and aligns with the speaker's statement in “Letters to Salonika” that “In Greece I found a maze and stories of mazes that became, / I now see, metonymous with my own life” (146). The speaker's conception of the maze as a metonym for life both indicates the ubiquity of gamespace in Kroetsch's work and conceives of the poetic act itself as akin to navigating a maze. Kroetsch's use of mazes, labyrinths, and other games foregrounds the “primacy of the forthcoming and as yet unmade discovery” (“For Play” 93) in both the

act of writing long poetry and the ongoing game. This recurs, in a different form, in Kroetsch's *The Sad Phoenician*, where the "and / but" structure of the long poem offers a formal kind of labyrinth whereby the speaker avoids closure and keeps the game of meaning from ending.¹⁴ This structure offers multiple paths for the reader to follow and thus locates the ongoing game at the structural level of the poem.

If Kroetsch criticism has heretofore focused on history as archaeology and text as palimpsest, conceiving of narrative as a game foregrounds the agency in the play of the writer and reader, constructing meaning in process. If "archaeology allows for discontinuity . . . for layering . . . for imaginative speculation" ("Alberta" 76), Kroetsch's ongoing gaming supplements that layering to demonstrate the writer's struggle to understand the rules that constrain his project as well as the "guesswork, juxtaposition, flashes of insight" ("Play" 93) of writer and reader at play. Kroetsch explains, "I want the reader to be engaged with me in fiction making. . . . I like that sense of process being fluid and open" (Kizuk 63). Lecker confirms Kroetsch's efforts "to combat the stasis of product" (Hutcheon 171), arguing that in order "to 'enter into the process' the reader must, like Kroetsch, become a borderman dodging through a hall of mirrors" (12). Thus, conceiving of text, writing, and reading as types of gaming stresses the agency of writer and reader playing together in the process of generating meaning.

Games are exemplary forms of postmodern representation and, in Kroetsch's work, offer a cogent writing of identity and place that resists closure and finitude but call on writers and readers alike to keep the game going. Games as metaphor and mechanism for meaning are an effective means of conceiving of narrative in a country that is caught both on the border between empire and the north and in a labyrinth of influence that speaks in a language not wholly its own. Just as Kroetsch reveals the gaming and playful elements of the formal rituals of war and religion, his attention to game theory and explicit acts of gaming depict the place of the "borderland" ("Canadian Writer" 12) and the writer struggling with the "hopeless and necessary hope of originality" ("Fear" 12) as elements of an unfolding postmodern godgame. Kroetsch's texts are proto-gaming texts that not only predict the increased relevance of games and game theory in a range of social relationships but also employ games as a metaphor for the transformation of meaning and identity under the conditions of postmodernism. Games also function

as mechanisms that reveal the postmodern godgame at work in broader social spheres. Thus, Kroetsch's application of game theory and game as metaphor and mechanism for depicting place, identity, history, and the writing process provides a new imaginative vocabulary for readers to conceive of their relationship to the text as ongoing, open to transformation, and never complete.

NOTES

¹ See, for instance, Randall (1989), Jackman (1991), and Whetter (1996). These represent, of course, only a sampling of the theoretical frameworks by which critics have attempted to decipher Kroetsch's work. Discussions of postmodern play in Kroetsch's work often begin by discussing his essay "For Play And Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem," a "seminal" (Djwa), cryptic, provocative, and unsettling commentary on the form of the Canadian long poem. What remains unconsidered in Kroetsch scholarship, however, is his attention not merely to play but also to games, particularly as they structure Kroetsch's poetics and criticism.

² Indeed, the neoliberal transformation of a number of social relationships into competitive, cost-benefit calculations has expanded game theory's domain. Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig de Peuter have recently argued that "virtual games are media constitutive of twenty-first-century global hypercapitalism and, perhaps, also of lines of exodus from it" (xxix).

³ Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, insists that "*The mark of postmodern adulthood is the willingness to embrace the game whole-heartedly, as children do*" (99).

⁴ See Howard (1971) and O'Neill (1991).

