

The Evolution of The *Disney Channel Games* Star Machine:  
From Controversial Stars to Role Models

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On your mark, get set, go! From 2006 to 2008, The *Disney Channel Games*<sup>1</sup> put Disney Channel's stars in an annual summer competition of physical challenges that had them running around, jumping obstacles, and performing live at the end of the day. A success among Disney Channel fans, the games brought all of the channel's major teen stars together as a celebration of their talent. However, after three successful seasons, the show was mysteriously put on hold for three years, unexpectedly coming back in 2011 with a different goal, brand and name: *Disney's Friends for Change Games*. The *Disney Channel Games* started out as a strategy of Disney's star machine, but in order to salvage their stars' problematic personas amid scandals, Disney put the show on hold and transitioned into a more positive and inspirational star-machine format by merging their new Disney Friends for Change initiative and the *Disney Channel Games*, establishing new stars as role models within a positive narrative more in line with Disney's family brand. This paper will first present a formal analysis of the *Disney Channel Games*, followed by context of the drama surrounding Disney Channel when the competition show was put on hold, focusing on the stars' scandals and how Disney dealt with such controversies. Finally, the paper will provide a formal analysis of the *Disney Friends for Change Games* – the *Disney Channel Games* reboot –, presenting a theory for why the *Disney Channel Games* went on an undetermined hiatus and was later brought back as the *Disney Friends for Change Games*.

The Disney Channel has a star machine system, which, according to *Newsweek* media journalist Johnnie L. Roberts<sup>2</sup>, is a pretty well-crafted reinvention of the 1940s Hollywood studio system, when studio heads locked up talent for many years with oppressive contracts and

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<sup>1</sup> Art Spigel. *Disney Channel Games*. The Walt Disney Company, 2006-2008.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, Johnnie L. "Disney's Star Machine; How Did 'High School Musical,' a Basic-Cable TV Movie, Become a Genuine Pop-Culture Phenomenon? It Wasn't an Accident." *Newsweek*, 24 July 2007, p. 42.

supervised their stars' lives to every detail. Roberts writes about how Disney carefully identifies and develops talented but unknown actors. They choose to go with this fresh-face kid-next-door appeal as a way to avoid the Paris Hilton controversial type of celebrities. With this meticulous casting strategy, Disney attempts to make stars that will unlikely morph into troubled stars like 2007 Britney Spears. As *The Guardian* reporter Will Dean<sup>3</sup> points out, Disney was not so excited to watch Spears, Justin Timberlake and Christina Aguilera leave the *All-New Mickey Mouse Club*<sup>4</sup> and go on to make millions of dollars for other record labels. Since that loss, Disney has worked hard on keeping hold of their emerging teen talent. They also want their stars to embody the Disney brand of family wholesomeness, so casting becomes not only about talent but also personal character<sup>2</sup>.

As a part of their star system, the Disney Channel then launched the *Disney Channel Games* as a platform to establish celebrities. The *Disney Channel Games* was an annual Olympic-type television game show that aired from 2006 to 2008. Each year, around 30 Disney Channel stars were divided into four teams to compete against each other for the Disney Channel Cup and a money prize that would then be donated to a charity of the winning team's choice<sup>1</sup>. This "huge brand event", as Dean writes, was used by Disney in the same way that guest appearances, crossover TV show episodes and joint-tours served to market celebrities and promote synergy. It was a way to bring all of their different talent to one place and not only profit off of that, but also to amplify the kids' stardom by putting them next to each other.

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<sup>3</sup> Dean, Will. "The Guide: The Tween Machine: How Do New Boyband Stars Jonas Brothers Fit into the Wired-up World of Disney 2.0? Will Dean Maps out the Disney Channel's Youth Empire." *The Guardian*, 16 Aug. 2008, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Disney, Walt and Hal Adelquist. *The All-New Mickey Mouse Club*. Disney-ABC Domestic Television, 1989-1994

Grouping these stars all in one platform, the *Disney Channel Games* showcased Disney Channel's top players. Pointing to this idea of the *Games* being like a Disney Channel star ranking system, to show who were the popular kids and which stars were at the top, is the show's theme song. The song "Let's Go"<sup>5</sup> performed by Booboo Stewart begins with the lyrics "If you wanna know who's the best, it's the D-I-S-N-E-Y, Disney Channel Games", literally telling the viewers that these games will show who is the best; and not just the best in the competition, but the best of the best, the best of the Disney Channel. The lyrics then continue to "Everybody gets it, here it comes. Gonna find out who is number one. Gonna be right on top of your game". Emphasizing the idea of being on top and being the number one creates a connotation of these stars all being there to show that they are number one, that they are on top of their games – not just in the games, but also talent-wise and in the Disney Channel universe.

