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CLASS WAR: THE GAME: THE MOVIE

By Scott Lenney , 4 November 2009



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Image: All images by Alex Veness

Between playful graffiti on the walls of the Sorbonne and long denunciations of the spectacle lies the enigma that is Guy Debord's *Game of War*. Veteran gamer Scott Lenney played a match with Class Wargames at their Summer Offensive, enjoyed it thoroughly but wondered at the aim of the game

... war is neither 'nothing but' an act of brute force nor 'merely' a rational act of politics or policy. This synthesis lies in [Clausewitz's] 'fascinating trinity': a dynamic, inherently unstable interaction of the forces of violent emotion, chance, and rational calculation.

- Chrisopher Bassord, *Clausewitz and His Work*

In true Debordian style, we must yearn for games gone by. It's not that they're lost, it's that they aren't played at sitting room tables on rainy Sundays to the soundtrack of doom metal. They are played obsessively, in little atomised worlds, even when those worlds are inhabited by millions of others. As a level 38 Death Knight, I can totally wreck the Razorfen Downs with my Doomplate Battlegear on, but the successful completion of that mission or task is rewarded with an essentially identical mission or task, which is merely to say the game is an extension of work. One seeks only to defeat the boss and become him or, at the furthest degeneration, to be approved by the boss. Thank you Mario, but your attaboy is in another castle.

Taking up Guy Debord's *Game of War*, Class Wargames (comprised of author Richard Barbrook,

psychogeographer Fabian Thompsett, artist Alex Veness and curator/film-maker Ilze Black, among others) have attempted a return to games as social events. Assisting in the task was a presentation at the HTTP Gallery late last September of 'xenographs' and cinema dealing with the concepts and experience of the game, and demonstrating Debord's belief that *Game of War* in fact represents 'a guide to how people should live their lives within Fordist society', and that, by playing it, 'revolutionary activists ... learn how to fight and win against the oppressors of spectacular society.'¹ While Debord came to regard the game as among his most important work, its relevance to class war is obscure: the set rules of operation, numerically equal opposing sides and arithmetical system of engagement do not seem to resemble, say, a wildcat strike, a picket or a demonstration in any way. The *Game of War* - like the more popular *Risk* - takes Napoleonic war as its model, not May '68.

So through moving and static images, through socialising around the *Game of War*, Class Wargames assumes the noble burden of exegesis. Abutted by people who actually knew the rules, the game itself - liberated from the tyranny of existing structures and brought out into the streets (or at least the car park) to bask in the early Autumn sun - provided the focal point for their summer offensive. But as their film, simply titled *Guy Debord's Game of War*, makes clear, the ultimate goal of *Game of War* is not to decimate the enemy. Rather, it is to surmount the conditions that make combat necessary; not winning or losing, but the different pleasures inherent in either.

The players of *Game of War* are typified in the published rules to the game, which reproduce a match between Guy Debord and his wife Alice Becker-Ho. Rather than a 20 by 20 square, the film argues, the terrain for these two was where the dynamics of their relationship were acted out. Part of what makes *Game of War* complicated is that the rules are simple - after coming to terms with the movements of the pieces, players are allowed massive spaces in which to operate and there is an exponential number of not only permissible, but also reasonable moves in every turn. And since each turn consists of five moves, the positions can change radically in a short space of time. In chess, one puts forward a theory - the king's gambit, the Indian defence - and this is either proved or refuted. In *Game of War*, a turn is something far more personal: you advance further and further toward the point at which your human opponent is most vulnerable or guard yourself against your opponent's advances, when the positions are suddenly reversed, and in all the to and fro something interesting happens. Between you and your opponent is the board only, and over the board, something seems to click. 'Our revolution', the film tells us in the chapter on combat, 'won't be militarised. It will be eroticised.'

