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Class Wargames: how an obscure board game led to Labour's gamification of power

“Transform the enclosed lands of spectacular capitalism into the participatory playgrounds of cybernetic communism.”

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SUBMIT**BY JULIA RAMPEN**

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Play the *Game of War*, and you will learn how to transform the enclosed lands of spectacular capitalism into the participatory playgrounds of cybernetic communism," says a disembodied voice over clips from historical dramas, demonstrations and famous moments from history.

It's the kind of video you wouldn't be surprised to find on an obscure gaming-enthusiast site, which makes sense since it is hosted on what appears to be just that. Or at least, it would have remained obscure if it weren't for one of those featured in the video, a man who was at the time a left-wing backbench Labour MP by the name of John McDonnell.

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Now shadow chancellor, McDonnell told the Labour party conference on Tuesday that his economic team would be playing war games to prepare for government, with the help of an academic called Richard Barbrook. Internet sleuths soon tracked down the site Barbrook helped set up, [Class Wargames](#). The site's main attraction is the video's subject, *Game of War*, which was reconstructed ten years ago by group of artists, software developers and political activists from an original developed by a left-wing Marxist theorist, Guy Debord.

The video promotes the game's unique selling points

The game was reconstructed in 2007 using photographs of the original, since destroyed, and the rule booklet. After creating it, the players then had to learn how to play. "It's a really complicated game," says Rod Dickinson, one of the original "players". While the board game resembles a chessboard, with pieces of different value that can be moved around, the successful player needs to draw on Debord's theories of military strategy. "The only way you can win in Debord's game is by disabling the enemy's network," says Dickinson. "You can't win by removing all their pieces from the game."

While it all seems terribly serious, Dickinson says the video promoting *Game of War* is at least partly a pastiche, which like the game itself is "playing with these ideas of the historical revolutionary moment". At one point in the video, the narrator declares that, when Debord and his wife played the game, "the table

Barbrook himself also hints that the *Game of War* shouldn't be taken entirely seriously. "That's an art project we did," he tells me of the whole Class Wargames site. A political scientist, Barbrook has introduced gamification into the courses he has taught, and it seems like a natural extension to apply similar theories to his work with the Labour party. As well as helping to write Labour's digital manifesto, he was involved in the creation of *Corbyn Run*, an online game launched during the 2017 general election. In it, the player, using an avatar of Jeremy Corbyn, shakes down bankers in order to collect money for the budget.

Barbrook was at the Labour party conference in part to launch *Games for the Many*, a pro-Corbyn games website. Launches include an improved version of *Corbyn Run* – "even Jeremy's playing it, he thought it was hilarious" – and new works in the pipeline, including the working title of "Tinder for Canvassers", which Barbrook says was coined by McDonnell himself.

The war games planned for the shadow economics team will not be quite as edgy, with participants seated round a table and asked to make decisions in a variety

of situations, which have consequences. Experts will be invited to attend, such as former Bank of England officials. “We’d ideally have the whole shadow cabinet playing,” says Barbrook.

As for *Game of War*, the project that kickstarted their enthusiasm for politically conscious gaming, Barbrook and his fellow player are divided. Barbrook says he was “surprised how good it was”. But Dickinson has a word of warning for aspirational Labour activists: “They will be very, very bored.”

Julia Rampen is the digital news editor of the *New Statesman* (previously editor of *The Staggers*, *The New Statesman*'s online rolling politics blog). She has also been deputy editor at *Mirror Money Online* and has worked as a financial journalist for several trade magazines.



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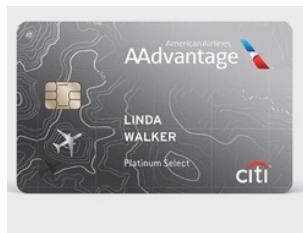


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**BY GEORGE
EATON**



John McDonnell is a man preparing for power. "We have proved that we are an effective campaigning party," he declared in his [speech yesterday](#). "We now have to prove that we will be an effective governing party."

At a World Transformed event last night ("Governing from the Radical Left"), McDonnell went further and

explained how Labour is preparing for the economic tumult that could accompany its election. "It [planning] tries to answer the question about what happens when or if they come for us," the shadow chancellor said. "What if there is a run on the pound? What happens if there is this concept of capital flight? I don't think there will be but you never know so we've got to scenario-plan for that. People want to know we are ready and they want to know we have got a response to anything that could happen."

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Labour, McDonnell said, was preparing "detailed implementation manuals" and drafting legislation so it could "hit the deck running". Even more intriguingly, he revealed that supporters (led by Richard Barbrook, founder of the group Class Wargames) are performing "war-game type scenario planning".

In view of Labour's manifesto, such preparation is essential. Not since the **Mitterrand government** has a European party entered power with such an interventionist programme (including the renationalisation of public utilities, higher taxation of the rich and corporations, increased public investment, a financial transaction tax and a £10 minimum wage).

Within two years of François Mitterrand's election in 1981, his Socialist administration had been brought to heel by the market. A surging trade deficit (owing to

The challenge for a Labour government, as McDonnell knows, is precisely to avoid such an outcome. In a far more globalised economy than that of the 1980s, the task is formidable. As a senior Labour politician **recently told me**: "There is simply no historical model anywhere in the world for what we want to do, which has been successful. A left government being elected in a post-industrial society and then successfully managing to transition into a major new settlement, whether a new form of capitalism or socialism: this is not easy to achieve." Indeed, as McDonnell told me: "We went beyond the concept of socialism in one country many decades ago. To transform our society, we know we have to work internationally and globally."

And all this even before the likely fallout from Brexit. To the UK's existing defects – low productivity, low investment and low pay – new ones have been added: political uncertainty and economic instability. McDonnell is wise to hope for the best but prepare for the worst.

George Eaton is political editor of the *New Statesman*.



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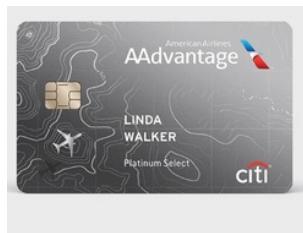


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