

Max said, “CC was a no-brainer for us because it gets the most people involved. Making the game free *and* available under a CC license led to the unbelievable situation where we are one of the best-marketed games in the world, and we have never spent a dime on marketing.”

Of course, there are limits to what the company allows its customers to do with the game. They chose the Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license because it restricts people from using the game to make money. It also requires that adaptations of the game be made available under the same licensing terms if they are shared publicly. Cards Against Humanity also polices its brand. “We feel like we’re the only ones who can use our brand and our game and make money off of it,” Max said. About 99.9 percent of the time, they just send an email to those making commercial use of the game, and that is the end of it. There have only been a handful of instances where they had to get a lawyer involved.

Just as there is more than meets the eye to the Cards Against Humanity business model, the same can be said of the game itself. To be playable, every white card has to work syntactically with enough black cards. The eight creators invest an incredible amount of work into creating new cards for the game. “We have daylong arguments about commas,” Max said. “The slacker tone of the cards gives people the impression that it is easy to write them, but it is actually a lot of work and quibbling.”

That means cocreation with their fans really doesn’t work. The company has a submission mechanism on their website, and they get thousands of suggestions, but it is very rare that a submitted card is adopted. Instead, the eight initial creators remain the primary authors of expansion decks and other new products released by the company. Interestingly, the creativity of their customer base is really only an asset to the company once their original work is created and published when people make their own adaptations of the game.

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For all of their success, the creators of Cards Against Humanity are only partially motivated by money. Max says they have always been interested in the Walt Disney philosophy of financial success. “We don’t make jokes and games to make money—we make money so we can make more jokes and games,” he said.

In fact, the company has given more than \$4 million to various charities and causes. “Cards is not our life plan,” Max said. “We all have other interests and hobbies. We are passionate about other things going on in our lives. A lot of the activism we have done comes out of us taking things from the rest of our lives and channeling some of the excitement from the game into it.”

Seeing money as fuel rather than the ultimate goal is what has enabled them to embrace Creative Commons licensing without reservation. CC licensing ended up being a savvy marketing move for the company, but nonetheless, giving up exclusive control of your work necessarily means giving up some opportunities to extract more money from customers.