



Playing for change

Probationary: A Partnership

Howard League for Penal Reform

Key points

- *Probationary* is a co-produced artwork that takes the form of a board game which aims to offer new insights into the lived experiences of those on licence to probation.
- Drawing on understandings of 'serious games' and 'artivism' this work led to questions about how stakeholders and the public learn about the impact of public policy and how this might inform change.
- Playing the game of *Probationary* is to engage with the lived-experiences of probation on an emotional level. This coincides with recent appraisals of the probation system that call for a critical understanding that is guided by empathy.
- At the end of the piloting phases of this project, future aspirations include drawing upon the transformative potential of this approach to research as a tool for penal reform.

Introduction

Probationary: The Game of Life on Licence explores the lived experience of being on licence to probation in England and Wales. It was produced through socially engaged art workshops with men on licence; the artwork takes the shape of a board game and takes its players on a journey through the eyes of four playable characters as they negotiate the complexities of the probation process. The aim of the game is to help players understand how the probation system is currently experienced and to contribute to campaigns for penal reform.

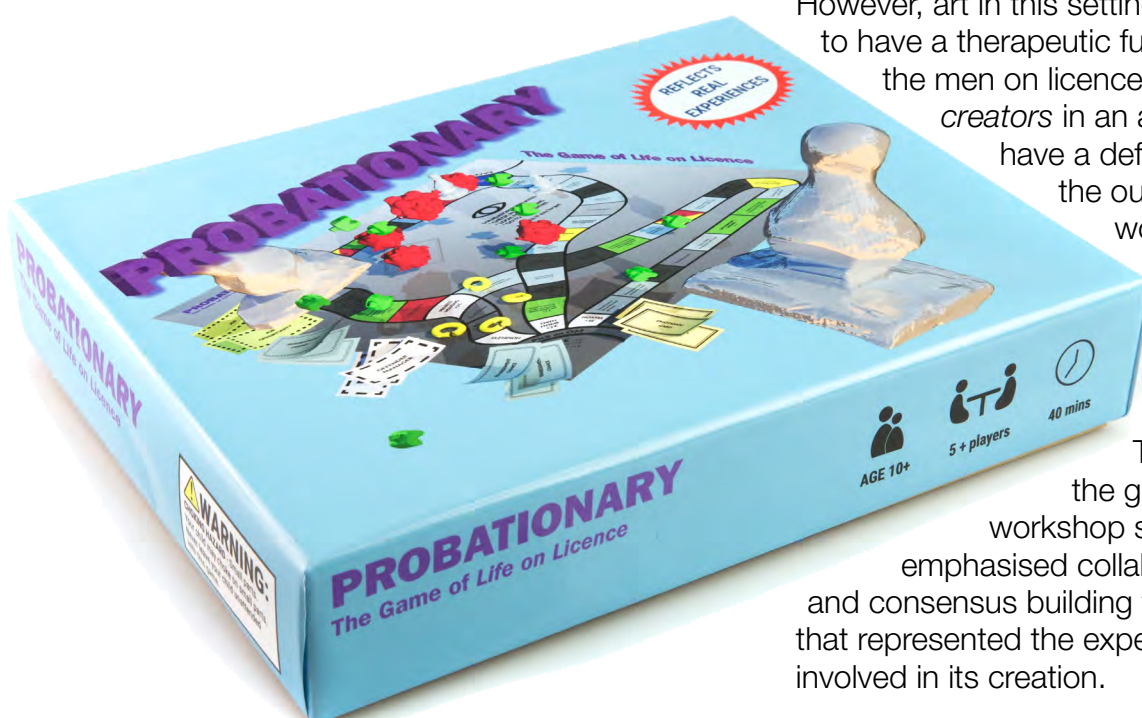
The game emerged from a pilot project, between Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), The Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT) in Liverpool, and the Howard League for Penal Reform. The aim of this project was to explore how creative methodologies and practices of co-production could develop criminological research and subsequently inform campaigns for penal reform. While working with the arts in criminology is not new, this project sought to move collaborative practice beyond a 'post-production model', whereby academics are invited to analyse and comment upon art post production, and to develop an 'alignment model' whereby the academics are proactively engaged in identifying the focus of the project, co-developing the artist's brief, appointing the artist, and contributing to the production and dissemination activities.

