"Fan Favorites": Using Games to Promote Meaningful Conversations about Media

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Over the past few decades, media literacy education has developed into an international field of study and practice. And while scholars and educators have made great efforts to encourage critical engagement with media culture, much of this progress has taken place within formal education settings. "Fan Favorites" is a scholarly and creative project that attempts to make media literacy education accessible to the larger population, using a game to promote players to have meaningful conversations about media. Fan Favorites begins as a card game organized around open-ended questions intended to encourage players to reflect on the meanings they make of their favorite media. Developed in collaboration with university students as part of an undergraduate course on media literacy—the game's questions help players consider concepts from media and cultural studies—like affect, aesthetics and issues of representation—in ways that are engaging and accessible. For example, players may be asked to share the significance of popular songs in their memories of past relationships, to devise a backstory for a unnamed character from a film or to describe how a book they read influenced their perception of a specific social issue. The research study involves focus groups, led by undergraduate students, in which the participants (1) complete an initial survey in which they discuss their media habits, (2) play the game in a group setting, and (3) participate in a post-game conversation about how the game encouraged them to reflect on their experiences with media. Throughout the research study, qualitative data from the surveys and conversations will be compiled as a means of both accounting for the public's perspectives and practices related to media and assessing the effectiveness of the game at promoting critical thinking and creativity. The last stage of the project involves the development of a digital version of the game for use on mobile devices. Available to the public, "Fan Favorites" will serve to simultaneously record and report anecdotal data on players' media habits via the game's initial survey and promote critical conversations about media among those playing. Also, the project itself serves as a means of helping the student participants practice uniting theory with practice, media education with media production. The session will include an explanation of the theoretical foundations of the game, a description of the game's development, a discussion of the data collected as part of the study, and a demonstration of the game itself.

Keywords: Media Literacy; Critical Thinking: Games; Videogames; Educational Games; Media Education.