

# SEEK!: creating and crowdfunding a game-based open educational resource to improve information literacy

Crowdfunding was used for the development and production of an information literacy game, SEEK!, in 2012. The game aims to build skills around creating a search strategy and is deliberately generic and adaptable. This article outlines the reasons for using such a game for the teaching of information skills, the process of gaining funding via the crowdfunding platform Indiegogo and some future developments that build on the initial game creation and use.

## Introduction

In higher education, a key role of libraries is to support students to develop a high level of information literacy that enables them to find and evaluate information, reuse it to synthesize new knowledge, and transfer the requisite skills to a wide range of environments and practice. Indeed, information literacy models such as SCONUL 7 Pillars<sup>1</sup> and ANCIL<sup>2</sup> explicitly address these high-level skills as well as lower-level, more mechanistic, skills. However, due to the limited availability of contact time with students and a lack of consistent embedding of information skills training within curricula, academic liaison librarians (who typically undertake responsibility for information literacy) often need to adopt a pragmatic focus on basic skills only.

One way librarians have been tackling the challenge to develop information literacy when facing such constraints is by bringing more active learning into their instruction, thereby providing potential to deepen learning even in short sessions<sup>3</sup>. Game-based learning techniques are one aspect of an active learning classroom, generally coming from the same constructivist approach<sup>4</sup>. Detailed, in-depth games can be seen as ‘a pervasive and subtle process, resembling life in many ways’<sup>5</sup> as opposed to the more didactic learning of lectures, including many traditional approaches to information literacy instruction.

‘SEEK!’ was created to apply game-based active learning to developing the key information skill of constructing a search strategy, where a research question, or assignment title, is transformed into a set of search terms and query that will retrieve useful results. In the common scenario where a session might be only 15 or 20 minutes long and the only chance to teach a group of students face to face, SEEK!, which is quick to play and allows students to construct their own learning, encourages and facilitates a level of reflection and discussion not attainable via basic instruction.

SEEK! is played in two halves. The first is a simple card game, which students take around ten minutes to complete in groups of three to eight players. They take turns asking each other questions from a deck of cards to gain points for either the questioner or the person who answers. (See Figure 1.)



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Many of these questions have simple answers, but others are deliberately open to interpretation in order to promote discussion. Additionally, there are wildcards which bring an element of chance into the game. These wildcards also aim to promote discussion, penalizing or rewarding players for activities such as consulting their librarian, or missing an information skills session. (See Figure 2.)

The first half, the direct playing of the game, is the equivalent of giving students a set of search tips, or talking through how to construct a search strategy from the front of the class. It addresses basic search skills that the students need to develop. The second half of SEEK! centres on a discussion, which facilitates the deeper learning. Prompted by questions from the instructor (sample questions are provided in guidance along with the game), students are encouraged to reflect on the issues and tips raised by the game. They discuss where they agreed or disagreed with questions; whether they thought the wildcards were fair or unfair; and what they could take from the questions raised. This reflection on the game moves the students on and embeds learning more effectively than the traditional didactic style of 'the sage of the stage' telling students how they should go about searching. Wherever possible, this learning is further embedded by time spent actually carrying out searches, to transfer theory into practice.

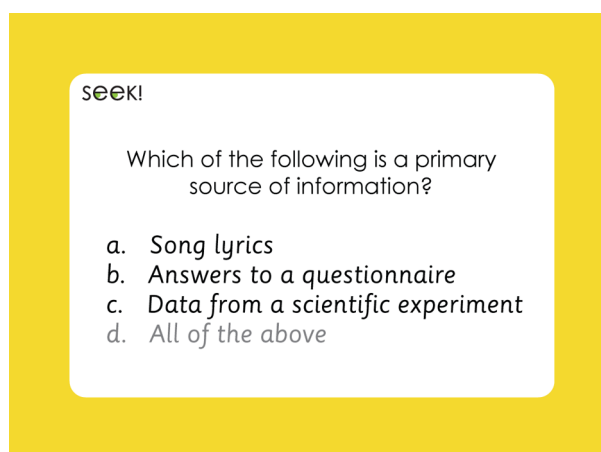


Figure 1. Example of a question on a standard SEEK! card



Figure 2. Example of a SEEK! wildcard

## Developing and funding SEEK!

When developing SEEK!, it was considered important that the game should not look 'rough and ready', but instead should look and feel like a professionally produced game and so be more attractive to students. As such, development and production costs would be incurred. As well as the staff resource to develop the structure of the game, the detailed questions that would go onto the cards, and play-testing, there were additional costs to consider. For example, without professional graphic design the game would always look amateurish, and would be difficult to print onto the proper card stock necessary for the feel of the game as it is played.