This project sought to explore the potential of a partnership between the arts, criminology and penal reform with a particular focus on the probation system. By aligning the artistic and research processes, the project examined the ways in which artworks produced through collaborative methodologies can contribute to the production of alternative forms of knowledge on probation. Importantly, the team was keen to understand the potential of this unique partnership in working to achieve real change in criminal justice policy.

The process

The game was developed through a programme of workshops led by the artist [Hwa Young Jung](#). The workshops brought together a group of men on licence to probation along with a group of criminologists from LJMU and artistic producers from FACT, and were organised on the principles of Socially Engaged Art Practice (SEAP). SEAP encapsulates artistic practices that address social and political issues and is often associated with activist strategies seeking to bring about change. The practice often employs participatory methodologies in the production of works, placing individuals and communities at the centre of the collaborative creative process. These workshops aimed to place those on licence at the centre of a collaborative and creative process.

The arts are practiced in the criminal justice system in a wide range of different ways. However, art in this setting was not employed to have a therapeutic function; but instead the men on licence were working as *creators* in an art project that did not have a defined outcome from the outset. The focus of the workshops was to explore the experiences of life on licence and produce artwork(s) that could reflect those experiences. The development of the game came through workshop sessions that emphasised collaboration, negotiation and consensus building to produce an artwork that represented the experiences of those involved in its creation.



Approaching *Probationary* through the lens of art means that we can enter into a different reality. We are not dealing with an absolute account of the probation system, instead the work asks us to navigate through a series of different narratives, experiences and emotions in an attempt to begin to better understand, or to perhaps think differently, about the current probation system and its impact upon the people subjected to it. As with all meaningful artistic experiences, *Probationary* does not provide an answer, neither does it claim to present an unconditional truth, instead it offers us something very important – it offers a space for us to convene, to imagine the probation process as if it were a board game, and to reflect upon our own responses to playing such a game. At the core of this approach, is a drive to evoke empathy in players by immersing them in an emotional experience. By taking players on a journey through the probation process, the game seeks to help players understand life on licence not simply by hearing about it but through a visceral experience that play is uniquely placed to induce.

Criminology and the arts

At present, the co-production of knowledge between artists, academics and participants is a relatively unexplored area within criminology. However, *Probationary* demonstrates the potential that this form of co-production could have for criminology as a field of study and its links with campaigns for penal reform. Exploring experiences of the probation system through SEAP, and sharing research findings through play, has significant potentials in terms of how criminologists learn and tell about research. *Probationary* suggests a new way of learning about crime, and the criminal justice system and points toward an alternative way of actually doing criminology and linking academic research to campaigns for change.

There is ample evidence to support this approach. Developments from the wider field of theoretical criminology have recently advocated a turn towards the creative mediums of culture (see Ferrell et al., 2015), and it is here that art and games naturally sit. Through *Probationary* we see a reflection of the everyday contours and contradictions of life on licence; it provides a

cultural representation of the complex lives led by those on licence to probation. But in addition, it helps us understand the world more critically too. Through play, and collaboration between different parties, it is possible to see the tensions and antagonisms of probation in new ways. In short, creating an artwork revealed a different picture to simply sitting people down and interviewing them as criminologists have traditionally done.

The process took us beyond the stock answers often learnt by those in the criminal justice system and allowed space for participants to reflect on their experiences. In doing so, the research developed in line with the principles of critical social research that seeks to ensure that ‘the voices and experiences of those marginalised by institutionalised state practices are heard and represented’ (Scruton 2007: 10). The aim of the workshops was therefore to provide a different space to explore the experiences of life on licence. As one of the participants explained:

“It just felt like we were getting our points across but not in the normal way and that it was going to people that were actually going to be listening for once. Instead of somebody who’s got a sheet there and they want you to give them the answers and it’s gone into a machine and then it’s going to churn out, “53% said this. 53% said that.”

