

The Poor & the Hanged

A game by Mark Vallianatos

October 2007

Comments to markvalli@gmail.com

“The labourers of London are, therefore, nine times as dishonest, five times as drunken, and nine times as savage as the rest of the community.”

- Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*

“In criminology as in economics there is scarcely a more powerful word that ‘capital.’ In the former discipline it denotes death; in the latter it has designated the ‘substance’ or the ‘stock’ of life: apparently opposite meanings.”

- Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*

X is a game on the intersection of work, crime, and punishment in London during the late 17th to early 19th centuries. To be more precise, one might say it is about how the London poor got food into their stomachs and found ropes put around their necks.

The poor and the hanged

The time frame of the game extends roughly from the 1690s, when some Londoners could still recall the defeated popular currents that had stirred during the Civil War and Republic and when many had lived through the metropolis’s rebuilding following the great fire of 1666. At its terminal point, it runs into the 1840s, up against the beggars, orphans, poor houses, criminal gangs, impenetrable courts of law and the rest of the Dickensian tragicomedies of Victorian London.

The game is not intended to be an accurate social history of the lives of the lower classes in London during these periods. I’m conflating more than a century of hardscrabble occupations, of evolving crimes and draconian legal codes, of popular ballads and public hangings and officially sanctioned fear and loathing and management of poor people – mashing them together in hopes of wringing out vivid details and identifying some avenues for playing these stories. That said, if you happen to know enough (more than I do) about English history to settle upon a particular era or decade, feel free to anchor your games to more specific historical events and trends in the growth and evolution of London.

I referred to the odd equilibrium between the stomachs and necks of poor Londoners. The first side of this equation concerns the desperate struggle by those on the bottom of the economic ladder to survive. England was the epicenter of the industrial revolution, which

sparked all kinds of new forms of work and wealth while undermining or transforming some traditional livelihoods. Millions of poor people – former peasants, immigrants from Ireland, workers in declining craft industries – shuffled among a bizarre ecosystem of occupational niches and criminal enterprises (what this game will refer to as Trades.) The London poor apprenticed to butchers and bakers and candlestick makers. They waded through the muck of the Thames to snatch coal off of barge decks. They were themselves snatched from docks and taverns and impressed into service as sailors. They sold fish and watercress and songbirds in the streets, the latter sometimes prettied up with paints to pass as more exotic species. They bred and stole and ransomed dogs, killed rats in the city, and bought rats from the countryside for dogs to kill in fighting pits. To close the canine loop, they even gathered dog shit (called ‘pure’) in alleyways to sell to tanneries.

Turning to necks, we consider what Peter Linebaugh, in his book *The London Hanged* calls ‘the pedagogy of the gallows.’ For a variety of reasons, including the ideology of the Stuart restoration and Williamite monarchy, the perceived need to protect the new forms of property and commerce generated by the industrial revolution, and fear of the rowdiness, criminality and possible radicalism of the poor, the number of crimes punishable by death in Great Britain exploded during the years covered by this game. In 1688, fifty crimes carried a sentence of death; by 1815, 225 did. This growing list of capital offenses, sometimes called the ‘bloody code,’ included crimes like pick-pocketing more than a shilling; stealing rabbits from a warren; being out at night with a mask or blackened face; and mothers concealing a still born child. Just because these laws were on the books does not mean that they were all aggressively enforced or that juries would convict for all offenses. But the gallows did not languish empty. More than 6500 people were hung to death in England, Wales and Scotland between 1735 to 1799 alone. Until 1868, every hanging was public, a spectacle that taught lessons about the majesty of the state and the cheapness or dearness of life.

Acknowledgements

This draft was written for a Make Game\$ Fast challenge to use spam message headers as ingredients. http://www.storygames.com/forums/comments.php?DiscussionID=4549&page=1#Item_43 Thanks to Joe Murphy and Graham Walmsley for running it. I used ‘join millions of men in the revolution’ (thinking of the industrial revolution) and ‘notice of suspension’ in the sense of “hanging is the lethal suspension of a person by a ligature” – wikipedia

The game draws heavily upon two books: Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor; A cyclopædia of the condition and earnings of those that will work, those that cannot work, and those that will not work*; which was published in 1851 and Peter Linebaugh's *The London Hanged: crime and civil society in the eighteenth century* (2nd edition, 2003).

The Trades character creation method is a simple version of lifepath systems used in a number of rpgs, for example, Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay and Burning Wheel.

The game that probably inspired me the most in this design is Phillippe Tromeur's free rpg Wuthering Heights roleplay, <http://philippe.tromeur.free.fr/whrpg.htm>

Characters

Each player makes a character.

