An educational game for postgraduate students

Game Rules

Introduction

"How to Fail Your Research Degree" is an educational game for 1 – 4 players or teams.

You are a student, undertaking a master's degree at an unusually busy and calamitous stage of your life. Can you plan and undertake your research well enough to pass whilst dealing with a flooded library, your sister's unexpected wedding, and the many other distractions of life?

Contents

You will need…

- A flat surface
- The decks of Activity tiles (small, 4 colours) and Events cards (large, 3 colours)
- Four 'Work Late' tiles per player or team
- A timer

How to Play

In this game you will create a fictional research project by undertaking research activities (small tiles which are played against the clock). Activities must be connected, meaning that arrows must match arrows and blank edges must match blank edges. Your hard work will then be affected by Events. The purpose of the game is to get as good a grade as possible for your research project by connecting as many 'thesis cards' as you can in the final WRITEUP stage of the game.

Setup

First, separate the coloured Activity tiles into four separate piles representing each research stage, then shuffle each pile. Then do the same for the three types of Events cards.

Issue each player or team with four (easy mode) or two (hard mode) Work Late tiles.

Plan your research project by drawing 8 tiles at random from the PLAN Activity deck and laying them out side by side in a horizontal line. There are no 'illegal' plays in the PLAN round as all cards have arrows at both sides. But watch out as some cards do not have an upwards arrow. This means you cannot play a card above this card in the next round.

Game rounds

After Setup, the game is played in three rounds, representing three stages of research:

1. CONTEXT – your initial research into the literature and resources with which you will contextualise your project
2. IMPLEMENTATION – the experiment, intervention, or original research you perform to uncover new knowledge
3. WRITE-UP – the expression of your research in academic writing, such as a master's dissertation

These rounds each have two phases.

First, there is a timed phase (the Activity phase) where you frantically build up your activity for that phase by turning over face-down Activity tiles and fitting them into your project framework. It is important to work fast to get enough research done so that you can build on it in subsequent rounds.

The Activity phase is followed by an Events phase where you draw Events cards at random from the relevant deck and resolve the impact of the event on your research.

Playing the Activity phase

Activity tiles are specific to each round. Place the Activity deck for the current round face down in the middle of the table. Set a timer for 2 minutes (easy mode) or 90 seconds (hard mode). When the timer starts, each player draws from the deck and must play the tile drawn into the framework for that round. Tiles must all be placed in a horizontal line, within each phase (i.e. the bottom row of the finished framework will be the PLAN round, the next row will be the CONTEXT round, and so on (See Figure 1).

Each tile must be placed so that its arrows and/or blank edges match the tiles around it. Arrows must join other arrows and any blank edges can only join to other blank edges. Every tile must be joined to the framework by at least one arrow link. Therefore, although it is entirely legal to place a tile with nothing below it, this tile must have an arrow (not a blank edge) linking it to the framework. The links on tiles can strengthen the framework of the research project (making it more robust against Events) and also directly lead to activity in future rounds. Some Activity tiles may block off future options by having no arrow pointing upwards (e.g. a card representing a dead end in the research such as Useless article).

If the tile is legal to play (i.e. can be placed so its links match) it MUST be played. Otherwise it is discarded. As soon as the tile is played the player may draw another tile, she does not have to wait for her turn.

When the timer runs out, all players may play the tile they are holding.

Illegal plays

Figure 1 shows examples of legal plays – all arrows and blank edges match. Figure 2 shows illegal plays – the three red circles are places where arrows do not match other arrows. The image on the right shows a card that *would have been legal* if there was a card below it, however all cards must be connected to the rest of the framework by at least one arrow, therefore this card is illegally played.

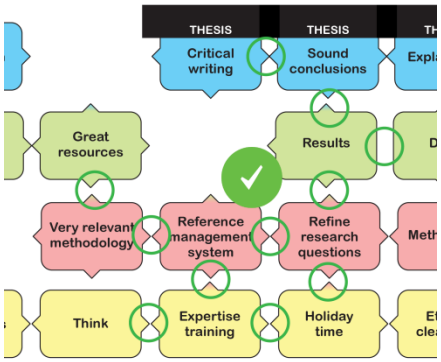
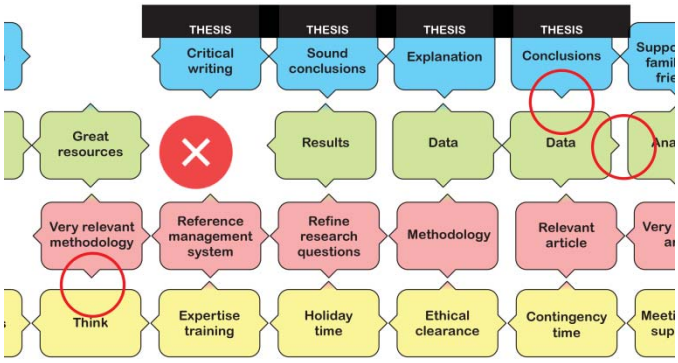