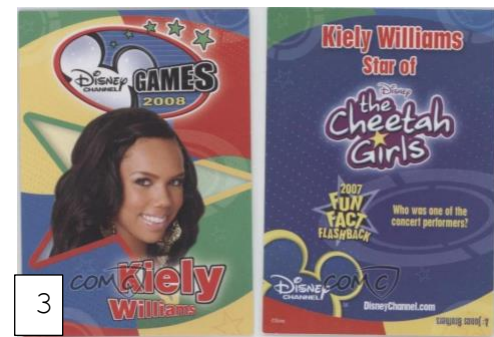
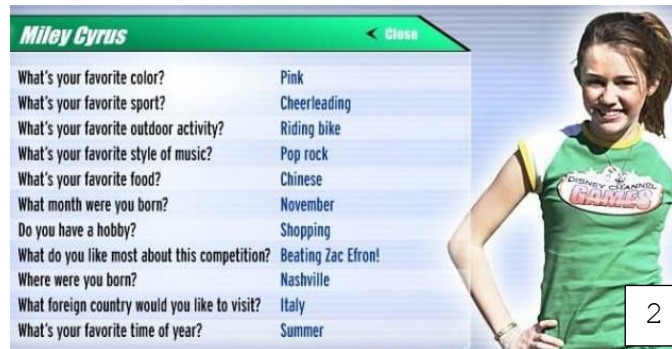
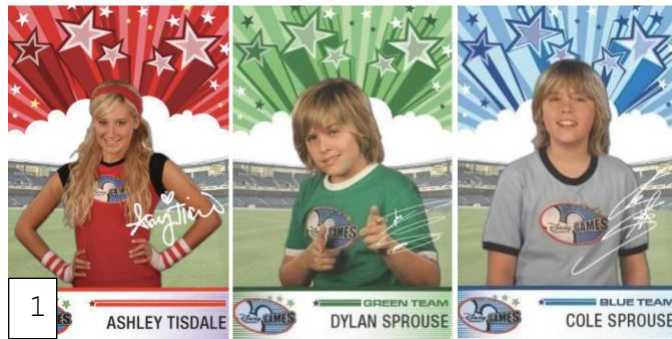
As Forbes senior editor Dawn C. Chmielewski points out in the *Los Angeles Times*<sup>6</sup>, the *Games* premiered at peak popularity of the first *High School Musical* (2006)<sup>7</sup> movie. Chmielewski writes that in 2006 and 2007, as *High School Musical* unprecedentedly became a pop-culture phenomenon, its stars took Disney Channel stardom to a whole new level and strengthened Disney Channel's fan base. With the cast of *High School Musical* participating in the first two seasons of the *Disney Channel Games*, the show elevated the star level of the other kids participating in the games to the level of the musical's stars. If the show represents the number one stars, the ones at the top of the Disney Channel game, they must be all on the same level. In this way, the *Games* became Disney Channel's Met Gala, a platform to showcase the Disney Channel A-list.

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<sup>5</sup> Booboo Stewart. "Let's Go", Walt Disney Records, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Chmielewski, Dawn C. "Hoping to Recapture Youth with 'High School Musical 2!'" *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 Aug. 2007

<sup>7</sup> Ortega, Kenny, director. *High School Musical*. Disney-ABC Domestic Television, 2006.



Ancillary content also emphasized the personality of each star in a commodified way, in the same way that celebrities are sold as special but relatable people. As it is shown in the *Buzzfeed* article by Julianna Garofalo “14 Reasons The Disney Channel Games Were Better Than The Actual Olympics.”<sup>8</sup>, fans of the *Disney Channel Games* could go online to collect and download virtual trading cards that featured the *Games*'

contestants (Image 1). These online cards also provided fans with insight to their respective stars' personality. A screenshot of this information card found in the *Buzzfeed* article displays personal information about Miley Cyrus, such as favorite style of music, hobbies, date of birth and more (Image 2). Fans could also buy physical versions of these trading cards, such as these Kiely Williams<sup>9</sup> and Selena Gomez<sup>10</sup> cards found on eBay (Images 3 and 4). These virtual and physical cards both sold celebrities as

<sup>8</sup> Garofalo, Julianna. “14 Reasons The Disney Channel Games Were Better Than The Actual Olympics.” BuzzFeed Community, 21 Aug. 2016.

