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Product Review The Publishing Trap

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PRODUCT REVIEW

The Publishing Trap

created by Jane Secker & Chris Morrison

Free download

INTRODUCTION

The Publishing Trap is a free, downloadable board game designed to orient early-career researchers to the scholarly publishing process. It was created by the UK Copyright Literacy Team, a group that assists scholars with navigating scholarly publishing copyright concerns. The two-person team includes Chris Morrison, copyright, software licensing and information services policy manager at the University of Kent, and Jane Secker, senior lecturer in educational development at City, University of London.

Gaming in academia has gained a great deal of traction in recent years. Game studies, which includes subdisciplines devoted to game design and game theory in addition to pedagogical gaming, is a growing field within scholarly publishing. MIT Press has a particularly renowned series devoted to the topic (MIT Press). Within pedagogical gaming, a litany of case studies discuss how to use games to teach subjects ranging from accounting to dentistry to math (Forché & Visser, 2008; Smith & Golding, 2018; Vahed, Singh, & McKenna, 2014). Case studies also report the best way to employ games to educate particular demographics, such as first-year college students (Hamshire, Whitton, & Whitton, 2012).

This game's objective is to prompt current and future researchers to reflect on the choices they will face as they begin publishing and how their decisions will shape their scholarly careers. In some ways, Morrison and Secker are successful in their attempt. The concept is original and creative, and the creators capture some of the real dilemmas that researchers face as they write and publish. *The Publishing Trap* could use another design iteration, however, as elements of setup and play could benefit from more simplicity and clarity.



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Setup

The Publishing Trap is delivered via a Google Drive folder with each portion of the game listed as a separate full-color PDF file. Players must then print and assemble these files, a process we found costly and time consuming. Players without ready access to a color printer may need to consider the price of printing materials at a print shop; we were able to print in color in our office. While we printed all files one-sided on standard-size paper, it may be worth experimenting with printing double-sided or using larger paper, particularly for the board. It took our group of five people 25 minutes to cut out all the materials. We began with scissors, but found it easier to use a precision paper cutter. Once this step was completed, we discovered that the board, as well as all of the pieces, must be laminated or otherwise treated to make them sturdy enough for regular play. Additionally, the instructions recommend the optional purchase of a die and plastic tokens. We found using a die app to be an effective and free replacement. However, as the paper tokens took time to cut out and then were difficult to use, we would recommend following the creators' suggestion to purchase plastic tokens instead if users' budgets allow.

Components



Figure 1. *The Publishing Trap* as assembled and played by the review team

The Publishing Trap's board is too small for the game's level of detail and amount of content. The characters represent a diverse mix of subject expertise, race, and gender, which we appreciated, but the area for each character's skill level was hard to read due to the use of a small font. The tokens to document increasing skills were too tiny to be manipulated easily. We felt it would have been easier for players to track their skill acquisition over the course of the game with pen and paper instead. The board contains so many icons that we found it difficult to identify their purpose. A key would be a useful addition to the game to solve this problem. Another addition we thought would be helpful is a designated space in which to place the cards.

The Publishing Trap's cards and the play book are better designed than the board. The cards are a good size, which makes them easy to cut out and read. The play book presents the game in an engaging narrative format, complete with fun illustrations. However, we decided that the play book was too long and would present accessibility challenges to players with color blindness. We also found during play that its instructions should be clearer. For example, on page 14, we believe the instructions mean the player should obtain one point, but the instructions state that the player should get one impact token. The terminology needs to be standardized and clarified; perhaps a glossary would help achieve this objective.

Play

We found that the events that occur to each character in *The Publishing Trap* correspond well to real-life scenarios in academic life, including how chance influences career outcomes. The play book for the game provides a strong narrative about the decisions the game's characters face regarding how to disseminate their research and protect their intellectual property rights. That said, interest in the game itself could be heightened with an element of competition and a clearer presentation of the goals needed to win. In our play testing, we were unsure what our characters' motives and goals were at each stage in the game. We did not realize that we needed to pay heed to each character's skills, which led us to wonder whether we should be making choices based on the characters' professional descriptions or our respective professional experiences. Similarly, questions arose about elements of the game's storyline. Characters incurred a two-year break between the completion of the PhD and the beginning of postdoctoral research, a timeline rare among recent doctorates pursuing academic careers.

The conclusion of the game also presented confusion. The prescribed winning score of 42 points seemed too high to reach based on our group's scores. Then, we found *The Publishing Trap*'s definitions of success and failure problematic. The game presented winning or losing as creating either a utopia or a dystopia. These results may be fun, but they do not match the game's educational goals. Additionally, the conclusion's insistence that money is of no importance made us wonder why financial value was included in the game at all, except to serve as a contrast to the philosophy behind open access. The game's singular focus on open access as the preferred and best approach in every situation overlooks the reality of promotion and tenure requirements for faculty in some disciplines.

While providing a strong narrative, *The Publishing Trap*'s play book does not clearly define the material components of the game or how to use them correctly. We did not know how many tokens, if any, should be passed out to players at the beginning of the game. We were not always sure which cards to play when, or indeed which cards were which. Token icons did not make it clear how they should be used. Furthermore, the color and number coding between the book and the board was difficult to parse. The first page of instructions for each

section had a consistent color, which we liked, but these section colors did not correspond to the colors of the cards.

We also identified challenges related to the game's intended audience and educational objectives. Students may be the population most likely or most willing to play the game, but the content clearly is geared toward early career faculty and/or postdoctoral fellows. Furthermore, the running time for playing the game was too long; we were unable to finish the game in an hour. A play time of over an hour makes the game difficult to incorporate into class sessions or workshops. More efficient and perhaps more effective means exist for communicating the educational content of the game to faculty.

The Publishing Trap is licensed under CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0. The no-derivatives element of this license creates another encumbrance limiting the game's adaptability for target audiences. The game is created using UK-based academic nomenclature, and although the terms can be equated to US academic terms during play, the differences in terminology add a barrier to understanding how to play. The prohibition on derivatives prevents users from adapting the game's terminology to better fit their context. For example, Americans would want to use "fair use" rather than "copyright exceptions" and "assistant professor" instead of "lecturer." We would suggest including a glossary of terms to help players understand terms and context.

CONCLUSION

Although we found major flaws with the design of *The Publishing Trap*, the concept was a worthy one. The game provides players with useful information about the scholarly publishing process, the value of open access content, and how to manage a successful academic career. Furthermore, we enthusiastically endorse Morrison and Secker's goal of creating open access educational games. We would not have been motivated to assemble, test, and review *The Publishing Trap* if we did not feel strongly about the value of play in the classroom. Too often, higher education delivers educational content in dry, lecture-based courses or workshops. Games offer an opportunity to engage in student-centered learning. Plus, the novelty of playing a game in a higher-education setting is an attractive hook to capture the attention of time-strapped audiences. As the Scholarly Publishing Team at the University of Iowa, we appreciate Morrison and Secker's efforts to employ an innovative format to teach complex and often overlooked topics related to scholarly publishing.

We hope to see more work from these game creators in the future and encourage others to try their hand at open educational game development. Whenever possible, we advise prospective game designers to work with their local Office for Disability Services, instructional technology divisions, digital humanities laboratories, and specialists in game design, product design, user experience, and computer science. Doing will improve increase games'

accessibility, pedagogy, and curricula while also creating a community that can help run play tests, refine branding, enhance player satisfaction, and generate digital adaptations.

BIOGRAPHY

Alonso Avila is a third-year resident librarian at the University of Iowa where he works in Special Collections, Research, and Library Instruction. His research interests include the intersection of youth culture and social justice, as well as the interrelationship between librarianship and hip-hop culture.

Mahrya Burnett is the Scholarly Communications Librarian at the University of Iowa and specializes in emerging publishing models, open education, and copyright issues as they pertain to scholarly publishing. Her research interests include learning analytics and privacy in higher education, global equity in open access publishing, and copyright education.

Amy H. Chen is the English and Communications Librarian at the University of Iowa, where she runs the Human(ities) Game Lab. She also maintains a scholarly profile. Her book, *Archival Bodies: The American Literary Collections Market since 1955*, is forthcoming from the University of Massachusetts Press. Most recently, her piece “Finding the Modernist Archive: Why UX Matters,” was featured in *Modernism/Modernity*.

Willow Fuchs is a Business Reference and Instruction Librarian at the University of Iowa. She has great interest in Scholarly Communications and Undergraduate Instruction and is active in SLA, ALA, and ACRL.

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Wendy C. Robertson manages the institutional repository at the University of Iowa.

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