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Citation Details

Berens, K. "Lifecycles of Digital Files and Staff Labor at Ooligan Press in Portland, Oregon," in Matthew Kirschenbaum, et al., *Books.Files: Preservation of Digital Assets in the Contemporary Publishing Industry*. College Park, MD, and New York, NY: University of Maryland and the Book Industry Study Group, 2020.

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[SIDEBAR]

Lifecycles of Digital Files and Staff Labor at Ooligan Press in Portland, Oregon

Dr. Kathi Inman Berens, Ph.D.

Featured people:

Marina Garcia, 2nd year Project Manager

Ivy Knight, 1st year Project Manager

Jenny Kimura, Design Manager

Hanna Ziegler, Cover Co-designer

Madison Schultz, Managing Editor

Abbey Gaterud, Publisher, Senior Instructor at Portland State University English Department

The Master's in Book Publishing program at Portland State University is the only one in North America where students own and operate a full-scale trade press that publishes four books annually. These are distributed by Ingram Publishing Services, one of the largest book distributors in the world; an Ooligan 2nd-year project manager leads the sales call to pitch her book to Ingram. Ooligan books, available anywhere books are sold, win regional awards (such as the Oregon Book Award, twice), and starred reviews in *Publisher's Weekly* and *Kirkus*.

Ooligan Press staff turnover is 50% annually because of graduation. In the spring, first-year students apply for management roles that start over the summer. Management positions radically expand a student's responsibility for making, moving, storing, bundling, and archiving digital files. At a weekly press-wide meeting in the spring, second-year managers answer timorous questions from the first-years applying to replace them. "What do I need to know to be a manager?" One asked. A manager replied: "Every book is on fire."

In an environment where digital files are urgently needed until launch and rarely needed after it, file "house-keeping" isn't a top priority. The team that launches a book becomes immediately responsible for the next acquisition. In general, publishers spend a lot of energy on the next new thing and don't always make time to tidy up digital files into archival folders. At Ooligan, populating the book's archival folder follows a precise checklist and is the project manager's final responsibility at the end of the book's production cycle. Publisher's assistants facilitate the archiving process by setting up the folder and, at the

end, confirming that the folder is complete.

Book publishers work extensively with digital files, and they benefit from both project management software and in-house protocols (such as naming conventions) that facilitate ease of finding things amid the hundreds of files associated with any given book. At Ooligan Press, Google Drive stores most of the files and Trello organizes them into a visual display. Trello acts more as a directory pointing to Google Drive than file storage itself. Book files are made using Word, InDesign, Photoshop, Illustrator, XML code and MOBI (for ebooks). These files are "final" products each of which represent the composite of often dozens of drafts, whether it's four final iterations of a book cover (front cover hi-res tif, CMYK; front cover hi-res jpg, CMYK; front cover web-optimized jpg, RGB; full cover hi-res tif, CMYK), or the compiled manuscript versions in Word, or the various interior design files, or the approximately 2500 emails exchanged about a book.

Ooligan Press has a *gratis* entry-level enterprise account with Trello, which Publisher Abbey Gaterud likens to a "bulletin board" where instead of sticky notes, Trello "cards" are attached with digital files. Trello is a vertically scrolling framework where each column represent a different part of a book's production timeline.

At Ooligan, a book's Trello board templatises workflow: when a new book is acquired, its Trello board is made from a template originally built by Gaterud. But how that template gets filled and customized depends on the practices of project

team members and particularly the leadership of the 2nd-year project manager, who is ultimately responsible for the book's delivery to the printer. For *Odsburg*, a literary fiction about an anthropologist who happens upon



*The Ooligan Press imprint
Image courtesy of Ooligan Press*

the surreal town of Odsburg, Washington, Marina Garcia was project manager for most of the book's production cycle which culminated when *Odsburg* published on 29 October 2019. Garcia, who worked on *Odsburg* for 4.5 of her total seven school terms, designed file management with an eye toward softening the impact of staff turnover. "I stored all artifacts that I felt the team would need on Trello because it was important that the current and future Odsburg team have access to the different components for publicity and production." Garcia worked between 8-17 hours weekly for 45 weeks, a mean of 562 hours in addition to coursework.

For *Odsburg*, the current Trello board one month before launch organizes materials into the following columns, left to right: "Project Materials," "Collateral," "Weekly Assignments," "Summer 2019," "Fall 2019," and "Done." Each column has many cards, each usually specifying one task, sometimes with multiple steps and files attached. As tasks are completed, team members move the card to the appropriate new location, as when a finalized book cover is moved from the design department's board to the "Project Materials" column on Odsburg project board;

Book files are made using Word, InDesign, Photoshop, Illustrator, XML code and MOBI (for ebooks)

or when a task is moved within Odsburg from, say, "Summer 2019" to "Done."