On this point, the 'xenographs' by Alex Veness are fundamental to Class Wargames' thesis. As the camera and scanner he uses attempt to reconcile all the different states of a movement it creates something wholly different: a photographic conglomeration peculiarly suited to interactions around the *Game of War*.² In one image, a player's hat has replaced his face as he moves a piece on the board, hiding his expression. In another, a player has somehow morphed into the Virgin Mary looking sympathetically at the infant on her lap, perhaps contemplating necessary sacrifice - of an artillery piece, for instance. But the most appropriate is an image from a social held in St. Petersburg, where movements in a crowd of people create the impression that several are sat around the gaming table holding placards. Because only moving things change appearances to the camera, each image has this in common: the game board and the pieces on it appear exactly as they should, but the players and spectators are each more or less distorted. The subjective element rears its head.



Alongside images of the game being played are more subtle ones, capturing the group's discussions around organising their events. Faces distort from the body - the smile remains. These images are interesting because

their relative tranquillity is juxtaposed with the mashed up images of combat in the film. In its explication of the concepts of *Game of War* - terrain, arsenals, combat, cavalry, lines of communication - the film attempts to translate them into terms consistent with more or less traditional class struggle. Arsenals become worker's councils, the site (for Debord) of revolutionary leftism with whom it is necessary to always maintain contact through the lines of communication.³ Cavalry are those active militants who clear the way for the infantry to occupy. The board is a stage and each piece plays its part. As a preface to the showing of the film, champagne was generously distributed - to each according to their need - and a toast was proposed: to the class war! Not, however, to its successful resolution.

Well, it will be said, one knows what was meant. But in contrast to the images of demonstrators and Hugo Chavez at the podium, these beacons of progress prominently displayed in the collage of cinematic fragments that made up the film, one may arrive at a notion that those whose needs are not met by existing society ought to down their placards and don their dungeon master robes as an end in itself. Contemporaneous with Class Wargames, Frère Dupont in his article 'For Earthen Cup', imagines that it's there, in the role a player assumes, that a break with dominant power structures is made.⁴ In contrast (or, more interestingly, not) to their idea of the eroticised player, Class Wargames claim: 'Every proletarian can play at being Lenin, Trotsky or Stalin on the game board so that no one is tempted to become a little Lenin, Trotsky or Stalin.'⁵ Personally, I could role-play as a communist Night Elf maybe, but never as Trotsky.

The Class Wargames Communiqué takes Foucault's reversal of Clausewitz, and then turns it around once more, arguably depriving it of its radical content: 'Wargames are a continuation of politics by other means.'⁶ What is needed, what meets human needs, is a break with politics, and this was glimpsed at the event, over a board game and a few beers, arguing amicably, which is not to say dispassionately, about ideas in the sunshine. In other words, wargames are a contribution to the end of politics. Just hanging out must be defended against leftist moralism as much as against the need to work more - against managed life, in short. But what the film insists on, again and again, is that one must play the game for oneself. Understanding the concepts is not sufficient, because unlike games that attempt to extract themselves from the social, *Game of War* allows for spontaneous, unmanaged expressions that at the very least, make it a worthwhile pursuit.

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Info

Class Wargames' Summer Offensive took place at the HTTP Gallery, London on 26-27 September. Check website for future event: <http://www.classwargames.net>

Their film, *Guy Debord's Game of War*, is available in chapters, starting with 'Terrain,' at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gd2STbEtZ_o

Footnotes

¹Class Wargames, 'Comminiqué #7', 27/09/09: http://www.classwargames.net/resources/communique_7v1.pdf. How the 'Fordism' of Debord's time relates to present modes of production is left unexplained.

² A note on the xenographs: the prefix 'xeno' from the Greek 'stranger', is borrowed from biology where it designates 'species-difference', so xenograph: an image created by different species (a camera and scanner). I am not clear as to the exact process of producing the images, but perhaps that is a trade secret.

³In the *Game of War* no piece can move, attack or defend if it is not in direct, uninterrupted, line with either the arsenal or a communications unit itself in direct line with the arsenal.

⁴See, <http://voidmanufacturing.wordpress.com/2008/11/25/the-inimitable-frere-dupont/>

⁵Part IV of the film, 'Cavalry'.

⁶Op. cit..