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Game inventor wants to play in big leagues

Article by: TODD NELSON , Special to the Star Tribune Updated: August 26, 2012 - 12:22 PM

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The creator of the board game Morphology is passionate about her game, and she even went back to school to learn how to sell it.

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Kate Ryan Reiling, founder of Minneapolis game developer Morphology Games, has enjoyed early sales and critical success with Morphology, a board game in which players use beads, blocks, string and other objects to build words for teammates to guess.

Now she's applying the creativity that went into developing Morphology, which she likens to a three-dimensional version of Pictionary, into driving growth of both game play and her fledgling company.

Reiling, for example, just staged a life-sized version of Morphology outside the Walker Art Center, observing how the larger scale influenced play. Earlier this year she raised money and awareness for a new Morphology Junior edition on Kickstarter. Her daily Facebook post gives fans a new word picture to decipher.

Morphology is more than just a party game or business venture to Reiling. She feels a responsibility to develop and share it as widely as possible. That's largely why she's publishing it independently after turning down an early licensing offer.

"I wasn't ready to let someone else play with it," Reiling said. "I truly believe there's something here that has a real transformative power to it. I don't want to miss the opportunity to have as many people find it as possible."

Unit sales through August already have topped last year's total, and heavy fourth-quarter sales are still likely to come. Revenue this year could be four times more than last year's \$225,000.

Morphology is available from the company's website and at Barnes & Noble, Games by James and Marbles: The Brain Store, which Reiling said this fall will launch an exclusive in-store expansion pack with extra game pieces and cards. Morphology Games has one other employee.

New editions and products

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With Morphology Junior now for sale online and in stores, Reiling is brainstorming other editions and new products. She has plans to pursue national distribution at mass-market retailers, the educational market (Morphology won 2011 Game of the Year from home schooling catalog Timberdoodle) and international sales.

Lending his expertise in international markets is global game inventor, Richard Gill, former co-owner of Pictionary, who this month joined Reiling's board of directors

"She has done a phenomenal job in getting her business up and running," Gill said. "I see a couple hundred ideas a year at least and she brought something with a unique twist and a unique feel to it. I love the fact that it's so creative and brings a tactile element to the game aisle that we haven't had in awhile."

Reiling, 35, created what would become Morphology one snowbound night in 2002, combining Jenga and Pente pieces as she and friends improvised a new party game.

Sensing something bigger, Reiling tested multiple prototypes. Along the way she added a 60-second timer (teams have only a minute to guess the clue word) and such wrinkles as requiring players to build words with their eyes closed, with string only or with their weak hand (southpaws using their right hands).

Going back to school

To learn how to develop a business around the game, Reiling got into an MBA program at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business. She already had a political science degree from Macalester College, where she played soccer and later served as head soccer coach.

Reiling began selling the game in the fall of 2009, after finishing her MBA. In early 2010, she took Morphology to a key industry trade show, the New York Toy Fair, where it was named a Top New Toy.

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Morphology Games

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That fall, the game was the No. 2 Toy of the Year in Time magazine.

Moving back to Minnesota to open Morphology Games in 2010, Reiling raised \$100,000 from friends and family to take production from her basement to a manufacturing facility. She is trying to raise \$500,000 to expand production.

"The fact that I'm running a board game company is a dream I never had and yet it's a dream come true," Reiling said. "I'm doing all the things I love doing but I never dreamed that it would look like this."

The expert says: Gregg Fairbrothers, an adjunct professor who worked with Reiling at the Tuck School, said other entrepreneurs can learn from the way Reiling has built her company.

"The best entrepreneurs, they are always trying to absorb everything, including what it is that they're not even asking that they should be asking," Fairbrothers said. "Kate was a textbook example. I had her marked as somebody who was going to make it because she was so careful to pay attention to what she needed to learn that she didn't know already."

Reiling, for example, took time to test the game repeatedly to understand her market and her customer, he said.

"She wasn't afraid to go out and execute as a means of learning," Fairbrothers said. "Try it, see what happens, pause and listen for what went right and what went wrong and re-engineer. Many entrepreneurs mistake boldness for limitless self-confidence and that to a great degree restricts their ability to adapt and learn."

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