BLACK DEATH

GOING MEDIEVAL · RULEBOOK

OFFICIAL · OPEN PLAYTEST **Players:** 4 **Deck:** One Going Medieval deck (54 cards)

Version: Master Rules v1.1

The Black Death sweeps through the Realm. The infected Estate spreads danger from trick to trick, while the Sinner threatens anyone unfortunate enough to capture her. Avoid Plague Points, beware the Forsaken, and survive with the lowest score.

Black Death is a trick-taking game inspired by Hearts. If you know Hearts, you already know most of it. Watch for the differences: the Page opens play, plague cards may fall on the very first trick, the Beggar decides who inherits the hidden Forsaken, and the optional modules let the plague wander between Estates.

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1 · COMPONENTS

One Going Medieval deck of 54 cards, divided into three Estates: **Nobility**, **Clergy** and **Peasantry**. Each Estate contains ten ranked face cards (9 through 0) and eight identical Faceless cards.

ESTATE	FACELESS CARD	RANK-0 DESTINY CARD
Nobility	Knight	The Page
Clergy	Flock	The Sinner
Peasantry	Serf	The Beggar

Faceless cards have no special abilities in Black Death. Each Destiny card belongs to its Estate and follows it like any other card. You will also need paper and pencil to keep score.

2 · OBJECTIVE

Finish the game with the **fewest cumulative Plague Points**. The game ends after any hand in which a player reaches 100 or more points.

3 · CARD RANK AND TRICKS

Within each Estate, cards rank from 9 (highest) down to 1, then 0, then Faceless (lowest):

9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0	Faceless

- Players must **follow the Estate led** if able. Otherwise they may play any card.

- There is **no trump** Estate. The highest-ranking card of the led Estate wins the trick.
- If identical cards tie for highest (two Faceless, for example), **the first one played wins**.
- The trick winner captures all four cards, places them face down in front of them, and leads the next trick.
- All 13 tricks are played each hand.

4 · THE STEWARD

The Steward is the dealer. Choose the first Steward by any method. After every hand, the Steward role passes one seat to the left.

5 · PREPARING EACH HAND

1. **Deal.** The Steward shuffles all 54 cards and deals 13 to each player. The remaining two cards are placed face down as **the Forsaken**. No one may look at them.
2. **Omen** WANDERING PLAGUE ONLY Reveal one of the two Forsaken cards as the omen (see Optional Advanced Rules). Without Wandering Plague, Peasantry is the infected Estate.
3. **Pass three cards.** All players pass at the same time, following the repeating sequence **Left → Right → Across → Keep** (no passing on Keep hands). Choose and pass your three cards before looking at any cards you receive.
4. **Beggar's Plea** OPTIONAL MODULE If the group uses Beggar's Plea, resolve it now.
5. **Opening lead.** Determine who leads only after passing and any Plea.

6 · THE OPENING LEAD

The player holding the **Page** must lead the Page to the first trick. This lead is always legal. If the Page is among the Forsaken, the player to the Steward's left leads the first trick with any legal card.

Because the Page is rank 0, it can win its own trick if every other player plays a Knight or has no Nobility at all.

7 · BREAKING THE PLAGUE

The **infected Estate** is Peasantry by default (or the omen's Estate under Wandering Plague). Its cards, together with the Sinner, are the **plague cards**.

Until the Plague is Broken, no player may **lead** a card of the infected Estate or lead the Sinner. The Plague is Broken as soon as any infected card or the Sinner is legally played, whether by following the Estate led or by discarding while unable to follow. From then on, plague cards may be led freely for the rest of the hand.

> **Exceptions**
>
> - **The Page.** The Page's opening lead is always legal. If Nobility is infected, this lead Breaks the Plague.
> - **Nothing else to lead.** A player holding only plague cards may lead one, which immediately Breaks the Plague.

Unlike Hearts

There is **no first-trick restriction**. Plague cards, including the Sinner, may be played on the very first trick whenever they are legal.

EXAMPLE · THE FIRST TRICK

Alice holds the Page and must lead it. Bob follows with Nobility 6 and Carol with a Knight. David has no Nobility, so he may play any card, and he drops the Sinner. Bob's 6 is the highest Nobility card, so he captures the trick: the Page (−1) and the Sinner (+18). The Sinner has been played, so the Plague is Broken and plague cards may now be led.

8 · THE FORSAKEN

The player who wins the trick containing the **Beggar** immediately claims both Forsaken cards. They stay face down; do not inspect a hidden Forsaken card until scoring. (Under Wandering Plague, the revealed omen stays visible.)

If the Beggar itself is one of the Forsaken, the **Steward** claims both cards. Either way, both Forsaken cards count as captured by their claimant, for scoring and for a possible Purge.

9 · SCORING

After the 13th trick, reveal the Forsaken and score every captured card:

CAPTURED CARD	PLAGUE POINTS
Each card of the infected Estate	**+1** (+2 during Famine)
The Sinner. Its value *replaces*, never adds to, any infected-Estate penalty on that card.	**+18** (+36 during Pestilence)
The Page	**−1**
The Page when Nobility is infected (its +1 and −1 cancel)	**0**
Every other card	**0**

Forsaken cards are added to the score of the player who claimed them. Add each player's hand score to their running total. **Cumulative scores may be negative**; there is no zero-point floor.