<sup>9</sup> COMC – Worl’s largest consignment service. “2008 Disney Channel Games #KIWI Kiely Williams Non-Sports Card 1/2.” eBay.

<sup>10</sup> Aminaalghad0. “SELENA GOMEZ DISNEY CHANNEL GAMES CARD.” eBay.

special collectable figures and made them relatable and likable by displaying personal regular-people information about them.

Aside from showing the contestants' fun personalities as they compete in foolish challenges such as Rock, Paper, Scissors, the games were also a venue to showcase talent. As reported by Kristin Ford<sup>11</sup> in the *Orlando Sentinel*, for many fans the highlight of the *Games* was the concert at the end of each week by some of the most popular teen artists at the time. In 2008, the show featured shows by Miley Cyrus, Jonas Brothers, Demi Lovato and The Cheetah Girls. As the show was filmed in Orlando, the stars also participated in Disney's Hollywood Studios parade, where they also sometimes performed for the park visitors<sup>11</sup>.

This specific format of the *Disney Channel Games* made it so that everyone was a winner simply by being there. No matter who won, spectators would always be happy because the show not only featured stars that viewers already knew and liked, but it also taught viewers to like all of the contestants through ancillary content such as the trade cards, personality cards and concerts. Dividing up casts into different teams also guaranteed that fans of specific shows would be happy with any outcome, as demonstrated by this comment found on a thread of *Disney Channel Games* fan reviews on TV.com<sup>12</sup>:

“i loved all of the actors who competed, my favourite team and the team i was going for was red because Dylan Sprouse was in that team, then i was going for green team because of miley cyrus, mitchel musso and emily osment was in it, and the blue team not far behind because of cole sprouse and jason earles, that are heaps more characters i love though!!”

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<sup>11</sup> Ford, Kristin. “Find the Disney Channel Stars at WDW.” *Orlando Sentinel*, 27 July 2009.

<sup>12</sup> TV.com. “Disney Channel Games Fans Reviews & Ratings.” TV.com.

By teaching fans that all contestants were special, likable, and the best of the best, it made it easier for the show to have happier and positive outcomes only. Everyone was a winner simply by being qualified for the competition.

In spite of the show's success, the *Disney Channel Games* were unexpectedly put on hold after its third season. As reported by the *Orlando Sentinel*<sup>11</sup>, in early 2009 Disney released the following statement, "While we are proud of *Disney Channel Games* and its great success over the past two years, this summer we are focusing on the launch of a new charitable initiative with Disney Channel." This was the only public statement made by Disney in relation to cancelling the star-driven show.

To understand a possibility for cancelling the show, we need to backtrack a little and look at the context surrounding the stars playing in the *Games*. As this generation of Disney Channel stars grew older and became more famous due to Disney's star machine power, they had more and more eyes on them. Growing older and entering the young adult world, some of these stars ended up getting involved in public scandals that contradicted Disney's family brand. As reported in *People* magazine<sup>13</sup>, *High School Musical* sweetheart Vanessa Hudgens, who had participated in the first edition of the *Disney Channel Games*, was in the center of the first scandal of this generation of teen stars by having naked photos leaked in the summer of 2007. In April of 2008, Miley Cyrus also got involved in several scandals that even dragged some of the other stars into the drama as they were all so closely connected through their creative projects and personal-public lives. First, Miley did a revealing *Vanity Fair* photoshoot, which, according to a report by Brooks

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<sup>13</sup> Silverman, Stephen M. "Vanessa Hudgens Talks About Dealing with Her Nude Photo Scandal." *People*, *People*, 3 Jan. 2008.

Barnes<sup>14</sup> for *The New York Times*, upset both Disney and parents. A while later, more revealing photos of Miley were leaked and dragged the Jonas Brothers into the controversy as the photos were allegedly taken for one of the brothers. Later in 2008, Miley and a friend of hers then got in a feud with Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez as they mocked each other in their respective YouTube channels<sup>15</sup>.

Disney has a track record of not reacting well to scandals related their teen stars and trying to spin the situation around in order to secure their family-friendly brand. One example of this was Miley's *Vanity Fair* photoshoot. After the photos came out, Disney released a statement saying that they believed Miley had been manipulated into taking those revealing photos. *Vanity Fair* then responded by stating that Miley's parents were in the room as the photoshoot happened and that they, as well as Miley, approved the photos there and then. Although the magazine article featured quotes of Miley saying that she liked the photoshoot, after Disney released their statement Miley also released an apology expressing how embarrassed she was<sup>15</sup>. This happened right when they were starting to shoot the 2008 *Disney Channel Games*. As reported in the *Los Angeles Times*<sup>16</sup>, because of this controversy, Miley did not attend a media party with the other *Disney Channel Games* stars to being promoting the show. With all controversies going on, the Disney Channel was losing its family-friendly brand in those stars – who were also the most popular of their generation at this point.