Figure 1 – examples of legally played Activity tiles



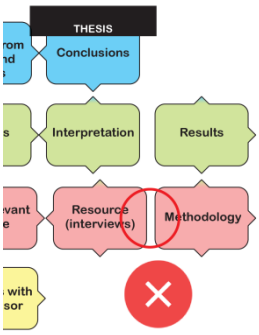


Figure 2 - examples of illegally played Activity tiles

Peer review

After each activity phase, players should 'peer review' each other's frameworks and point out strengths and weaknesses. If a peer reviewer spots an illegally placed card, its owner must remove it.

The final Activity phase

The final (WRITEUP) round has some cards with a thick black stripe at the top. These are 'thesis cards' and the purpose of the game is to get as many thesis cards in a row as is possible.

Summary

- Play each round's tiles only in a horizontal direction
- Arrows must match arrows, blank edges must match blank edges
- Every tiles needs to be connected by at least one arrow
- If you can play, you MUST play
- Empty spaces in the framework are fine

Playing the Events phase

Each Activity phase is followed by an Events phase. For example, immediately after the CONTEXT Activity phase, the CONTEXT Events phase takes place. Events cards are specific to each phase. Players take turns to draw and read out Events cards which affect their own project. Each player (or team) draws three Events cards in each Events phase.

Events can have disastrous (or occasionally helpful) effects on the research. Events are often negated or ameliorated by activities the player has successfully completed. For example, Ania draws a "Bluescreen!" event during her WRITE-UP Events phase. Luckily, she has the 'Research data management (RDM) Strategy ' tile in her PLAN activities and the event is negated.

Figure 3 - example Event cards

Effects typically take the form of removing existing activity tiles. If an instruction on an Events card cannot be completed (for example, remove a tile you don't have, or play a tile that there is no legal space for), fulfil the instruction to the best of your ability, then ignore the remainder of the effect.

Removing cards

If an Activity tile is removed, all tiles which are wholly dependent on that tile (i.e. their links connect ONLY to the removed tile) are also removed along with it. (See Figure 4 below).

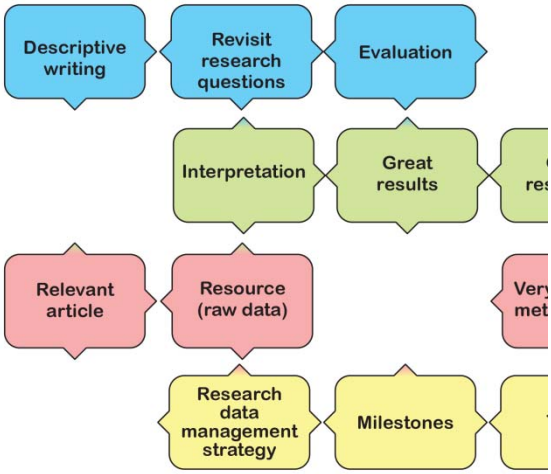


Figure 4 - example framework. If Resource (raw data) is removed then Relevant article must also be removed as it has no links to other cards. Interpretation however would be safe as it is linked to the card to its right.

Blocking out spaces

If an Events card instructs the player to 'block out' spaces, he must place a face-down Activity tile in the framework section (horizontal row) specified, touching an existing card. He cannot play there for the rest of the game. This card is treated as having no links. Even if the cards connecting the blocked space to the framework are removed, the blocked space can never be cleared.

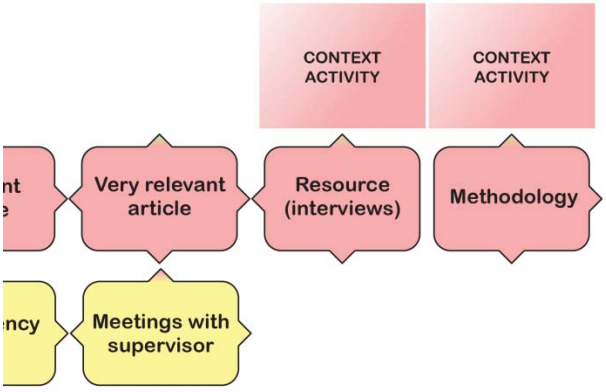


Figure 5 - demonstration of blocking out spaces in a future round, using face-down unused tiles from the CONTEXT round.

Summary

- Draw three Events cards per round
- Read the card and its effects out loud
- Apply the effects as much as is possible
- Make sure to remove all tiles which are linked ONLY to a removed tile

Work Late tiles

Work Late tiles are special tiles that represent pulling an all-nighter to get more work done or rectifying a glaring omission in your research project.