EXAMPLE · SCORING A HAND

Peasantry is infected. Alice captured 5 Peasantry cards and the Page: **4**. Bob captured 3 Peasantry cards and the Sinner: **21**. Carol won the Beggar's trick and captured 6 Peasantry cards in all, the Beggar among them. She reveals the Forsaken: a Serf (+1) and a Clergy 6 (0), so she scores **7**. David captured 3 Peasantry cards: **3**. All 18 Peasantry cards, the Sinner and the Page are accounted for: 35 points in total.

10 · PURGING THE PLAGUE

After the Forsaken are revealed, check whether one player captured **every card of the infected Estate and the Sinner**, counting any of those cards in the Forsaken they claimed. If so, that player has Purged the Plague.

The Purger scores 0 for the hand's plague cards and chooses **one** reward:

- **(a)** add 36 Plague Points to **each other player's** cumulative score, **or**

- **(b)** subtract 36 Plague Points from **their own** cumulative score.

The Purge value is always 36, even during Pestilence or Famine. The Page's −1 still applies to whoever captured it, unless Nobility is infected, in which case the Page is a plague card and scores 0 like the rest.

11 · WINNING AND TIES

After a hand is fully scored, if any player has reached **100 or more** cumulative Plague Points, the game ends. The player with the **lowest** cumulative score wins.

If two or more players tie for the lowest score, **all four players** play another complete hand under the normal rules, then compare totals again. Repeat until one player alone has the lowest score. A player who was not tied may overtake the leaders during these extra hands. The plague is not finished with anyone yet.

OPTIONAL ADVANCED RULES

Learn the core game first. Each module below can be added on its own; the group decides before the game begins.

WANDERING PLAGUE AND THE OMENS

Immediately after dealing, reveal one of the two Forsaken cards. That card is the **omen**: **its Estate is infected** for the entire hand in place of Peasantry. Keep the omen face up as part of the Forsaken; do not shuffle it back into the deck. The other Forsaken card stays face down. All normal Forsaken ownership and scoring rules still apply, so the omen card scores for whoever claims the Forsaken.

Three Destiny cards bring special omens:

Pestilence · the Sinner revealed

Clergy is infected. The Sinner is worth **36** Plague Points instead of 18 this hand. Because the Sinner rests in the Forsaken, whoever claims the Forsaken through the Beggar inherits this penalty.

Divine Mercy · the Page revealed

Nobility is infected; the Page rests in the Forsaken. Immediately, before passing, **halve every player's positive cumulative score**, rounding down. Scores of zero or less are unchanged. Divine Mercy has no effect in the first hand, when everyone still has 0 points.

Example: scores of 80, 55, 15 and −4 become 40, 27, 7 and −4.

Famine · the Beggar revealed

Peasantry is infected, and every captured infected card is worth **2** Plague Points instead of 1. The Sinner keeps its normal value. Because the Beggar is in the Forsaken, the Steward claims the Forsaken, Beggar's Plea is unavailable, and only the Steward can complete a Purge.

BEGGAR'S PLEA

A separate module, usable with or without Wandering Plague. After passing and before the opening lead:

1. **Declare.** The player holding the Beggar may declare a Plea and choose one opponent.
2. **Offer.** They secretly give the Beggar to that opponent.

3. **Receive.** The opponent adds the Beggar to their hand, then secretly gives back any one card from their hand, **including the Beggar itself** if they wish to turn it away.

Neither card is revealed to the other players. Only one Plea may occur per hand. Determine the Page holder and the opening lead after the Plea. If the Beggar is in the Forsaken, no Plea occurs.

Optional table cue when the Beggar is returned: *"The Beggar is turned away!"* Saying it tells the table where the Beggar went, so it is always the returning player's choice.

STRATEGY TIPS

- Avoid capturing infected cards and the Sinner unless you are pursuing a deliberate Purge.
- **Beware the first trick.** When the Page leads, a player with no Nobility may discard the Sinner immediately.
- **Quarantine Your Neighbor.** When passing, consider giving your target a Nobility card. It forces them to follow the Page's opening lead instead of discarding the Sinner onto the first trick.
- The Beggar decides who inherits the Forsaken. Under Wandering Plague, one of those cards is public information.
- Track when the Plague is Broken. Once it spreads, infected cards and the Sinner may be led.
- If you have already captured many infected cards, ask whether a Purge is still possible, including who will own the Forsaken.

GLOSSARY

Breaking the Plague
The first time a plague card is played in a hand; afterward plague cards may be led.

Destiny cards
The three rank-0 cards: the Page (Nobility), the Sinner (Clergy) and the Beggar (Peasantry).

The Forsaken
The two cards left over after the deal, claimed by whoever captures the Beggar (or by the Steward).

Infected Estate
The Estate whose cards cost Plague Points this hand: Peasantry, or the omen's Estate under Wandering Plague.

Omen
Under Wandering Plague, the face-up Forsaken card that sets the infected Estate.

Plague cards
Cards of the infected Estate, plus the Sinner.

Purging the Plague
Capturing every infected card and the Sinner in one hand; Black Death's version of Shooting the Moon.

Steward
The dealer for the hand; the role passes one seat left after each hand.