As a result, *Probationary* presents us with a view from below, highlighting the experiences of those whose voices are seldom heard in discussions about the aims of probation. In this sense, there is much to be positive about in terms of how this project can impact upon how we do things as criminologists, how we learn about often hard to reach groups of people and how this can inform campaigns for change.

Serious games – serious issues

Games, particularly ‘serious games’, are more frequently being used in learning, training and rehabilitative spaces (Ritterfeld et al 2009). Serious games are those that have an ‘explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement’ (Abt 1975: 9) – the concept is not new. While much of the academic exploration of serious games currently relates to digital forms,

the key idea behind using game play to facilitate learning can underpin the design of many different types of games. As Shen et al (2009: 48) explain:

The advantage of fun game play calls attention to some important social and educational issues, spurring deeper thinking, discussion, and learning, as well as creating opportunities for vicarious experiences that would be otherwise impossible.

The making of *Probationary* demonstrated to all involved the power of games to inform a learning process. The workshops involved consensus building and the process of negotiation among participants created a collaborative space within which the experiences of life on licence were explored in a novel way. The probation service staff who participated in the workshops highlighted the effectiveness of this collaborative mode of working:

It's quite an interesting way to learn, and I do think that from that hour we had you could probably take in a lot more than you could sat reading pieces of research.

I definitely think it opened my eyes to what other ways you could not only engage people but educate people as well.

While the workshops provided a space of reflection for the men on licence and the practitioners involved, as researchers, we were also forced to think differently about academic, artistic and professional practice.

As has been found in other studies, the value of arts-based activities does not lie in their ability to directly address specific criminogenic needs but instead lies in the spaces they create for learning and reflection (McNeill et al 2011). With an increased emphasis on co-production and user voice in the criminal justice context (Hutt, 2013) this research project suggests that this way of working has significant potential to inform how we learn about probation and how we seek to inform change. Most crucially, *Probationary* aims to create those immersive and vicarious experiences central to serious game play, and in doing so, seeks to bring the experiences of life on licence alive for those who play.

Another period of change in probation provision in England and Wales has been signalled by the *Strengthening probation, building confidence* consultation (MoJ 2018), and therefore, we believe, it is vital to hear from those who have experience of life on licence. The failures of the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms introduced by the then Justice Secretary Chris Grayling demonstrate the need for change that is informed by those who have direct experience of the system. Those reforms arguably demonstrate the effects of a failure to listen to practitioners, scholars and campaigners who all raised serious concerns about the nature, scale and pace of the Grayling reforms (Annison et al 2014). We recognise the need for policy that is informed by those with experience and expertise, but we also agree with Morgan (2003: 9) that those experiencing probation are an important constituency who have a 'clear, informed view about the quality of probation staff and services'. We think that this is key to providing the critical analysis that the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms so clearly require.

In terms of academic research on probation, there has been relatively little work that considers the perspective of probationers (Shapland et al 2012), but what work has been undertaken suggests that key things valued by probationers, and viewed as being key to rehabilitation, have been undermined by the organisational and structural changes introduced in *Transforming Rehabilitation*. For example, research studies have shown that the quality and continuity of supervision is valued by those on probation (Shapland et al 2012; Robinson et al 2017) and is viewed as key to success by staff as well. This is reflected in *Probationary* and while our findings about the nature of life on licence accord with a number of those studies who have examined probation from below, we believe this artwork provides a different way to disseminate this knowledge.

In attempts to get to grips with the existing problems, the Ministry of Justice has expressed a desire to hear from those who have been through the probation system (Ministry of Justice 2018). It is important that there is official recognition of the need to listen to this constituency, but all future changes must be informed by a clear understanding of how the current system is experienced. Public debate



must be encouraged and, as part of this, the voices of those within the system have to be heard. *Transforming Rehabilitation* demonstrated that discouraging or censoring staff (Annison et al 2014) and ignoring those on probation leads to a service in crisis.

