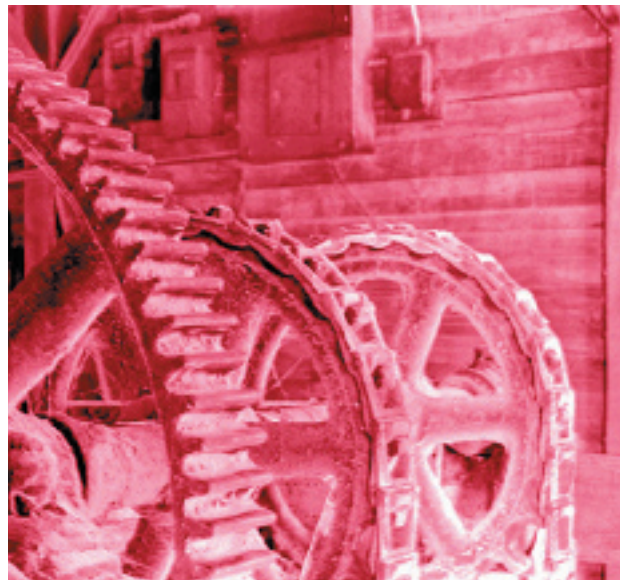# Satanic Mills

" All is under the sway of inhuman power "
> K. Marx

> by Mark Vallianatos, July 2006

> Satanic Mills is a game about the production of alienation and the destruction of human lives. Alienated labor corrodes the dreams of workers in a 19th century factory town.

Something strange and hostile

An inhuman power hums in the shuttles and valves of a 19th century English factory town. An alien power that lies congealed in the cloth and steel manufactured there. A hostile power that twists bone, robs children of their youth, and turns neighbors against neighbors. It is more terrifying than any unholy spirit, slithering lifeform or doomsday device because this horror is real, grounded in social relations. It is alienation and it is generated anew each shift as men, women, and children toil at the machines.

Satanic Mills is a game about the production of alienation and the destruction of human lives. It is based on Karl Marx's theory of alienation as expressed in his Economic and Philosophical manuscripts of 1844. Marx believed that workers in capitalist societies are stripped of or separated from what should be meaningful in their lives – and that what is taken from us fuels our exploitation. He identified four linked types of alienation. People are alienated from their labor, since work is not done to fulfill the worker's human needs and creativity but to meet the external agenda of the owner. Workers are also alienated from the products of their labor, which profit capitalists and emerge as commodities that the worker must buy. Workers are alienated from other people as the exchange of money and commodities warps social relationships. People are finally alienated from their species being, since the loss of meaningful productive activity removes one of the main capacities that makes us human.

Alienation, forged in Satanic Mills, will inexorably damage the lives of the game's characters, with you serving as both victim and executioner.

Workers of the world

Your characters are workers in a industrial town sometime in the 19th century. Decide if your character will be a man, woman, or child. Pick a name and set your character's age between 8 and 50. Collectively choose one industry that your characters are employed in. If you wish, you can specify your character's job.

Write down four positive aspects of their person and their life, one for each type of alienation. These are conditions, talents, or possessions that your character is proud of and happy about.

> Labor aspect: a positive physical or mental trait, such as a good memory, pleasant smile, strong arms, etc.
> Products aspect: a positive possession or financial status such as a fine tea set, chickens kept for eggs, a yard with natural light, etc.
> Other people aspect: a positive social relationship such as married going on ten years to Elizabeth, youngest son Harry (the apple of my eye), deacon at church, etc.
> Species aspect: a creative talent or hobby such as singing, breeding pigeons, reading penny novels, etc.

At least one positive aspect must connect to at least one other character. For example, two characters could be siblings, naming each other as their people aspects. Or a character could have baking as their creative talent (with fresh eggs purchased from a character who keeps chickens).

Factory Town

After making characters, choose several locations around town as settings for the game's action. The factory is always a location. Each player chooses one additional location. Some possibilities include worker's dwellings, a tavern, the charity hospital, a capitalist's mansion, a church, a vacant lot where children play...

Scenes

The game is played in scenes. Players take turns framing scenes that: (1) involve their character (and potentially other characters); (2) are set in one of the game's locations; (3) and place their character at risk to suffer the consequences of one of the four types of alienation. (See chart 1).

The first time you address each type of alienation – and anytime you frame a scene that could move your character to the edge – then the positive aspect of your character tied to that alienation type must be specifically put at risk in the scene. The player framing the scene invites other players to role-play NPCs and other PCs present. The lead player also chooses one player to determine the consequences of the scene – to play alienation, as it were. This should be a player who is not taking a role in the scene. If all players are involved in the scene, the player with the smallest role should decide the consequences. Players role-play the scene for a brief period, until the lead player is satisfied that their character's risk and alienation has been addressed. Then the player in charge of alienation describes the lasting consequences that the character suffers. Sometimes the consequences will be clear from the role-played action of the scene, and will just need to be summarized or restated. Other scenes will be more ambiguous and the player responsible for consequences will determine an outcome that inflicts some harm to the framing player's character (and often, that character's positive element). Remember that there are four steps along each alienation track, so do not jump to a complete loss on the first or second step. Leave 'room' for grief and alienation to build.

As an example first scene on the labor track, a character with the positive labor aspect pleasant smile meets their sweetheart in a park. After a role-played conversation, the player in charge of alienation concludes that the character with the nice smile had lost some teeth in a workplace accident. Their sweetheart had been averting their eyes and was reluctant to kiss goodbye.

