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Children's book illustrator Ryan Hobson has spent the past three years developing a board game called Serial Killer. A prototype is at Capitol Hill's Vermillion Gallery.

## **This children's book illustrator's pet project is a trivia game about serial killers**

By [REGINA HACKETT](#)  
P-I ART CRITIC

By day, Seattle's Ryan Hobson illustrates children's books.

By night, he toils on his Serial Killer Trivia Game, recently completed. Although he works for Chronicle Press through its Bellevue-based subdivision, Becker & Mayer, Chronicle declined to publish the game, as did Running Press.

In an e-mail describing her reasons for turning it down, Chronicle editor Debra Lande called it "too dark, morbid, not funny, not PC and sick-o. I do admire his execution (design/production)."

A prototype of the game can be seen at Capitol Hill's Vermillion Gallery, 1508 11th Ave., across the street from Hobson's condo.

He's proud that he has illustrated or helped assemble nearly 100 children's books, a figure Becker & Mayer confirmed. A series of his field guides is scheduled for nationwide

release in April. In a test run last fall, they were available at Costco, where they quickly sold out.

If there's a contradiction between his affinity for both children's books and murder trivia, Hobson doesn't see it.

"I'm an artist, and artists explore a range of topics," he said. "I understand that publishers who are eager to deal with the field guides fear the subject matter of the game. The point is not to glorify but to acknowledge our collective interest in the darkest impulse of the human character."

He thinks he can overcome initial objections, and so does art curator Larry Reid, who runs the Fantagraphics Bookstore and Gallery in Georgetown.

"If we lived in the Garden of Eden, the game might be inappropriate," Reid said. "I tend to think if an artwork makes people uncomfortable, it's doing something right. Plus, this game is hardly the first foray into serial killer lore."

True. There are serial killer playing cards (formerly sold at the gift shop in the University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery), as well as video games that put players in the role of the killer, countless gore movies (including the "Saw" series) and true-crime murder books that crest the top of best-seller lists.

Author Ann Rule launched her career with "The Stranger Beside Me," about her friendship with Ted Bundy. Novelist Bret Easton Ellis achieved infamy for his graphic depictions of torture and death in "American Psycho."

"Dexter," the Showtime TV series featuring a serial killer in a sympathetic role, is a hit. It attracted 1.4 million viewers in the final episode of its first season.

Murder and mayhem are central themes throughout art history, from Titian's "Flaying of Marsyas" and countless depictions of St. Sebastian riddled with arrows to Leon Golub's paintings of death squads.

However, gory board games are uncommon, if they have ever existed at all.

Based on Monopoly by way of Trivial Pursuit, Hobson's game rewards those who know their John Wayne Gacy from their Bundy. The well-informed land on an unnamed victim's house and deliver a body to the dump. The person with the highest body count wins, but to get there, knowledge is not enough. The game is seeded with what Hobson calls "entangling situations," such as random discovery or chance intervention by law enforcement. Still, justice rarely prevails.

The idea of the game originated with Toby Allen, a collector of art made by serial killers. Hobson asked Allen for permission to take it over, and he agreed. Last August, Allen swallowed enough Valium to overdose and drowned himself in Lake Washington.

Why doesn't the game focus on victims?

"I'd never do that," Hobson said. "Killers have a killer identity, but victims are victims by accident. It's how they died, not who they are. There's no other way to remember a serial killer. It wipes out everything else. It's who they are."

Living in Seattle makes him well placed to be an expert, he said.

"Ted Bundy, Gary Ridgway, Kenneth Bianchi, Westley Allan Dodd, William Batten, Gary G. Grant, Martin Lee Sanders, James Edward Ruzicka, Daniel Yates and many more -- all of them serial killers -- have made Washington state their home, so it seemed fitting that such a game should come from Seattle," Hobson wrote in his artist's statement.

The distinction between board games and video games is important to Hobson, who notes that video games are all about speed while board games are paced for slow play. Video tends to be solitary; board games involve family and friends.

"Board games are old school," he said. "While the subject isn't lighthearted, making a board game about it is. A board game takes the glamour away, and the fear. It reduces the subject and makes it manageable."

Mark Prothero, one of Ridgway's lawyers, isn't so sure.

"The game is about real killers," he said. "Even though they aren't named, the victims are real too. The pain and suffering of their families is enormous. Anything that adds to that pain shouldn't be done."