⁵ Brams argues that "a number of conflicts in the literary works I assay can be viewed as zero-sum, in which what one player wins the other players lose. If there are only two players, the . . . minimax theorem . . . established that there is always a solution that guarantees the players at least a particular value, whatever the opponent does" (5). He proceeds to analyze a number of literary texts as zero-sum and strategic games. For instance, he posits that the story of Abraham and Isaac can be conceived as a game in which "Abraham has two strategy choices: 1. Offer Isaac 2. Don't offer Isaac. God, in turn has two strategy choices: 1. Renege (if Abraham offers) / relent (if not) 2. Don't renege / relent." (34). Brams develops an outcome matrix and decision tree that maps out the optimal decisions for both Abraham and God: "If rational then, Abraham will [sacrifice Isaac, resulting] . . . in both players obtaining their mutually best outcome. . . . This outcome, associated with the dominant strategy of God and the best response to it by Abraham, leads to a *Nash equilibrium*, or an outcome from which neither player would depart unilaterally because he or she would do worse doing so" (39). Brams offers a similar analysis of *Hamlet* as a game of incomplete information, showing that "Hamlet's apparent dithering is less a tragic flaw in his character than a rational response within a game in which sketchy information had first to be filled in and verified before a rational course of action could be plotted and then taken" (210).

⁶ Kroetsch's differentiation between a picture theory of language and language games evokes Wittgenstein's critique of Augustine's conception of language as referential. Wittgenstein begins *Philosophical Investigations* with a quote from Augustine, about which he comments, "In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every

word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (2). Wittgenstein critiques this referential theory of language, investigating, through language-games and other methods, instances in which the referential theory of language fails.

⁷ While Wittgenstein refers to language games throughout *Philosophical Investigations*, it is perhaps part of his refusal of an ur-theory of language that he never precisely defines *language game*. He writes, "Don't say: 'There *must* be something common, or they would not be called "games"' — but *look and see* whether there is something common to all. For if you look at them, you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! . . . we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (32). It is in the specific examination of particular games and particular examples of language that Wittgenstein is able to demonstrate the "complicated network of similarities" between language and games. As David G. Stern argues, "Wittgenstein is not claiming that language is nothing more than a game, or that we can change our language as easily as we can change a game. Rather, he is advocating a close comparison between language and games, a comparison that can help us see aspects of our use of language — in connection with activity, its diversity, and the role of rules — that are often obscured by other approaches" (90). Marie McGinn agrees, arguing that "instead of approaching language as a system of signs with meaning, we are prompted to think about it *in situ*, embedded in the lives of those who speak it" (44). Kroetsch's conception of "*language as a serious game*" obscures Wittgenstein's notion of language games, and in *Labyrinths*, Kroetsch seems to be identifying language as a game in Huizinga's sense of the term while using Wittgenstein's terminology.

⁸ Kroetsch himself explicitly describes his interest in Bakhtin's work in "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation."

⁹ Indeed, Bakhtin's inventory of the functions of the carnival-grotesque reads like a description of much of Kroetsch's work: "to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (34).

¹⁰ It is worth noting that Bakhtin differentiates between the "utopian" space of the carnival and the imitation of the "official feast." He writes, "As opposed to the official feast, . . . carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (10). Reading Kroetsch via Bakhtin requires differentiating between the official feast and the carnival.

¹¹ Aritha van Herk observes that "the quest here is that of the aroused male repeating himself endlessly" and that "Hazard Lepage is trickster embodied, the studhorse man peddling lust and horseflesh at the same time" ("Biocritical"). Hazard's desire drives the plot yet his desire, like Poseidon's, is repeatedly delayed in a manner that parallels the delay that Kroetsch identifies in the Canadian long poem. While it is beyond the scope of this essay, the connections between desire and gaming fuel Hazard's attempts to breed Poseidon, Demeter Proudfoot's struggle to narrate Hazard's life, and the labyrinths of meaning in which author and reader play.

¹² Toward the end of the novel, for instance, a group of hunters tracking coyotes turns on Hazard and his companion Utter. Demeter describes the coyote hunt wherein "frantic animals were shot or at least shot at with shotguns amid great excitement and hilarity. . . . [The hunters] were all well equipped with lethal weapons, and they delighted in anything that enabled them to pretend at waging war" (117). Once again the narrative establishes a continuity between the raucous pretending of the game and the violence of war. This is one

of many instances in the novel where pretending suddenly becomes serious and the space between the game and “serious” life is blurred.

¹³ In his “Towards an Essay: My Upstate New York Journals,” Kroetsch reveals that his original title for *Gone Indian* was *Funeral Games*. This alternative title suggests the manner in which Mark Madham’s manipulations of the fragments of Jeremy Sadness’s narrative take the form of a game for which neither reader nor Madham knows the rules.

¹⁴ I am thankful to the second anonymous reviewer of this article for this observation.

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