Work Late tiles can be played in one of two ways: either after an Activity phase to add a tile to that row; or during the timed Activity phase to replace the links on an Activity tile with the links on the Work Late tile.

Working Late after an Activity phase

After each Activity phase (including the PLAN round) but BEFORE any Events are drawn, a player may discard a Work Late tile to add a single tile to his framework from the remaining deck for that round. This may only happen once per round. A player may not discard a Work Late card in response to an Event, only before any Event cards are drawn.

For example, during the discussion after the PLAN round, Dave realises that he does not have an Ethical Clearance tile. He (rightly) thinks that this might be important later on and discards a Work Late tile to add Ethical Clearance to his PLAN row.

Working Late during an Activity phase

During the timed phases, it is possible for a player to block herself in by unlucky draws or poor tactics. At any time during any timed Activity phase a player can place a Work Late tile over the top of an existing Activity tile. The covered tile remains in the framework but its links are replaced by those of the Work Late tile.

For example, during the IMPLEMENTATION round, Michelle draws a 'Data' tile with only one linking arrow. This limits her when playing further Activity tiles. She plays a Work Late tile over the Data tile. The data still exists, but how has all four linking arrows and Michelle can continue to extend her framework on the right hand side.

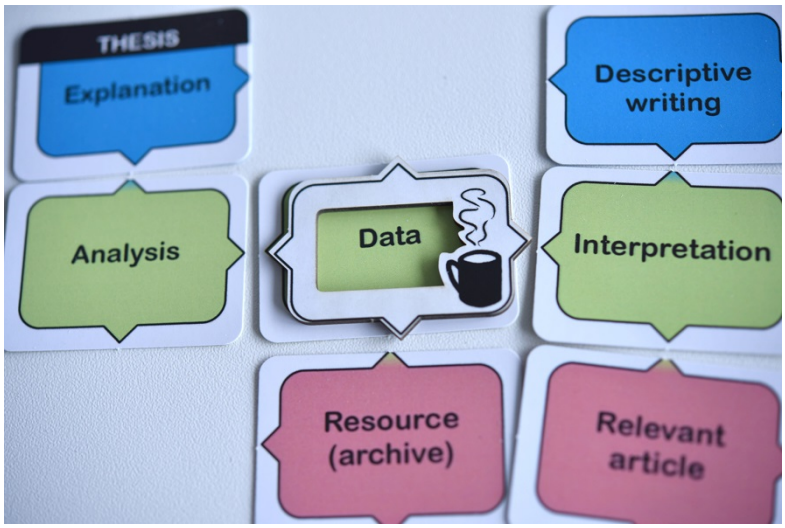


Figure 6 - playing a Work Late card during a round to improve connections

Completing the game

In the final Activity phase, players will attempt to join up Thesis tiles to create the longest line possible. Thesis tiles are special WRITE-UP Activity tiles which have a thick black stripe at the top. Only the longest Thesis for each player or team is counted.

After the final Events phase, players will be able to see how well their research process and dissertation held up to the perils of life. The tutor may wish to comment on the quality of the

submitted theses. Players and tutor will then discuss and interpret what went wrong and how to avoid these pitfalls in real life.

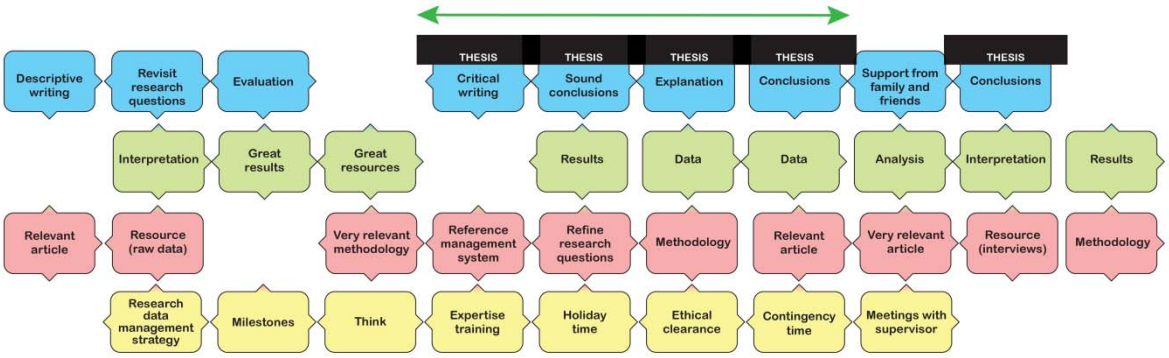


Figure 7 - Completed framework showing a conjoined series of four thesis cards.

Summary

- Join Thesis tiles to make the longest possible unbroken line
- Only the longest thesis is counted
- Use the game results to reflect and discuss

Additional resources for How to Fail Your Research Degree:

- Tutor Guide
- Quick Rules