Born and raised in Anchorage, Hobson, 37, traces his interest in serial murder to his childhood fondness for glazed doughnuts and maple bars. After school, he'd stop by Hansen's Bakery to load up.

When Hobson was 12, the mild-mannered baker who owned the shop was arrested and convicted of hunting down and murdering women. Hobson was stunned to discover he had eaten so many pastries baked by a killer.

"It was creepy and fascinating," said Hobson. "He looked normal. Isn't that what everybody says? I lived next door to a cop, and we discussed this endlessly. I think killers are made that way, that they can't help it. They're nature's mistakes."

In 1988, Los Angeles artist Mike Kelley created an installation titled "Pay for Your Pleasure" in a corridor lined with mural-size faces of famous novelists, poets and philosophers who've glamorized the outlaw, with quotes from their texts.

At the corridor's end there was always art from a serial killer, preferably someone from the area where the installation was on display. It was a way to contrast real evil with its deluded admirers.

Kelley's portrait gallery included artists, such as Impressionist Edgar Degas, and philosophers, such as Michel Foucault.

Here's Kelley's quote from Degas: "A painting requires as much viciousness as the perpetration of a crime."

From Foucault: "The madness of desire, insane murders, the most unreasonable passions -- all are wisdom and reason, since they are part of the order of nature."

Hobson says he's startled when people ask if he disapproves of serial killers.

"Of course I disapprove, but I don't want to demonize," he said. "My game puts players in killers' shoes a little bit. You don't have to think like a serial killer. All you do is answer trivia questions about them. I want it to be fun."

Fun? Seattle painter Harold Hollingsworth doesn't like the idea of a fun killer game.

"After walking past where a girl was just stabbed and killed in my neighborhood on New Year's Eve, I feel like this game is just a bit too real," he said. If he played, he knows he'd do well on questions about Bundy and Ridgway. They were big topics when he was a child, and he knew one of Ridgway's victims.

Hobson is aware that his game is not in good taste but he says good taste never interested him.

"It doesn't seem real," he said. "I didn't see much of it growing up."

Binge drinking since he was 12 (the same year he discovered the truth about his local baker), he broke his leg in several places in a skiing accident when he was 15. From pain killers, he graduated to heroin. As a heroin addict, he worked his way through Western Washington University with his computer drawing skills, graduating with a bachelor of arts degree. Off and on from 1993 to 2003, he said, he worked on staff at Microsoft as an illustrator and animator.

Hobson wishes Allen were alive to see the game in its finished form.

"He was never sober, never had a chance to enjoy his life." Hobson says he has been alcohol and drug free for nearly seven years.

"Toby's fascination with serial killing got him fired from a job at a day care," he said. "I won't get fired. Everybody I work with knows."

What's Hobson's idea of the game's take-away message?

"It's about human behavior, and that's what we are in the end, human beings," he said. "Killers don't know that. They think of their victims as tools or objects, not moms and dads and sons and daughters. If we knew how to change that, maybe the killing would stop, but I don't see how ignoring the subject or calling it in poor taste is going to help anybody."

## **HOW WELL**

### **DO YOU KNOW**

#### **YOUR SERIAL KILLERS?**

1. Born to 16-year-old prostitute Josephine Maddox, what was Charles Manson's registered birth name?
2. What serial killer said voices in his head told him to "sing the die song?"
3. Who told the judge after being sentenced to die, "See you in Disneyland?"
4. Who claimed to be a mistake of nature, a mad beast?
5. Who said about the women he murdered, "What's one less person on the Earth?"
6. Who boasted that clowns get away with murder?
7. Who said, "There's a lot left in a girl's body without a head. Of course, her personality is gone."
8. Which American state was the last to ban the use of firing squads to execute prisoners?
9. Who taunted the judge at his trial, "If I do escape, I promise you I will kill and rape again, and I will enjoy every minute of it?"
10. Can art made by serial killers be sold on eBay?

#### **ANSWERS**

1. No Name Maddux
2. Herbert Mullin
3. Richard Ramirez, the Night Stalker
4. Andrei Chikatilo, Soviet serial killer known as Citizen X

5. Ted Bundy

6. John Wayne Gacy

7. Edmund Kemper

8. Utah

9. Westley Allan Dodd

10. No

-- Questions and answers by Ryan Hobson, modified from his game, which is based on multiple-choice and true/false queries.

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