Consequently, progressing the game beyond a rough and ready prototype required a budget to cover professional design and printing. This was not a large cost, but still a challenge. Persuading the library management and budget holders to pay for a designer, and to pay for printing on playing cards (rather than printing ourselves and cutting to shape), would have been difficult so the decision was made to take an alternative route.

Crowdfunding was investigated and adopted, persuading fellow librarians across the world to contribute towards the costs of developing and producing SEEK!. The crowdfunding approach was also seen as offering an additional benefit, increasing awareness of the game as an open educational resource (OER) that could be shared by librarians everywhere.

Organized through websites such as Kickstarter<sup>6</sup> and Indiegogo<sup>7</sup>, crowdfunding relies on interested people pledging small amounts of money towards a project. Typically, they can expect rewards for their donations, though they are not directly buying those rewards. The emphasis instead is on supporting projects to get initial funding and often the most

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65 important rewards are intangible, for example the sense of helping a project to take place that otherwise may not run.

In this case, Indiegogo was chosen as the crowdfunding platform because it allowed donations worldwide. (At the time, Kickstarter was the biggest crowdfunding website but limited to the US for campaigns). Pledge levels were set, which typically offered 'print and play' (the files required to print a game) versions of SEEK! or packs of the finished, printed and packaged game. These pledges were set at a level where the printed packs covered printing, postage and packing, plus a small contribution towards design costs. The 'print and play' offered a slightly larger contribution to the design costs.

Significant promotion of the campaign<sup>8</sup> was carried out using social media, particularly Twitter, as well as library mailing lists. During the campaign, which ran over six weeks during August and September 2012, we received campaign contributions of US\$1,485 from 55 people, which enabled us to pay for the design work.

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The amount of time and effort spent on promoting the campaign was vital and helped gain 1,400 'referrals' during the campaign period via links sent to social media or mailing lists. Referrals, people following a link that the campaign manager or another supporter shared, are the key way that people find a crowdfunding campaign. Few potential funders find small campaigns such as SEEK! through direct searching or browsing of crowdfunding sites. Securing 55 funders from 1,400 visiting the site represents a conversion rate of just under 4%, many resulting from referrals during the final days of the campaign. This is typical of crowdfunding, where success depends on making an impact in the first few days, as once funding levels start to climb, confidence increases, often leading to a spike of funding in the final days. Kickstarter<sup>9</sup> publishes statistics that show that if a campaign gains 20% of its funding goal, it has an 81% chance of being fully funded by the closing date, so the initial few contributions make a significant difference to the overall outcome.

The design work for SEEK! was carried out by a former librarian and freelance designer, Tanya Williamson. The crowdfunding campaign was sufficient to buy enough of her time to work on the final questions, the game logo and the design of the cards themselves. There was even a small surplus left to part fund the design work needed for a second game, 'SOURCES'<sup>10</sup> which required a smaller number of card designs.

## Sharing the game

As funders, the people who backed the Indiegogo campaign received their copies of the game first. It was always the intention, however, to offer the game freely to people to use, adapt and develop. With the permission of the Indiegogo backers, therefore, we released the game files a few months after development. These are hosted on Jorum<sup>11</sup> and the author's institutional repository<sup>12</sup> under a Creative Commons non-commercial licence.

The crowdfunding activities meant that by the time of the launch, there was an awareness of the game in the library community worldwide, particularly in the UK, US and Australia. This helped the dissemination of the game as an open educational resource and to date (January 2014), SEEK! has been downloaded 1,040 times from 43 different countries, in addition to the copies (print and electronic) sent out as part of the crowdfunding campaign.

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The game has been used worldwide in schools, colleges and universities, including within the author's own institution, across a range of subject areas. Feedback has been positive, with students appreciating the alternative angle to teaching these skills. As just one part of a typical, 'one-shot' teaching session, impact has not been seriously investigated, as it is just one tool used to achieve one of the learning objectives within existing teaching sessions.

## Further developments

Growing out of this crowdfunded game, there have been a series of workshops run across England allowing attendees to prototype their own, non-digital games for libraries<sup>13</sup>, and talks at conferences such as the Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC)<sup>14</sup> and the European Conference on Information Literacy (ECIL)<sup>15</sup>. The prototypes created at the workshops are videoed and shared freely so that others may adapt them for their own use, further encouraging the use of games in libraries.

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The author hopes to create further games for libraries over the coming years, as well as running workshops to facilitate others to create their own games. In addition to this, it is hoped a practical 'games for libraries' book will be produced in the coming year. Who knows, crowdfunding may be a useful way to fund the production of this book as a free, open access book!

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