

The Publishing Trap! A game of scholarly communication



*In a complex, evolving scholarly communications environment, it is more important than ever for researchers to have access to information and support resources relating to copyright and intellectual property rights. However, many among the academic community continue to view copyright as something of a problem and difficult to engage with. Experimenting with new ways to communicate and critically examine the challenges and opportunities copyright presents to researchers, **Chris Morrison and Jane Secker** have created *The Publishing Trap*, an exciting new board game through which players learn about the relationship between knowledge, impact, and money, and how choices they make about their intellectual property will prove central to their academic success.*

[The Publishing Trap](#) is a board game which helps research students, early-career researchers and the wider academic community to learn about and discuss the importance of copyright literacy in relation to academic publishing and scholarly communication.

Developed over the past 18 months or so, the game is a sort-of academic *Game of Life*, though it takes its name from the classic board game *Mouse Trap*. Following the career of [four fictional academic characters](#), players learn about the relationship between knowledge, impact, and money. They come to see how choices they make about their own and other people's intellectual property are central to their academic success. Launched [last week at the University of Kent](#) to celebrate Open Access week, *The Publishing Trap* is part of our commitment to promoting a wider understanding of copyright issues in higher education, through providing support to librarians, academic staff, and students.



Why did we create The Publishing Trap?

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In recent years we have noticed an increasing need among researchers for guidance and support on issues related to open access, publishing, and the evolving scholarly communications environment. PhD students are now typically expected to deposit their theses in open-access repositories; make decisions about the licences they apply to their work; consider open licences, such as [Creative Commons](#); and understand how all these decisions may impact their careers. Do they go for high-impact journals to boost Research Excellence Framework scores? Or publish on principle in open-access journals to ensure their research reaches as many people as possible? What should they do when asked to clear third-party images within their monograph for publication? And what happens when researchers reuse data from an open dataset only to subsequently realise the licence terms require them to share their research outputs openly as well? These are real issues academics and early-career researchers face every day, and form part of a complex picture in which nothing is black and white and there are no right and wrong answers.

Back in 2015 we developed [Copyright the Card Game](#), an open educational resource primarily (but not exclusively) used for teaching librarians and academic support staff. This too was in response to a growing impression among the academic community of copyright being something of a problem and difficult to engage with. We believe it's a problem only if researchers don't have access to engaging information and resources to help them address copyright and all aspects of intellectual property rights, and so wanted to try new ways to communicate and critically examine the challenges and opportunities copyright presents to researchers; i.e. a board game!

How the game was originally devised

Chris first had the idea for the game in November 2015, inspired by a games-based learning event in Leeds organised by [Andy Walsh \(@playbrarian\)](#). Chris remembered hearing about [MONIAC](#), the hydraulic computer created by economist Bill Phillips in 1949, designed to demonstrate the economic system by physically modeling the UK national economy. Chris's idea was to create a similar model to explain the flow of knowledge and money between research institutions, publishers, and academics, and the subsequent impact this had on the wider world. We talked more about how scholarly communication and copyright might be taught using a game and resolved to bring this idea to life, entering Lagadothon, the games competition held at the [LILAC conference](#) in April 2016.

Inspired by *Mouse Trap*, Chris began building the models, creating a range of images and components printed on Velcro-backed cards. By the time of Lagadothon we had a prototype game exploring a PhD student's decisions and had also come up with the basic currency types of "money", "impact", and "knowledge".

Despite not having yet been properly developed – at that stage it was a large board with a lot of arrows fixed to it with Velcro and a stash of chocolate owls to bribe the judges – we received the runners-up prize. Shortly afterwards, Jane, inspired by memories of playing the *Game of Life*, had the idea of following the lifecycle of an academic who completes her PhD and progresses to the pinnacle of her career as a professor or eminent scholar.

We were delighted to receive input from Lagadothon judges and playful learning experts [Professor Nicola Whitton](#) and [Alex Moseley](#). They playtested an early version of the game, offered a framework for approaching game design, and encouraged us to focus on the learning (the Velcro and chocolate owls were great but an educational game needs more than just gimmicks and bribes!). A crucial decision was that players should be in teams, with each team taking on a persona or character to play the game. This led to the creation of our four academics (any resemblance to any individual, living or dead, is unintentional, of course!):



Mary Mercurial – an astrophysicist studying dark matter and deep space. She spends her spare time tinkering with her motorbike and making her own wine.



Simon Selleck – an English Literature researcher, specialising in the work of Jane Austen. He likes theatre and paintballing in his spare time.



Misha Malevoski – a criminologist studying gangs in south-east London. She is highly social, playing women's football and helping at her son's school.



Brian Bellamy – a microbiologist researching environmental factors affecting cell mutations. He's studious and hardworking. He has an allotment.

How to play!

The Publishing Trap is played by four teams (of up to four people) over a series of rounds, the full course of which broadly corresponds to the typical academic lifecycle. You start as a newly completed PhD student, become a post-doctoral researcher, then a junior lecturer, senior lecturer, and finally become a professor.

At the start of each round the workshop leader or “host” presents a scenario, with each team then required to make decisions about publishing choices. Players will learn that information has value, that there are different ways of making an impact, and that many pragmatic decisions may have to be taken during an academic career, involving trade-offs between promotion, reputation, earning a living, scoring highly in the REF (or non-UK equivalent), and being able to widely share research outputs. At the end of each round, teams discuss the decisions made and are asked to justify their own choices.

Following feedback from the team at LSE, we added “wildcards”, drawn between rounds to introduce an element of chance and which contain exciting and somewhat random events, such as being accused of plagiarism or having a mid-life crisis.

The ultimate aim of the game is to reach the pearly gates and be judged on your academic legacy – are you heralded and celebrated in your field with a building named in your honour, or do you die in academic obscurity? We have been clear that despite the scoring mechanism there is no one way to “win” the game and players should think hard about balancing their need to generate income and secure funding with measuring impact and creating and disseminating new knowledge.



We hope the game will pose players questions: being published in high-impact journals can bring academic success, but can the wider world and those outside academia read your work? Or what about the inspirational teacher who doesn't seek status but spreads knowledge through their passion for their subject? Academic success is a many and varied thing and we hope the game will help new researchers recognise this and make choices aligned to their own values.

We're fairly sure no one has ever changed the world through a board game, but we do think The Publishing Trap could go some way towards helping academics understand more about copyright, and the impact publishing choices can have on their careers.

How to find out more

As with many ambitious ideas, the key issue has been time, and we've learned that developing games is actually very hard work. Feedback from research support colleagues at LSE and the University of Kent has been very important given their knowledge of the issues faced by academics and PhD students; while a few months ago we also enlisted the help of graphic designer [Lisa Johnstone](#), to turn our hand-drawn board and clipart icons and characters into original creations.

For more information about the game, please visit our website copyrightliteracy.org. You will be able to download The Publishing Trap resources from here from 1 November 2018. To register your interest in obtaining a copy of the game or helping us to develop and test it further, please complete the handy [contact form](#) (bottom of the page). We're also making plans to run showcase events in 2018 so please sign up to our blog to be kept updated.

Please also follow [@UKCopyrightLit](#) for updates on The Publishing Trap!

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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