Poverty Is No Shame? Oh Yes, It Is!

If they exist, I like to read the "Designer Notes," the story that a designer tells about the development of his game. The development that LONDON has taken is pretty typical: The original idea was too complex and comprehensive, so that Martin Wallace had to cut it back. Even though the Great Fire of 1666 is inextricably linked to the history of London, a game in which the city is built, then destroyed by fire and after that built up again would have been unsatisfying. For this reason, Wallace's version of London history begins only after the Great Fire. The effects of this fire, however, will be described in one of the next spielbox issues.

Cards are a proven means to trace the history of a city. They can be used to bring events, characters and buildings into play in any way. In order to adhere to historical facts, Wallace has divided them into three piles; each of them is shuffled separately, but then all of them are combined into one card deck in a predetermined order. This ensures that the London Underground actually is not built in the 17th century and doesn't come into play until the final third of the game, if at all.

Also, in regard to colors, the cards are divided into economic, scientific, cultural and political activities. But we can quickly forget about this division. First, some allocations are rather questionable (is the building of the Underground a political activity?). Second, only the colors are of importance for the game anyway.

Each player makes his contribution to the buildup of London. You are equipped with too little money and a handful of cards; on your turn, you take one card and choose one of four possible actions. For instance, you can play cards, using them to build a row of cards in front of you. This layout represents your part of the city. Generally, any card is good for this action. Later on, more cards can be added to the ones in front of you and also be put on top of previously played cards, forming stacks. Each card played in such a way has to be paid with another card of the same color; some cost money in addition. This simple rule is substantial, however. It not only means that, after playing a card,

I have to discard another card without being allowed to use it. It also means that I play into the other players' hands – because the discards are laid out face up next to one another and are, from now on, alternatively available for anybody taking a cards.

The building cards in front of every player have, in the first instance, positive effects. Many cards give you victory points at the end of the game; some of them provide additional advantages. A few others have immediate effect, but most cards need to be activated first. It is left to you how large you make your card layout. A card is effective as long as it is visible. If it is covered by another card, it can no longer be used; nevertheless, any victory points are retained.
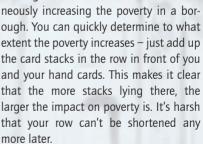
▌ Running the city leads you into poverty

Theoretically, you can expand your layout as much as you like, i. e., place any number of cards next to one another. However, that takes its toll as soon as you run the city. Running the city is the second possibility of action, meaning nothing but activating your row of cards. This has to be paid in some cases, too, either with money or by discarding any one card.

The benefits of an activated card are many. They fill your empty pockets with money, for example, or give you victory points. In most cases, it's a one-time benefit: The activated card is turned face down, but remains in the display. That is important in terms of the consequences of running the city: It increases poverty!

This brings us to another aspect that Wallace incorporated into his game and that plays an important role for determining the victory points. I don't want to conjecture, however, what made the designer come up with the rule of every running action instantaneously increasing the poverty in a borough. You can quickly determine to what extent the poverty increases – just add up the card stacks in the row in front of you and your hand cards. This makes it clear that the more stacks lying there, the larger the impact on poverty is. It's harsh that your row can't be shortened any more later.

But there are possibilities of countering the growing poverty, indicated by black cubes; some cards allow you to get rid of a few. A lasting remedy is to buy land.

Open or hidden?

According to the instructions, the money is always visible for all players. They don't say anything about the poverty points and victory points; consequently, it is up to the players how to handle this. As for the victory points, you need to consider that the chips constitute only a part of them. Hardly anybody will be able to memorize how many points are contained in the players' card displays. But considering the poverty points, you should constantly keep an eye on the other players' number of cubes. If one player manages to keep his poverty on a low level, he makes sure that the others will lose a lot of victory points in the end. Such surprises don't fit the character of Wallace's games. And then there are the credits that we have defined as a special form of money and therefore have laid open.

the cards. There are 110 overall; more than half of them exist only once. Besides the three kinds mentioned, there is also a fourth type of card: the paupers. Their purpose: dead weight. Or, as the instructions read: "essentially useless unless you can educate them or find menial work for them." The paupers are dead weight because you can't play them; you can only get rid of them with the help of other cards or by using them as currency to activate cards.

