'Jogos de Mesa contra Fake News': Reflections on Serious Analogue Games for Media Literacy

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The idea that games can be used to educate citizens and create social change is well established, lying at the heart of initiatives like Games for Change (2022), alongside the widespread use of games in educational contexts (Cole et al. 2023). Similarly, the use of game prototyping in jams and educational settings speaks to the importance of experimentation in the development of artefacts which may one day become fully fledged games. Building on these existing understandings, this paper reports on a pilot project which brought together educators, researchers, media literacy advocates, and students for a series of workshops in Brazil exploring how analogue games - board games, card games, and RPGs - can be deployed for media literacy education. Outcomes offered specific insights into what games can add to processes and practices of discussion around complex issues like fake news, the value of articulating existing expertise in new forms, and how ideas from academia, and specifically Game Studies, around applied research and impact can be aligned effectively with the objectives of international development initiatives. This paper will be of interest to

researchers focusing on serious games, games in education outside universities, and media literacy of all kinds, including games literacy.

Concerns about media literacy have become increasingly prominent in recent years, and scholarship has placed growing importance on games and/or gamification as viable forms of media literacy intervention (e.g. Dumitru et al. 2022). Attention has been paid both to games that directly address media literacy issues (e.g. Glas et al. 2023) and to the development processes that produce them (e.g. Literat et al. 2021). Here, we extend this research and build on thinking around board games and media literacy (Currie and Kelly 2022; Maze et al. 2020), asking how we might tackle what is predominantly understood as a digital issue through non-digital means. Brazil presents a range of contexts where a digital solution is not practical due to a lack of access to digital tools or reliable networking or power. How, then, can games be used to do (digital) media literacy training when "an app" or other digital solution is not an option?

This pilot took the form of a two-day event, held in Rio de Janeiro in August 2023. It was held in collaboration with non-profit technology company Meedan, as part of the Check Global initiative, focused on countering misinformation and increasing media literacy in the Global South. Eight workshops were delivered across two days, led by university partners and civil society organisations focused on media literacy, with a brief to address fake news using games and game mechanics as tools. Workshops typically asked participants to play or design games, where the process of design was to think through mechanics, balance, objectives, and components. All workshops took place in Portuguese. The event attracted 35 participants with whom we engaged organically across the two days, and we gathered formal research data and evidence of impact through workshop observation, plenary discussions each day, and an extended follow-up questionnaire.

This pilot produced valuable insight in direct response to our research questions. Firstly, it provided evidence that games, and game design practices like paper prototyping, can play an important role as provocations for explorations of fake news and media literacy. For example, many existing games use mechanics (such as bluffing) which prompt or replicate critical thinking practices important in the recognition of fake news. Discussions around making games prompted a degree of social learning and negotiation of ideas and meanings, in similar manner to related studies in this area (Literat et al. 2020, 512). Secondly, our observations, and discussions that took place during the workshops, invited reflection about the role of literacy itself. Although many participants lacked extensive gaming literacy, observations and feedback suggested this did not impede (and may in fact have increased) the capacity of the workshops to prompt reflections on media literacy. This implies that a lack of games literacy is not a barrier to games' value as provocations. Finally, the analogue nature of the games and activities was highly valued by participants, who attached significant importance to in-person activities and the very low material and technological cost of the options presented.

We conclude that the outcome of the workshops was not that our participants had learned to make games based on ideas around media literacy, but rather that they had learned how to use games to extend the media literacy of themselves and others. Games, and in particular discussions about making games, encouraged participants to explore their expertise around media literacy and to refine it by reflecting on media literacy as a systematic and mechanical challenge. This is distinct from approaches

that see games and gameplay as vehicles for learning, and can be captured in the idea of thinking with and through games, rather than learning from them.

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