1. Pick trades: starting characters are constructed from two or more **trades** – their jobs or professions – that determine character's traits, as well as give trade **quirks**. Choose trades from the list at the end of this game, writing down one as your character's current trade and at least one other as a prior profession. Players should decide together how many prior trades their characters will have. One to three prior trades is usually a good rule of thumb.
2. Calculate trait values. Through their trades, characters are defined by four traits: appetite, guilt, notoriety, and penury. These traits are ranked at 2, 4 or 6. To determine the numerical value of your character's traits, add the value given under the character's current trade to one half of the highest value for any previous trades. This will give a final value of between 3 and 9 for each trait.
3. List trade quirks. Each trade has one quirk associated with it, which are physical or social characteristics common to people of that occupation. Note down the quirks from all your character's trades – current and prior.
4. Invent personal quirks. Each character has four personal quirks, one associated with each trait. For your character's appetite trait, write down an addiction that they suffer (to gin, tobacco, sexual release, gambling, etc). For the guilt trait, write down a conviction they hold: a belief or value system that they will suffer from violating (thou shall not kill, I will not scab against a fellow coal-heaver, vegetarianism, orthodox Judaism, etc.) For the character's notoriety trait, you also write down a conviction, but a criminal one this time (petty larceny of 2 lbs cheese, passing of false coins, etc). For the penury trait, you have the choice of three types of quirks: an affliction, a possession, or the character's origins. Afflictions are medical conditions such as scars, limps, mental disorders, or diseases. Possessions are significant objects owned or used by the character (tools, toys, personal mementos, etc. Origins are non-typical backgrounds such as minority nationalities (Irish, Jewish, Welsh, Scottish, Hindoo, Negro, etc.) or orphan or foundling.
5. Add biographical information. Finalize your character by choosing their gender, age, and name.

Traits:

Appetite: does such a person tend to have strong urges?

Guilt: does this sort of person fear for their soul or otherwise regret their actions and who they are?

Notoriety: is such a person well known in their demimonde for and/or wanted by the authorities?

Penury: is this type of person usually impoverished?

Conflicts

The game is played through one of the five story circuits described below. All circuits share the same basic rules for addressing conflicts that the characters face. Players control their characters while one player acting as a moderator controls the actions of other persons or forces involved in scenes. When a conflict arises, player and moderator will each take a hand of cards. They divide up a number of cards equal to the value of the characters trait that is active in the scene, following a ratio listed under the relevant story circuit.

Before looking at the cards in their hand, a player says what their character wants to achieve through the conflict. The moderator does the same for the opposition. Player and moderator then look at the cards they hold and play their choice two cards face down. They say what the cards are, listing the higher card first. (Aces are high). Compare each side's higher card, and then compare the sides' lower cards. The side with the higher of the two high cards takes a step towards winning the conflict and overcoming their opponent. The side with the higher of the two lower cards is positioned well to continue the conflict; that player or moderator draws a new card from the deck. Play two new cards until one side has won two steps (two comparisons of high cards). At this point, the conflict ends and player and moderator can describe or roleplay how the character or opposition do or don't accomplish their goals.

That's the basics of using cards to determine the outcome of a challenge. There are some additional twists and options:

- **Running out of cards-** when one or both sides run out cards, the conflict ends. When one side has no cards left in their hand, the other side wins the conflict, even if they were behind from prior hands. If both sides run out simultaneously, the side that has won more high pairs wins the conflict. If both sides have won the same number of high pairs, the conflict ends in stalemate.
- **Playing one card-** it can be possible to win a conflict by playing just one card against two played by your opponent. If a side has already won a high pair in a conflict, they can play a single card, and if it higher than the opponent's high card, they win the conflict. You cannot play a single card if you have two remaining.
- **Ties-** ties are broken by the other pair of compared cards. So if a player has a 6,4 and the moderator has a 6,3 then the player wins the tie and takes a step towards victory and draws a new card. If both pairs are tied, then the outcome is a temporary stalemate. Both players draw one new card and proceed with the conflict.
- **Bluffing-** players are allowed to lie about one or both of the cards they place down. Cards are not revealed unless one side accuses the other of bluffing/lying. In this case, the cards of the accused player are turned over. If they indeed were bluffing, then they lose both pairs of cards and must discard their choice of one card from their hand. (even if the cards they placed down would have won absent their bluff). If, on the other hand, a side is shown to have been falsely accused, then the accuser loses both pairs and must discard a card from their hand. If both