Those who engage with *Probationary* are thus implicated in an informative and emotional experience shaped by the effects of policy failure. Player feedback has suggested that the impact of the game lies in this emotional experience:

I felt frustrated at the unnecessary complexity of probation system. More aware of challenges of living on the knife-edge of licence.

I felt better informed about the experience of being on probation and about the systems involved; at the same time, I felt confused, and as though aspects of the system are unpredictable and out of my control.

I feel like I have had a real insight into some of the problems, I really emotionally invested in the characters and was genuinely upset when I had to start again and when anyone had to start again.

As a result, the game suggests that co-produced artworks and games in particular, could play an important role in bringing the experiences of those in the probation system to a wide audience. By exploring these experiences, and then sharing them through the immersive experience of play, the aim is to inform change and rethink the goals and organisation of probation.

Creating change through play

The treatment of social and political issues through socially engaged art is often associated with activist strategies – referred to by some as ‘artivism’ – an approach which recognises that art can be a powerful tool in campaigns for change (Ramsden 2016) and seeks to merge ‘the boundless imagination of art and the radical engagement of politics’ (Jordan, 2016:1). To align criminological scholarship and policy reform agendas, at the boundaries of art and activism, is to draw upon the transformative and poetic qualities of art, to mobilise and to inspire. As an ‘artist’ project, the aim of *Probationary* was to critically explore the potential of socially engaged art practice to understand probation from the perspective of those on licence and, ultimately, to explore the potential this work has to effect change.

Post-production the aim has been to explore the relationship between method, strategies of dissemination and impact. Impact in this context is based on the potential this artwork has to reframe modes of perception and to contribute to the process of rethinking probation. We believe that *Probationary* has this potential because of the way in which it was produced and the way it is experienced by players. By providing a much needed view from below the game not only gives voice to those experiencing life on licence, but enables us, as players, to follow their journey and share their experiences.

In collaborating with the Howard League we are seeking to explore the impact that this artwork

can have on perceptions of life on licence, whilst also considering the wider potential of this mode of collaborative work between academic, artistic, and penal reform sectors. As a game, *Probationary* offers a campaign for change something different as a way of bringing research findings to target audiences. By taking the familiar form of a board game, *Probationary* presents the findings of critical research in a form designed to invoke empathy, and has the potential to engage new groups and to engage key stakeholders in new ways.

Throughout 2018 the project team have taken *Probationary* into a range of spaces to engage with different audiences. Dissemination of this project has to come through *play* and we have sought to explore the potential of the game by playing with stakeholders in policy, campaigning, voluntary, academic, and criminal justice sectors as well as the general public in arts based settings. We have had a positive

response and there appears to be a growing recognition that there could be a role for serious games in bringing about a change in the probation service:

The game reflects the complexity of release and probation supervision for offenders, and it is a means of getting this message across to wider audiences.

It was an interesting insight into life on probation and it made me think of all the details that it would be easy to overlook.

It's a very creative, interactive and innovative intervention that can promote discussion and highlight the importance of probation and reintegration work.

How exactly this type of game could be implemented needs further exploration beyond this pilot study, but we have heard from



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service users, practitioners, policy makers, and campaigners, that *Probationary* could play a valuable role in informing our collective effort to rethink probation. Central to this contribution is the ability of art, and serious games in particular, to evoke empathy in the player, and to enable those involved in the (re)design and delivery of probation to better understand the experiences of those on licence to probation.

As a campaigning tool, the game gives voice to those experiencing probation and with the Howard League we are seeking to bring these experiences to those individuals and institutions involved in the development of policy and practice in the probation system. We believe that through the immersive experience of play the game enables players to feel some of the ‘pains’ of probation (see Hayes 2015) and to begin to better understand the effect of policy failure. At its core, *Probationary* seeks to educate audiences about the experiences of life on licence and to effect changes in attitudes on the way to changing policy.

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About the Howard League for Penal Reform

The Howard League is a national charity working for less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison.

We campaign, research and take legal action on a wide range of issues. We work with parliament, the media, criminal justice professions, stakeholders and members of the public, influencing debate and forcing through meaningful change.

www.howardleague.org



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