

CAT PARK

Educators' Toolkit

An Online Game to Build Resistance to Disinformation and Promote Digital Media Literacy



ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is intended to enable educators and trainers in foreign countries to build an interactive learning experience around the free online game, *Cat Park*, which counters disinformation and fosters media literacy skills. The toolkit contains background materials on the game and the science behind it, as well as a suggested lesson plan tailored for young adults or professionals. The lesson can be conducted over 90 minutes, including 25 minutes to play through the full game as a group or individually, and requires no printed materials. *An internet connection is required.*



BRIEF BACKGROUND ON CAT PARK

Cat Park was developed in 2022 by Tilt, a Dutch media studio, through a grant from the United States Department of State's [Global Engagement Center](#) (GEC). *Cat Park* is a free public resource to foster global resilience to disinformation. *If you would like to know more about Cat Park, please reach out to: GECTech@state.gov.*



GAME PLAY

Cat Park is an interactive story experience playable online and optimized for mobile devices ([catpark.game](#)). *Cat Park* is available in English, French, Dutch, and Russian. Players choose their path across a game map, through dialogue options and a series of graphic and text puzzles that simulate techniques commonly used in media manipulation campaigns. Players will simulate the creation of **emotional headlines, attention-grabbing memes, manipulative imagery**, and *polarizing rhetoric* and attempt to counter disinformation with similar tactics. Player scores are measured by the number of "friends" they earn for completing game challenges, and players can see how their scores compare with the max possible score.

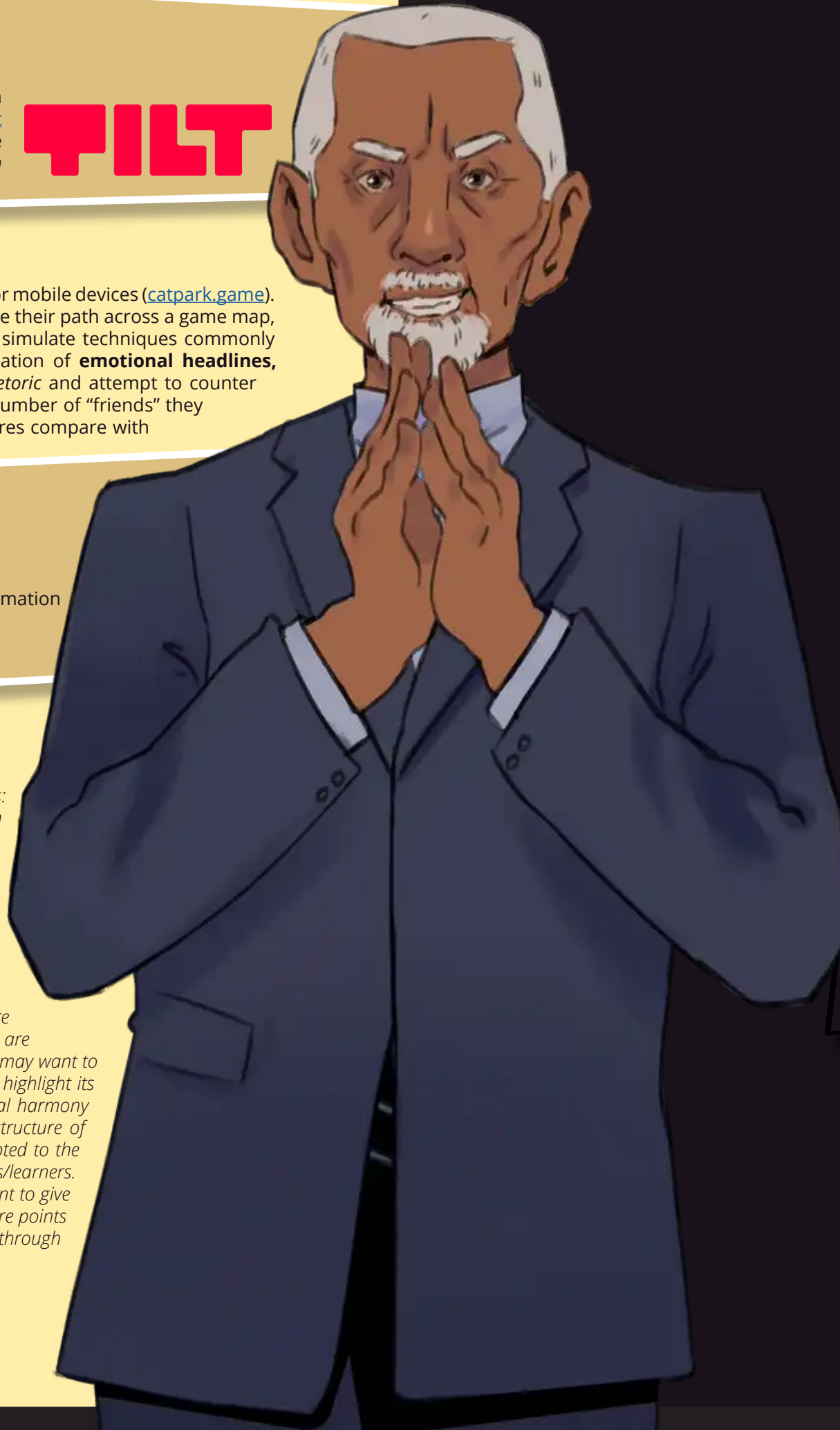
GAME OBJECTIVES

- Improve player abilities to spot disinformation
- Increase player confidence in their abilities to navigate the information space safely
- Increase understanding of the impact of disinformation on society