Odsburg project manager Ivy Knight, now a second-year who collaborated with Garcia, notes that how people sort objects in Trello can be idiosyncratic. "When I need a specific file that I didn't create, I don't go looking for it on a card any more. Guessing the file name and searching for it is faster and more reliable than trying to figure out what board and card it might be on." Files might start as attachments to department card (marketing, design, digital) but then need to be transferred to the appropriate card on the Odsburg board when the department has produced a "finished" file. Couple this sometimes-confusing migration with the fact that 50% of the staff is new each fall while also adjusting to a full

load of master's-level academic coursework, and the Trello learning curve can be daunting. "I have so many questions about what all these different elements are that I just don't know what's all here," said one just-promoted manager. Inefficiencies are not uncommon while team members and managers are onboarding—duplicating work, for example, because unaware a resource already exists such as templates for blurb requests and review letters. From the student perspective during their first term, it's heady to go suddenly from loving books to running a full-scale publishing house. "You have the keys to the press," Gaterud announces at orientation. "Don't burn it down." (She pauses for effect and smiles: "I wouldn't let you burn it down.")

The upshot is that, at Ooligan and perhaps for many presses, working with digital files in project management software is less structured and automated than it would seem. People rely on email as a backup storage system associated with particular people based on their jobs at the press. Remembering "who touched the file" and scanning email for communications from that person can be a way to find missing stuff. "I made 4 files for my first *Odsburg* cover concept," says Jenny Kimura, Design Department manager, "and maybe 2-3 with Hanna when we combined our files. When we finalized the cover, however, we were passing files back and forth, making new files updating old ones, and I lost track of how many we sent. My email says at least 8 different files—Illustrator files, zip files, etc." Jenny spent "upwards of 75 hours on *Odsburg's* cover if you count each round, sending feedback on others' designs, and when Hanna and I finalized the design over the month of December. You'd have to ask Des how many hours they spent on shaping up the interior, but probably about 50-75 on my side of things, which included creating the special galley interior, testing out some of the found docs, giving feedback on others' found docs, and coordinating with [managing editor] Maddie and [project manager] Marina about the artistic direction."

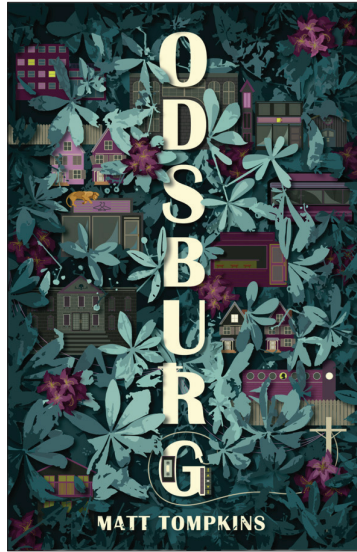
"Design work is only ever done when you send it to the printer," observes Hanna Ziegler, who co-designed the cover with Kimura. "Until then everyone will have to touch it and give their opinion, maybe argue about something, but once the printer has it, it's officially done." Ziegler also designed several "found" documents (the novel features a number of visual elements), plus marketing collateral,

chapbook cover, and galley cover, in addition to assisting other designers on their projects.

“Timing is everything when working on a large, shifting team,” notes Ivy Knight, the first-year project manager who will see *Odsburg* through to launch and archive the files. “Taking time to organize files and plan timelines is never time wasted. But researching contacts for reviews, venues, specialty markets and the like way ahead of time is a bad idea because that info can be out of date. Assets created far ahead of when they’re needed have a tendency to be hard to find, especially when the person who made them just graduated.”

The greatest challenge to *Odsburg*? “We couldn’t market the book as short stories because it isn’t a short story collection, but we couldn’t market it as a sole narrator either,” says Garcia. “Needless to say, the project team became particularly adept at finding the surreal marketing spot between character-driven and town-driven marketing copy.” *Odsburg*’s lack of generic markers made it hard to decide upon cover specifications. At the weekly “exec” meeting, where the entire press gathers on Mondays during lunch, the press deliberated about how well the three finalists for the cover decision interpreted the design brief made by Kimura. Kimura shrunk the finalist covers down to see how they’d look as thumbnails; the press debated how emotionally light or dark the cover should be so as not to signal a kid’s book. “Despite the initial struggles that surrounded this,” Garcia says, “Ooligan’s collaborative nature truly won out in Hanna and Jenny’s work. It was amazing--their work not only represented the town of Odsburg, but also laid a foundation on which to build future visual artifacts for marketing. Sometimes to find what works, you need to talk and talk and dream, and then get a little weird. Strategic absurdity was key in producing this book.”