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<sup>14</sup> Barnes, Brooks. "Revealing Photo Threatens a Major Disney Franchise." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 28 Apr. 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Spanos, Brittany. "Miley Cyrus' 10 Biggest Scandals." *Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone, 8 May 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Associated Press. "Miley Cyrus to Skip Scheduled Disney Red Carpet Event." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 1 May 2008.



Vanessa Hudgens' scandal also gives us insight into how Disney dealt with controversies. In 2013, Joe Jonas wrote an essay for *Vulture*<sup>17</sup> exposing some of the behind-the-scenes of the Disney Channel and discussing how he felt constricted by Disney's brand. In his essay, he discussed that first scandal involving Vanessa Hudgens' leaked photos: "We heard that she had to be in the Disney offices for a whole day because they were trying to figure out how to keep her on lockdown. We'd hear execs talking about it, and they would tell us that they were so proud of us for not making the same mistakes." This shows Disney's desire to control their stars and maintain their brand and how even when the issue was only with one star, the executives made sure to warn others to not make the same mistakes. It was not about controlling just one star, but all of them. Thus, there is a possibility that the Disney Channel wanted to move away from the direction of its star-establishing *Disney Channel Games* platform to salvage the brand of their most popular stars.

If the *Disney Channel Games* was only setting up stars with a focus on their personalities and celebrity factor, Disney needed to put a spin on their personas and give those stars a positive narrative that aligned more with Disney's positive brand. That is where the Disney's Friends for Change movement comes in to play. Right after they cancelled the *Games*, the new initiative that the Disney Channel started focusing on was this environment focused program. As described by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)<sup>18</sup> organization, Disney's Friends for Change is an initiative created in 2009 to encourage and inspire kids to come together and make a positive impact in the world. At first it was solely about helping the planet and encouraging people to volunteer, but later, Friends for Change started relying more Disney's stars to provide helpful information and tools

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<sup>17</sup> Jonas, Joe. "Joe Jonas: My Life As a Jonas Brother." *Vulture*, Vulture, 2 Dec. 2013.

<sup>18</sup> World Wildlife Fund. "Disney's Friends for Change." WWF, World Wildlife Fund.

for kids to make a difference in the world. Yes, it was still about the environment, but the stars were very much at the forefront.

As a part of this movement, Disney released songs about making a difference in the world performed by Disney Channel stars. But not just any stars; these were their biggest stars who had just been publicly involved in drama and scandals: Miley Cyrus, Demi Lovato, Selena Gomez and the Jonas Brothers. In August of 2009, instead of showcasing their star power through the *Disney Channel Games*, the Disney Channel released the music video for “Send It On”<sup>19</sup>, the first Friends for Change single performed by Miley, Demi, Selena and all the Jonas’. It played on repeat in between Disney Channel shows, reaching #20 on Billboard’s Hot 100<sup>20</sup>.

In an attempt to move away from the negativity of these stars’ previous scandals and feuds, the song’s positive message with a music video of all the stars together, hugging, holding hands and smiling at each other helped to attach a new positive aura to their personas and shape them as inspiring role models as they sang lyrics such as “Just smile and the world will smile along with you / That small act of love that’s meant for one will become two” and “Send it on [...] / Just one hand can heal another / Be a part / Reach your heart / Just one spark starts the fire / [...] Make it strong / Shine a light, and send it on”. In the summer of 2010, Disney released a new Friends for Change single, “Make a Wave”<sup>21</sup>, performed by Demi Lovato and Joe Jonas. Although it was not as successful as “Send it On”, it still reached #84 in Billboards Top 100<sup>21</sup> and helped to promote their Disney Channel original movie *Camp Rock 2* (2010)<sup>22</sup>. These hit songs were crafting a more inspirational image on top of these stars’ superficial, ego-centric and problematic personas. They

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19 Demi Lovato, Jonas Brothers, Miley Cyrus and Selena Gomez. “Send It On”, Walt Disney Records, 2009.

20 “Disney’s Friends For Change Chart History.” Billboard, Billboard

21 Demi Lovato and Joe Jonas. “Make a Wave”, Walt Disney Records, 2010.

22 Hoen, Paul, director. *Camp Rock 2*. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2010.

served as a tool to transform the personality-focused personas created in the *Disney Channel Games* into inspiring figures that used their fame and talent to encourage kids to do good.