- sides are penalized during the same hand (because both are exposed as bluffers or both accuse falsely), then the hand is considered a stalemate and the players do not draw a new card or discard a card. If one side is caught bluffing and makes a false accusation, they lose both pairs and must discard two cards from their hand.
- **Quirks-** both sides of a conflict can draw upon extra cards by referencing a quirk in a manner that supports their desired outcome. Referencing the personal quirk associated with the character's trait lets a player or the moderator draw three cards from the deck. Referencing a trade quirk lets a side draw two cards. Referencing a personal quirk from a different trait grants one extra card. Both sides of a conflict can reference the same quirks, providing they 'use' them in ways that support their side of the conflict. Each side can only reference each quirk once during each **scene** (not each hand, not each story circuit). The moderator has final say over whether a quirk has been appropriately referenced to support a side in the conflict.
 - **Multiple players in a conflict-** if multiple players are involved in a single conflict, the moderator creates a hand of cards to oppose each player. The moderator will alternate hands between the players she is opposing. Players can lend aid to other players in the same conflict by describing how they are helping. You can only aid each other player once per scene. The moderator can also lend aid between her hands by giving one or two cards from one opposition hand to another. The moderator must justify the aid by a narrative connection.

Story circuits

Story circuits are pathways for exploring the game's themes. They provide a framework of scenes that predetermine the overall flow of the game, while leaving the content of scenes to the choices of players. You can play one circuit or plan to play several (with the same characters or new characters each circuit). Each story circuit is described below, with a sequence of scenes, the trait that is active in each scene, the distribution of cards from the active trait, and the consequences that befall characters at the completion of the circuit. When distributing cards, round numbers in favor of the side that gets more cards for that scene. If the split is even, round in favor of players. Each scene must include at least one conflict, and possibly more, depending on the nature of the character's actions and the narrative logic of the scene. The moderator decides when to proceed to the next scene. You'll need one participant to be the moderator for the story circuit.

Note that whichever side wins a conflict in each scene, the game proceeds to the next scene. Players don't have to win to advance.

Broadsheet

This circuit is a broadsheet on the life and crimes of a well-known malefactor (or criminal gang). 'Written' for a popular audience, it will scandalize by publishing all the salacious and bloody details of the criminal subject; while also ultimately edifying readers through its morality tale structure. Players should decide whether the broadsheet will focus on one character or a gang of low-lives.

Scenes:

1. Penury. A scene from the characters' early years. 2/3 in favor of players.
2. Appetite. Scene revealing a moral flaw. 2/3 in favor of moderator.
3. Notoriety. Scene from criminal career. Even split.
4. Guilt. Scene after capture (during sentencing, confession, on way to scaffold, etc).
2/3 in favor of moderator.

Consequence: if player wins guilt scene and at least one other scene, their character is pardoned or has their sentence commuted; otherwise, their character is hanged.

Cost of living

According to Peter Linebaugh, modern economists are unsure how the London poor survived in the late 17th and early 18th century, because their expenses – food, lodging, fuel – seem to have been greater than the wages available to most trades available to their class. This circuit is meant to show characters' desperate and constant struggle to make ends meet.

Scenes:

1. Appetite. A scene on doing without, or wasting what scant funds the characters have. Even split.
2. Penury. Getting by: looking for work or food or lodging. 2/3 in favor of moderator.
3. Guilt. Sliding into crime. 2/3 in favor of player.

Consequence: if player wins the guilt scene, they can choose a new, criminal trade for their character. If their current trade is not criminal, this new trade becomes their current trade. If their current trade is already a criminal one, they can choose whether to bump the current one to prior or to slot the new trade as a prior one.

Prison break

Engel's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) quotes a Childrens Employment Commissioner to the effect that "Some of the children have never heard the name of Her Majesty, nor such names as Wellington, Nelson, Bonaparte. But ... there was a general knowledge of the character and course of life of Dick Turpin, the highwayman, and more particularly of Jack Shepherd, the robber and prison-breaker." This story circuit follows characters whose daring escapes capture the popular imagination.

Scenes:

1. Notoriety. The crimes for which characters are being held. Even split.
2. Players choice of Guilt or Penury. Misery, doubt and deprivation in prison. 2/3 in favor of moderator.
3. Notoriety. Escape. 2/3 in favor of players.
4. Appetite. Enjoying freedom. Even split.
5. Notoriety. Concealment and manhunt. Even split.

Consequence: characters' notoriety permanently rise by one if they win 2 of 3 notoriety scenes; also, they are caught hanged if they lose the final notoriety scene.

Impressed

This story circuit follows characters who voluntarily or involuntarily become sailors, then muster out and enjoy city life. (Criminal indictments in 18th century London spiked during the weeks when the East and West Indies fleets were in harbor.)