Odsburg was particularly challenging because the “found” objects that the narrator discovers each required many drafts. Most were built in InDesign. (All master’s candidates are required to learn Adobe design software,



The final jacket design for the Ooligan Press's Odsburg
Image courtesy of Ooligan Press

and many Ooligan Press lab students contributed to this design effort.) Some “found objects” were hand drawn and scanned. Managing editor Madison Schultz wrote on physical napkins for the segment “A Woman Walks Into a Bar.” “From an editorial standpoint, my primary concern was making sure the artifacts were error-free prior to scanning them and adding them to the InDesign file, because if something handwritten had an error, we’d have to have the creator remake it, then rescan it and replace it in the file... Luckily we only had one document that needed to be modified, and it was relatively painless to do.” Schultz’s main jobs

are guiding the book through developmental edit after acquisition, communicating those to author Matt Tompkins, overseeing a team of copyeditors, and compiling copyeditors into one document returned to Tompkins for review. (A copy chief oversees the manuscript’s conformity with the *Chicago Manual of Style*.) Schultz and her team use Word because its editorial and review features are more robust than those in Google Docs.

The *Odsburg* team varied in their habits of overwriting files or saving each draft. Knight saves everything; she adds a date to the end of the file name to distinguish drafts. Kimura saves items on her computer and loads only the final documents to Google Drive. Ziegler stores files everywhere: “personal computer, appropriate Trello card, Ooligan Google Drive, email.”

Distributed storage between Trello, Google Drive, email, and team members’ personal computers can complicate matters if down the line the publisher decides to reissue a book. This was the case when Gaterud decided to make available as print-on-demand the 2010 title *Brew to Bikes*. It had one long print run and then was made into an ebook. In that process, “we made a lot of corrections to the text, so the ebook was the most current version,” Gaterud notes. “We took the ebook file and exported XML to make a new print version” which digital editors manually cleaned up for POD. While it would seem that software to automate such clean up would be

desirable, to Gaterud's knowledge it doesn't exist. "Book publishing is not the place that's going to care about [automated versioning] because books tend to not be in print that long. Archivists or librarians would care about collecting all that information along the way. But book publishers—I mean the book has one shot and it's probably not gonna make it. The vast majority of books don't go through the [versioning] process again." And if they do, it's because the book sold exceptionally well, so the

Texting via phone is a frequent, vital, and unarchived component of Ooligan's production process

cost of manually updating the files would be recouped in the second round of sales. If files go missing over the years, an email search may or may not yield the answer. "Email is a kind of backup," says Gaterud. "But we probably have 700 accounts in our Google domain, and who knows who touched something in the last few years? Time makes it much harder."

Unlike many regional small presses, which run on lean staff labor, Ooligan has large labor force. PSU's approximately 60 book publishing master's candidates are required to take either Ooligan studio (four credits) or lab (1 credit—can be taken multiple times) toward their degree. Most students opt to invest much more time in Ooligan than that, since nothing sends the academic lessons home like making a book start-to-finish. Such hands-on experience also accounts for why PSU book publishing grads are in high demand: 90% of them are working in their field of choice 6 months after graduation; 30% land publishing jobs within one month.

A lot of press work gets done in informal settings while students gather at desks before class starts, or on lunch breaks between classes, or after classes before (many) students commute to paying jobs. Texting via phone is a

frequent, vital, and unarchived component of Ooligan's production process. Live synchronicity allows for real-time collaboration and deliberation that cuts down on the number of emails staff would otherwise be obliged to send to each other. Oolies gather in two weekly meetings, one press-wide, one project- or department-based. Oolies work in either a department (acquisitions, design, editorial, marketing, digital, outreach) or a book project like *Ods-burg*. Departments collaborate with book project teams to make the digital artifacts.

Ooligan staffers aren't just classmates; they're also colleagues running and managing a business in an industry that runs on relationships and sells objects that are very expensive to fix if something goes wrong. The love of books first brings students together in the graduate program; loyalty, trust, understanding, and mutual dependence prompts the students to tattoo themselves with the Ooligan Press logo, start new presses and freelance agencies together, and engage in a myriad of personal and extracurricular activities together. The files they make, actualized in the book itself and individually credited on a colophon, become a tangible part of who they are—and what they became—working with each other on digital files.

Kathi Inman Berens is Assistant Professor of Book Publishing and Digital Humanities at Portland State University, where she works on digital-born bestsellers. A longtime scholar and artist in the electronic literature community, Berens joined PSU's book publishing faculty in 2015 after completing a Fulbright in Norway. Ooligan Press, a commercial trade press that publishes three books annually and distributes through Ingram, is staffed entirely by PSU book publishing Master's candidates. Ooligan books have won many awards and earn starred reviews in *Publisher's Weekly* and *Kirkus*. Berens's role is to teach students digital contexts and emergent practices in book publishing and book culture. Her essays have been published by Oxford University Press, Bloomsbury, Hyperrhiz: the Journal of New Media, and the Los Angeles Review of Books, among others.