After two to three games, you are more familiar with the cards. Who gets what cards at what moment into his hand depends on luck, especially with four players more so than in a two-player game. Actually, all cards always take part. The winning strategy is to optimize your own display. Interaction is kept within limits; it is restricted to the open cards on the game board from which the players can avail themselves, and to the skirmish for the acquisition of land in London. Ones personal row of cards rarely directly affects the other players. For many a player, that means too little cooperation or conflict. Having land is also important for the Underground, which comes into play pretty late, is expensive, and requires two rounds in order to give you victory points; but then it is lucrative.

I Does the playing appeal last?

There are various constraints during the game. Money is scant, and loans are expensive if you're not able to pay them back. A wide-spread card layout earns you money, victory points and other benefits, but exacerbates poverty. And poverty is also costly if it has to be paid with victory points. Too many cards in your hand make you poor as well whenever you run the city. This contrast of poverty and victory points, light and shade, plus and minus is characteristic of Wallace's games.

One remark on the game materials: Whoever was not lucky enough to get hold of the luxury edition with little wooden buildings (individual shapes for each player!) and wooden money had to content himself with cardboard tiles for the buildings and plastic chips for the

Which brings us to the third action you can choose. The gameboard shows London, divided into 20 boroughs. Each borough has its purchase price, gives you victory points in the end, and allows you, when you buy it, to take two to five cards into your hand, also from the open display, if you want. Each borough acquired means one less cube when poverty runs rampant.

Unfortunately, our financial means are very limited. As mentioned above, playing or activating cards sometimes costs money. And now, in addition, there is the need to buy land ... Almost nobody stays the course of the game without taking a credit. The number of loans is not restricted and is not attached to any con-

ditions. Finally, however, one should pay back lent money, even though the interest of 50 percent is horrendous. If a player still owes in the end, he has to account for this by a reduction in victory points. Poverty also decreases the number of victory points drastically.

For the sake of completeness, I want to mention that players can also choose a fourth action on their turn: They can take three cards, but then do nothing else.

The game comes to an end when the card pile has been gone through once. Of course, the player with the most victory points wins; the calculation is even more comprehensive than described here.

Playing LONDON for the first time, our main concern is to become familiar with

A tourism marketing building set

Originally, the game of LONDON was developed close to the historical model. In accordance with the designer's usual approach, the city's history determined the mechanism. In doing so, something emerged accidentally that could be used for a universal city game. By modifying the cards, an adaptation to Moscow, Paris or Amsterdam could be done pretty easily, and the completed game would tell the history of a city in any case. Actually, tourist associations should scramble to get a version for their city and thus the ideal playful advertising medium. The only thing that's missing is that the persons in charge have the insight to understand that city games don't necessarily have to be for the lowest common denominator intellectually.

London also in cooperation!

Without any rule changes, LONDON can also be played in a cooperative fashion. In this case, the victory points of all players are added up, and the object is to score as many points as possible. Even though the rules remain the same, this variant requires a different way of playing.

play money (in the regular Treefrog edition as well as in the Mayfair edition). You should quickly dispose of the chips and replace them with nicer money; the rest doesn't lessen the playing fun.

I can't predict, however, how long this fun will last. As your experience grows, you'll know the strong and the weak points of the cards; you'll know which ones will simply be better than others, and you'll roughly know when they will come up in the card deck. LONDON is an optimization game, and optimization games can become boring after a while.   *kmw/sbw*

Title:	**London**
Publisher:	**Treefrog Games/Mayfair**
Designer:	**Martin Wallace**
Artist:	**Peter Dennis, Simon Jannerland, Mike Atkinson**
Players:	**2–4 (for two: ➜)**
Age:	**about 13 and up**
Duration:	**about 90 minutes**
Price:	**about 40 €**

Reviewer	Playing appeal
KMW	8
Christwart Conrad	8
L. U. Dikus*	7
Oliver Grimm	8
Matthias Hardel	8
Christian Klein	7
Roman Pelek**	8

* Multi-player solitaire.
** The game mechanisms are well to the point. Sometimes, commercial constraints regarding the production of a game have also a silver lining.