Scenes:

1. Appetite. Scene showing why characters weren't thinking straight when they were seized or signed on. 2/3 in favor of moderator.
2. Penury. Life under the mast ("no man will be a sailor who has a contrivance to get himself into a gaol; for being in a ship is being in gaol with a chance of being drowned" Dr. Johnson). 2/3 in favor of moderator.
3. Guilt. The worst things characters did in foreign ports/ strange seas. 2/3 in favor of players.
4. Notoriety. Conflict and crime back in London on short leave. Even split.

Consequence: all characters add sailor as a new current trade. Players that lose the notoriety scene have choice of their character hanging or else embarking on another round of the impressed circuit.

Testament

A character is sentenced to hang. Before swinging, he or she reads compose their will. The players' characters are friends of the condemned. Each scene is a bequest of an item or items to a different player character, allowing a memory of why that possession is appropriate for the recipient (a shared escapade or the like). This circuit has no set scene order. The moderator gets up to four bequests, one per trait; or, if there are more than four players, one scene per player. All cards are evenly split. Note that this circuit can be played after the consequences of other circuits have condemned any character to hang.

Consequence: all recipients of bequests can add that item as a new possession personal quirk.

List of Trades

Trade	Trade quirk	App	Guilt	Not	Pen
Apothecary's apprentice	Access to medicine	6	4	2	2
Beggar: crippled	pity	4	2	4	6

Beggar: disaster survivor	storyteller	2	4	4	6
Beggar: family man	respectable	4	2	2	6
Beggar: subject to fits	actor	4	2	4	6
Bird duffer: paints live birds to look like rarer species	artistic	4	4	2	4
Bird seller	Surrounded by song	4	2	2	6
Blacksmith's apprentice	strong	6	4	2	4
Bone-picker	Strong stomach	4	4	2	6
burglar	agile	4	2	6	4
Butcher's apprentice	Anatomical knowledge	6	4	4	2
Button maker's apprentice	Good eyes	4	4	2	4
Carpenter's apprentice	Handy with tools	4	4	4	4
cheap john (hawker of goods from a platform)	Good judge of personality types	4	4	4	4
Chimney sweep	sooty	4	2	4	4
clerk	Knows a bit about the law	2	4	2	4
coachman	Knows the city	6	2	4	4
Coal-heaver	Strong upper body	4	2	4	4
Coiners (make fake coins from plaster molds)	Cache of 'money'	4	4	6	2
Cook's apprentice	Well-fed	6	2	2	4
Dog stealer	Liked by animals		4	6	4
Domestic servant	Middle/upper class employers	4	6	2	4
Exhibitor of trained animals	menagerie	4	2	4	4
Flower girl	Romantic air about	4	2	2	6
forgery	literate	4	2	6	4
gardener	Rustic	2	6	2	4
Highway robber	armed	4	4	6	2
Horse thief	robust	2	4	6	4
Locksmith's apprentice	Opening doors	4	4	2	4
Mudlark (knock coal off the decks of barges, gather it from	At home in water & muck	4	2	4	6

the muck)					
pickpocket	Nimble hands	4	2	6	4
Prostitute: board lodger	Room of their own	4	2	6	4
Prostitute: park woman (streetwalker)	Ugly/old	4	4	4	6
Prostitute: Seclusives, or those that live in Private Houses and Apartments	'benefactor'	4	6	4	2
Pure finder (pure = dog dung)	resourceful	2	4	4	6
Rat killer	ruthless	4	2	4	4
Rat-match promoter	organized	4	2	6	4
Receiver of stolen property	Good with figures	4	4	4	2
River Pirate (enter ships during night to rob)	Can pass for sailor	4	2	6	4
Sailor	World traveler	6	2	4	4
Sharpers (cheaters at games of chance)	misdirection	2	4	6	4
shoplifter	Respectable appearance	6	4	4	2
Sneak (common thief)	quiet	4	2	6	4
Stevedore (dock worker)	Contacts in fleet	6	2	4	4
Street magician	mysterious	2	4	6	4
Street musician: blind	Object of curiosity	2	4	4	6
Street musician: skillful	Plays well	4	2	4	4
Street seller of coal	Knows locals	4	4	4	4
Strolling actor (street performers)	Charisma	4	4	4	4
Tailor's apprentice	dexterous	4	4	2	4
Vagrant (wandering beggar)	Used to deprivation	4	4	2	6
weaver	Radical political contacts	4	4	4	4
Wig maker's apprentice	Up on latest fashion	6	4	4	2

Character Sheet

Player name

Character name

Gender

Age

Trades

quirk

app

guilt

not

pen

Current

Prior

Traits

value

personal quirks

Appetite:

Guilt:

Notoriety:

Penury:

addiction:

conviction (belief):

conviction (legal):

affliction/possession/origins:

Consequences

Broadsheet circuit:

Cost of living circuit:

Prison Break circuit:

Impressed circuit:

Testament circuit: