A review of *The Publishing Trap* as a training tool for researchers, doctoral students and academics

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This article explores the potential of using an educational board game as a fun and stimulating learning resource to support researchers and academics in Higher Education. *The Publishing Trap* was developed by Chris Morrison and Jane Secker (@UKCopyrightLit) to highlight the impact of publishing and scholarly communication choices that researchers make throughout their career. After trialling the game with Library staff at Leeds Beckett University, Rachel Thornton summarises the experience and participants' feedback, and considers the game's usefulness as a training tool.

Introduction

Libraries and Learning Innovation (LLI) provides support to doctoral students, early researchers and academics through a variety of training methods and resources, including participation in the University's Research Training Programme and the development of a Research Café concept.

We are continually seeking new ways to engage with our 'customers' and the informality of the Research Café, where researchers meet to share their research ideas and watch short presentations, seems to lend itself to the idea of playing a game. *The Publishing Trap* was developed by colleagues in the sector and is freely available to download under a Creative Commons licence.

It is hoped that the game will provide LLI with an opportunity to stimulate discussion on the complexities of open access (OA) publishing, Article Processing Charges (APCs) and good practice around copyright, in a playful yet relevant way.

The Publishing Trap

The Publishing Trap was created by Chris Morrison and Jane Secker[1] from UK Copyright Literacy whose stated mission is "to make learning about copyright fun, engaging and empowering".

Chris and Jane described the creative process of designing the game in a presentation at the ICEPOPS[2] 2018 conference, with Chris favouring a three-dimensional board game similar to "Mouse Trap" and Jane liking the concept of "The Game of Life" which simulates a person's travels through his/her life from college to retirement.

The resulting game, *The Publishing Trap,* follows the academic career of four fictional characters from PhD submission through to their final legacy. At each stage in their career, the characters are presented with a series of scenarios about which they have to make choices. There are opportunities to gain Skills, Knowledge, Impact and Money, as well as random outcomes through the roll of a dice or the pick of a Wildcard.

The game avoids providing right or wrong answers, although there is a way to win, and aims to provoke discussion between players.

Resources for the game are available to download from the UK Copyright Literacy website:
https://copyrightliteracy.org/resources/the-publishing-trap/

There have been 2,500 hits on the game's website and 175 downloads of the game since its launch in October 2017.

Practicalities of using the game

Getting started with the game initially involved a visit to the Resources page of the game's website and completion of a Download Form in order to receive an email with a link to all the downloadable resources. At this point the game started to look very complicated with a set of instructions, multiple card layouts, tokens, two playbook layouts and two layouts for the board (4xA3 or A1 download).

We made the decision to print out the board in a single sheet and to purchase plastic counters rather than spend time cutting out all the tokens required for the game. Although the game involved quite a bit of preparation –time spent at the printer and then chopping cards up with a guillotine –the end result was a colourful, professional looking board game.

As I had decided to take on the role of Game Master, it was important that I familiarised myself with the rules and knew how the game would progress before I attempted to introduce it to other players. A couple of fun mornings were spent taking a fictional character and working through their choices by myself. As a result, I found it useful to add my own notes to the game's Playbook where I thought useful bits of information were missing or not clearly spelt out quite enough for an amateur (and rusty) game player such as myself. For example, the colour coding on the Skills levels on the board are not explained in the instructions.

Next I had to find some willing 'volunteers' to play the game. Playing time is at least one and a half hours, and requires enough participants for four teams. The Research Services team in LLI meet at regular intervals to discuss projects and work being undertaken in support of research at the University so it was logical to extend one of those meetings and have a play. The participants have knowledge in the areas covered by the game and were on the whole quite excited about the prospect!

Playing the game

The first time we played the game there were six players including members of the Research Services Team and myself as host. Although the teams were slightly uneven this didn't prove much of a problem and the most competitive players were happy to try winning on their own.

Preparation proved to be vital and hosting the game was as much fun as playing. The role was important to keep the play flowing, to nudge the discussions along and to remind the players of their characters and how the nature of their research might influence the choices they make.

All the players were very engaged with the game, using the Playbook to guide them through their characters' academic careers and the stages of the game. As the game progressed, teams gained or lost tokens. The Wildcards were particularly successful with random life events introducing some humour and an element of chance.

Knowledge of our University's research policies and processes was useful and prompted some lively discussions, with players sometimes disagreeing with the game over the outcome of their choices.

At the final stage of the game, players were not allowed to read the last page of the Playbook until their team's tokens were added up as the game has a slight twist for those players who measured the success of their achievement through certain tokens (without giving too much away)!

Each character learnt the consequences of the choices they made, discovered their legacy and whether the world had fallen into dystopia or become a utopia as a result of their research.

Even after the game had finished, the players were keen to carry on discussions and agreed that it has been a thought- provoking, fun session.

Feedback

Immediately after the session, informal feedback was invited from the participants

resulting in some useful analysis of how well the game fared as a learning tool. This was followed up by a Feedback Form, a fillable PDF form sent to each player prompting them to think about:

- What did you like about the game?
- What didn't you like about the game?
- Describe something new you learnt from the game

Some of the positive comments received included:

"Enough variety to keep interest. A good mix of dice rolling, counter moving and card reading to get you round the board"

"It was fun and I learned a lot!"

"The wildcards were good, and the touch of humour (eg. having an affair, mid-life crisis etc.) helped to make it less dry"

"I'm not a researcher so I found discussions about decision making when publishing (and the potential consequences) particularly useful"

"...it's an achievement to create a game that makes these things fun!"

Other feedback deliberated on the aims of the game. By guiding the teams towards open access publishing and using copyright exemptions when appropriate, several players felt that more explanation was required or that the game was directing researchers too far in a certain direction:

"There were a couple of times when the game rewarded what librarians would consider 'bad' choices – Paying for an APC in a hybrid journal/ not checking picture copyright in advance – if people with less awareness of Leeds Beckett policies or preferences played this game it might teach them the wrong thing – the facilitator would have to make sure players were aware of the policies but this all might end up leading to confusion"

"'Getting published in a renowned journal' – I think that this is generally OK, but it perhaps leans too much on the idea of some journals being better than others"

"Sometimes the lack of explanation could potentially cause conflict"

"There were a couple of times when it didn't feel completely true to life, for example when deciding whether to sign a copyright agreement for just a poster but this is only an issue if the game's intention is to teach how researchers should behave, or whether the intention is simply to create discussion"

"Some questions were a bit ambiguous but like we discussed, this could be deliberate to provoke discussion"

"might be useful to have a glossary or explanation of some terms"

"The game is quite complex and I can understand why, but I think you would definitely require a facilitator with a good knowledge of the game"

Although not all participants responded in writing, the general feeling was that the game was successful but would benefit from further development. It was felt that the duration of the game was a bit too long and would be more appealing to time-hungry researchers if it could be reduced to an hour. In regards to number of participants, the consensus was that each team shouldn't exceed two players as greater numbers wouldn't be able to fit around the board!

There were some concerns about certain scenarios and terminology which might be interpreted as flippant or even disrespectful. For example, the term "Conference Junkie" and jokes around affairs and paying rent. The game's designers have already recognised this issue from feedback they have received and it might be that future versions of the game take this into account. However, it would be detrimental to lose the fun aspect of what is essentially a 'game'.

Conclusion

There is definite potential for using an educational board game as a fun way of providing

support for researchers' open access publishing. The game will encourage researchers to meet and exchange ideas, both strengthening the research community at the University and creating an opportunity for discussion about moving forward in their careers after graduation.

This corresponds with the University's strategic aims of leading research and academic enterprise, creating a community of great people and providing excellent education and experience thus enhancing employability.

Although the initial idea was to introduce the activity at one of the Research Cafés, the duration of the game may lend itself more to being part of the University's People Development programme of longer, bookable training sessions. Alternatively, feedback from one of the volunteer players suggested taking a single character from the game and have participants at the Research Café work through that one character's choices, teaching them about copyright, OA and publishing without lengthy gameplay.

The next step is to introduce a team of Academic Support staff in the Library to The Publishing Trap, and find out whether they have a similar experience or approach the game differently. Further feedback will be gathered and shared with the game's developers. Finally, the hope is that we can reach the target audience and play the game with our research students and staff.

Notes

[1]Chris (@cbowiemorrison) is Copyright, Software Licensing and Information Services Policy Manager at the University of Kent and Jane (@jsecker) is Senior Lecturer in Educational Development at City, University of London.

[2]International Copyright-Literacy Event with Playful Opportunities for Practitioners and Scholars, held at the University of Liverpool 3rd April 2018.