Although these songs were successful and situated its performers within the more positive narrative of being good people and doing good in the world – which is the opposite of what their scandals had previously done for their personas –, this was not enough to keep these stars around under Disney’s brand. In 2010, Demi Lovato and the Jonas Brothers finished their run with the *Camp Rock* franchise and went on to do their own Disney Channel shows. However, Lovato ended up going to rehab and not coming back for her show, as reported by journalist Sharon Cotliar<sup>23</sup>, and the Jonas’ series was not doing well in terms of viewership and reception<sup>18</sup>, so they all slowly faded out of the Channel. Miley was still getting involved in scandals – the most popular one being a video of her smoking in 2010<sup>16</sup> – and *Hannah Montana*<sup>24</sup> was reaching its end, finishing its last season in 2011. After that, Miley was out of Disney Channel’s picture. By this time, the *High School Musical* franchise was also over. The Disney Channel was losing most of their popular stars of that time, and it was exactly then that the *Disney Channel Games* was brought back, unexpectedly and without any explanation.

In need of new stars, Disney brings back their *Disney Channel Games* star-establishing strategy, but this time around attaching it to their new Friends for Change initiative. They called it the *Disney’s Friends for Change Games*. It premiered in the summer of 2011 with 30 up-and-coming Disney Channel and Disney XD teen stars competing in several eco-inspired physical challenges. The stars were again divided into four teams, but this time around, the show’s promos

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<sup>23</sup> Cotliar, Sharon. “Demi Lovato: Details of the Fight That Sent Her to Treatment.” PEOPLE.com, People, 3 Nov. 2010.

<sup>24</sup> “Hannah Montana.” Created by Rich Correll, et al. It's a Laugh Productions and Michael Poryes Productions, 2006-2011.

highly emphasized that each team would be playing on behalf of an environmental charity. Viewers could also play the games online and pledge their own commitment to being eco-friendly and making a difference to help the world<sup>25</sup>.

This new version of the show had a different narrative than the original *Disney Channel Games*. The first rendition was mostly about the stars and their fun personalities as they played foolish games, but in the *Friends for Change Games*, the emphasis was mostly on encouraging kids to help the planet as celebrities engaging in the eco-friendly competition made caring for the environment look *fun* and *cool*. As a way to mirror the idea of helping each other to do good, throughout the *Games* kids at home could play online versions of the TV show's challenges and donate their game points to their favorite teams, which allegedly helped teams in the competition<sup>26</sup> (even though the games were previously taped).

Another aspect of the *Friends for Change Games* pointing to this change of narrative for the competition show was the new theme song and show intro. According to UNICEF USA<sup>26</sup>, who encouraged kids to download the song, the *Games*' anthem was "We Can Change The World, performed by rising Disney Channel star Bridgit Mendler"<sup>27</sup>. Similar to the previous *Friends for Change* singles, this song encouraged kids to be good and make a difference in the world. The intro to the television show also emphasized the importance of being eco-friendly by ending with the narrator saying "it is time to go green or go home"<sup>28</sup>. Both the show's anthem and intro

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<sup>25</sup> Ford, Kristin. "Jason Earles Co-Hosts Disney Friends for Change Games, Stars in 'Kickin' It!'" *Orlando Sentinel*, 22 June 2011.

<sup>26</sup> "Disney Friends for Change Games - Let the Games Begin!" *UNICEF USA*, 24 June 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Bridgit Mendler. "Let's Go", Walt Disney Records, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> TheLegendkiller2100. "Disney's Friends for Change Games 2011 Event 1 Energy Dance Battle Part 1." YouTube, YouTube, 28 Oct. 2011.

conveyed a message that was very different than the original *Games*' ego-centric idea of just being the number one in a personality contest.

In this way, the *Disney Channel Games* came back with their power of establishing a new group of teen stars, but within a new narrative of doing good; one that aligned more closely with Disney's wholesome brand. The *Disney's Friends for Change Games* was not only establishing stars, but it was establishing inspiring celebrities; role models for kids to look up to and be inspired to make a difference in the world. After comparing the differences between the *Disney Channel Games* and its reboot, the context and drama surrounding the original show being put on hold, and how Disney has dealt with their teen stars' scandals, we can infer that the Disney Channel cancelled the game-show to control the stars it had established and then brought it back to create new celebrities who would, this time, serve as role models and hopefully not end up with scandals like the others. With the first generation of *Games* stars out of the picture, the Disney Channel had a clean slate to craft these new role models under the premise of helping the planet. Whether this new generation stayed with this narrative during their time at Disney is another story.