Once for each alienation track, the framing player can appeal to the other players to change the consequences that have been imposed. Each player, except the framing player and the player who just determined the consequences, now states a modified version of the consequences. You can change one small detail of the consequence or significantly rework it. Once all alternatives have been stated, the framing player chooses from among the original consequence and these modified version.

Consequences of alienation

> Alienation from labor (L) is tracked vertically above the center point. It produces 'mortification of the body and mind.'
> Alienation from the products of labor (P) is measured vertically below the center point. It produces powerlessness and poverty.
> Alienation from other people (OP) is tracked horizontally to the right of center. It produces distrust, solitude and conflict.
> Alienation from species being (S) is measured horizontally to the left of center. It produces animality and in-authenticity

Pushing you to the edge

The graph on the character sheet provides a visual track of how much your character is affected by the four types of alienation. Alienation is measured by distance from the center (zero point) of the graph. The further a character's alienation points are from the center, the more that character is 'stretched' from who they are as an authentic, creative, social human being.

At the close of every scene, the player who framed the scene moves the alienation point that was at stake in the scene one further from the center. Turn by turn players can move different types of alienation, balancing their character between different forms of despair. Or players can focus on one or two alienation tracks and reach the edge sooner.

Back from the abyss

Once per game for each of your character's four alienations, you can ask another player for assistance in slowing your descent. Frame your next scene to include a character who is less alienated that your character is in the alienation type that you want to address. During the scene have your character's alienation be revealed so that the other character can assist you, bearing the brunt of the consequences your character faced. For example, if your character lacks money for the rent (prodduct alienation) maybe the other character can lend you money. The other player gets to decide if they want to help your character. If help is given, your character does not move further away from the center point this turn. The character who helped takes on your troubles for you and receives an extra alienation step even though it was your scene. The player stating consequences narrates a consequence

by which the negative consequences of alienation the character who rendered assistance. Players of course may refuse to help, in which case the scene concludes as normal, with the framing player's character suffering.

Geometry of destiny

Once your character hits the edge, their final alienation is revealed. The shape formed by their alienation line(s) provides guidance on the character's downfall. Unlike during scenes, players narrate their own character's final destiny.

> If the shape is a line or slender triangle pointing up (with labor as the most significant form of alienation) then your character is physically injured and/ or psychologically damaged by dangerous, repetitive labor.

> If the shape is a line or slender triangle pointing right (with the strongest alienation being from other people), then your character is overcome by loneliness, hate, or misunderstanding.

> If the shape is a line or slender triangle pointing down (towards products of labor), then your character suffers abject poverty, homelessness, and/or hoarding or obsession with certain commodities.

> If the shape is a line or slender triangle pointing left (towards species nature) then your character gives in to thoughtless, 'animal' urges (intoxication, gorging, sexual desire).

> If the shape is a vertical line or chevron reaching towards labor and products, then your character is harmed by work and the products of industry, such as being poisoned by defective medicine to treat a workplace injury.

> If the shape is a horizontal line or chevron link-

ing people and species, then your character suffers social damage by becoming a pariah, isolating themselves, or otherwise losing all meaningful social contacts.

> If the shape is a wedge in the upper right of the graph, between labor and people, the the character is embroiled in and harmed by labor related strife.

> If the wedge is in the upper left between labor and species then the character suffers from a loss of creativity, the extinguishing of joy and freedom.

> If a wedge is in the lower right between people and products then the character is harmed by social inequality and accompanying resentment.

> If a wedge is in the lower left between products and species then consequences range from toadish submission to superiors to snarling rebellion.

> Finally, if the shape is a triangle with three nearly equal sides or an almost-square, then you can weave in elements of three or four types of alienation.

Sources and inspirations

Satanic Mills draws, crudely and selectively, as befits a game, from Karl Marx's *Economic and Philisophical Manuscripts of 1844* and Bertell Ollman's *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*, 1975.

It was also influenced by Ben Lehman's rpg *Polaris*, which I played two days before writing Satanic Mills. Thanks for the doom. Plotting character's fate on a graph is an idea that I've experimented with before in my game-in-progress *Wine Dark Seas*.

The image of mill gears on the front page is from a photograph by Jeremy Byington: http://www.sxc.hu/profile/byington

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Satanic Mills

Player >
Character name >

Age >
Gender >
Industry >
Position >

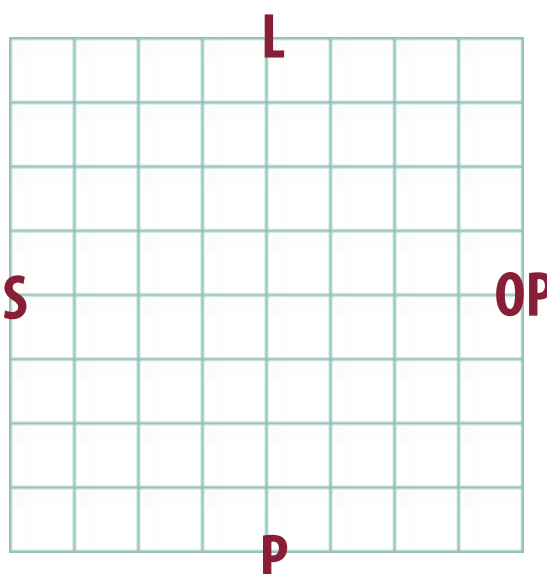## Positive Aspects

Labor >

Products >

People >

Species >

L

S   OP

P

Locations in town

> the Factory   >

>   >

>   >

Effects of alienation

> Alienation from labor (L) produces 'mortification of the body and mind.'

> Alienation from the products of labor (P) produces powerlessness and poverty.

> Alienation from other people (OP) produces distrust, solitude and conflict.

> Alienation from species being (S) produces animality and in-authenticity.