

All together, these factors—the crass tone of the game and company, the free download, the openness to fans remixing the game—give the game a massive cult following.

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Their success is not the result of a grand plan. Instead, Cards Against Humanity was the last in a long line of games and comedy projects that Max Temkin and his friends put together for their own amusement. As Max tells the story, they made the game so they could play it themselves on New Year's Eve because they were too nerdy to be invited to other parties. The game was a hit, so they decided to put it up online as a free PDF. People started asking if they could pay to have the game printed for them, and eventually they decided to run a Kickstarter to fund the printing. They set their Kickstarter goal at \$4,000—and raised \$15,000. The game was officially released in May 2011.

The game caught on quickly, and it has only grown more popular over time. Max says the eight founders never had a meeting where they decided to make it an ongoing business. “It kind of just happened,” he said.

But this tale of a “happy accident” belies marketing genius. Just like the game, the Cards Against Humanity brand is irreverent and memorable. It is hard to forget a company that calls the FAQ on their website “Your dumb questions.”

Like most quality satire, however, there is more to the joke than vulgarity and shock value. The company's marketing efforts around Black Friday illustrate this particularly well. For those outside the United States, Black Friday is the term for the day after the Thanksgiving holiday, the biggest shopping day of the year. It is an incredibly important day for Cards Against Humanity, like it is for all U.S. retailers. Max said they struggled with what to do on Black Friday because they didn't want to support what he called the “orgy of consumerism” the day has become, particularly since it follows a day that is about being grateful for what you

have. In 2013, after deliberating, they decided to have an Everything Costs \$5 More sale.

“We sweated it out the night before Black Friday, wondering if our fans were going to hate us for it,” he said. “But it made us laugh so we went with it. People totally caught the joke.”

This sort of bold transparency delights the media, but more importantly, it engages their fans. “One of the most surprising things you can do in capitalism is just be honest with people,” Max said. “It shocks people that there is transparency about what you are doing.”

Max also likened it to a grand improv scene. “If we do something a little subversive and unexpected, the public wants to be a part of the joke.” One year they did a Give Cards Against Humanity \$5 event, where people literally paid them five dollars for no reason. Their fans wanted to make the joke funnier by making it successful. They made \$70,000 in a single day.

This remarkable trust they have in their customers is what inspired their decision to apply a Creative Commons license to the game. Trusting your customers to reuse and remix your work requires a leap of faith. Cards Against Humanity obviously isn't afraid of doing the unexpected, but there are lines even they do not want to cross. Before applying the license, Max said they worried that some fans would adapt the game to include all of the jokes they intentionally never made because they crossed that line. “It happened, and the world didn't end,” Max said. “If that is the worst cost of using CC, I'd pay that a hundred times over because there are so many benefits.”

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Any successful product inspires its biggest fans to create remixes of it, but unsanctioned adaptations are more likely to fly under the radar. The Creative Commons license gives fans of Cards Against Humanity the freedom to run with the game and copy, adapt, and promote their creations openly. Today there are thousands of fan expansions of the game.