THE SCIENCE BEHIND CAT PARK

The learning strategy of *Cat Park* is based on a body of research on the use of games to "inoculate" populations against misinformation and disinformation. [Peer-reviewed studies](#) have shown that exposing people to common disinformation techniques in the controlled setting of a game can sensitize people to disinformation in the real world. Instead of imparting facts about specific truths and untruths, *Cat Park* allows players to come to their own understanding of the general tactics used by disinformation actors. Thus, players develop a deeper and more lasting psychological resistance to manipulative media by experiencing it beforehand – what scientists refer to as "pre-bunking." An initial study conducted in collaboration with the University of Cambridge's Social Decision-Making Lab found that, after playing *Cat Park*, individual players were 19-percentage points more likely than a control group to spot disinformation, and 15-percentage points less likely to want to share it.

Note for international educators: the content of this lesson plan should be adapted to the cultural context of students/learners. For example, in contexts where the concept of "media literacy" may be politically sensitive, educators may want to use the analogous and more innocuous term, "information literacy," and in contexts where democracy and "liberal values" are not held as the ideal, educators may want to modify the lesson's language to highlight its benefits to "civil society" or social harmony more generally. Likewise, the structure of this lesson plan should be adapted to the pedagogical norms of students/learners. For example, educators may want to give the "suggested answers" as lecture points rather than eliciting answers through conversation.



CAT PARK

LESSON PLAN:

- Lesson Overview and Objectives (10 minutes)
- Introduction to Media Literacy (15 minutes)
- What is Mis- and Disinformation? (10 minutes)
- The Science of "Inoculation" (10 minutes)
- Let's Play *Cat Park*! (25 minutes)
- Discussion (20 minutes)
- Additional Resources

Lesson Overview and Objectives

Estimated Time:

10
minutes

Teacher/Trainer suggested intro:

Every day, we are bombarded with information from the media: traditional sources such as television, radio, and newspapers; as well as newer sources such as online videos and social media. With so much information coming from so many sources, it may be difficult to know what is true, and it can be all too easy to believe or even spread false information. Today's lesson will help you improve your ability to spot fake information before it has had a chance to fool you. You will learn key concepts of misinformation and disinformation, how media literacy is critical to navigating today's information space; and gain practical experience spotting it in a fun game developed by experts.

Introduction to Media Literacy

Estimated Time:

15
minutes

Teacher/Trainer prompt: Where do you get your news?

Suggested answers: Friends, TV, radio/podcasts, news websites, and social media.

Teacher/Trainer prompt: What are some pros and cons about these different sources?

Suggested answers: *These answers will be subjective, but generally all answers could be characterized as either "pro" or a "con."*

- The speed of information delivery.
- Hearing from people you trust.
- Getting the news at a time that is convenient, rather than having to catch the news at a particular time.

Teacher/Trainer prompt: What does it mean to be media literate? [Or] How is media literacy taught in your local schools?

Suggested answers: Media literacy is the ability to understand and filter information from different sources and viewpoints. Those who are media literate are able to:

- Understand the difference between fact and opinion.
- Understand that authors, creators, and commentators may be biased and may present information in a way that advances their own agenda
- Recognize at least some of the manipulation techniques that are used to influence readers, listeners, and viewers.
- Identify the source of the information.

Teacher/Trainer prompt: What is an example you have seen in your life of how people are not media literate?

Suggested answers: [recent viral fake news story shared by your family or peers; or a viral phishing scam received over email; from your city or country, for example: The Earth is flat; there is something in the drinking water]

Teacher suggested close/summary: Research has shown that media literacy is correlated with higher levels of satisfaction with democracy. Those who are media literate are better able to spot mis- and disinformation in relation to democracy and liberal values.

What is Misinformation, What is Disinformation?

Estimated Time:

10
minutes

Teacher/Trainer prompt: What would you say is the difference between misinformation and disinformation?

Suggested answers: **Misinformation** is the unwitting spreading of false information, without the intention to mislead, and **disinformation** is the deliberate spread of information that is known to be false. Or, misinformation is misleading, inaccurate or false information that is communicated without the explicit intent to deceive, and disinformation is false information that is shared with the intention of misleading people.

Teacher/Trainer prompt: What is a good example of misinformation in your (professional/academic or personal) life? What is a good example of disinformation?

Suggested answers: *Misinformation:* social media posts that claim COVID vaccines are used to inject tracking devices into people (people who spread these claims often believe them). *Disinformation:* Russian government claims that the U.S. led or planned the 2014 Euromaidan revolution / Maidan uprising in Ukraine (politicians who push these claims have a political agenda to delegitimize the U.S. or the current Ukrainian government and they deliberately conceal overwhelming documentary evidence to the contrary, that the uprising was spontaneous and driven by local actors).

Teacher suggested close/summary: Improving media literacy can therefore help to stem the flow of mis- and disinformation and increase support for democracy and liberal values.



The Science of “Inoculation”

Estimated Time:

10
minutes

Teacher/Trainer prompt: Have you ever heard the phrase, “a lie can travel halfway around the world before the truth has put its pants on in the morning”? Why do you think it is important to prepare for fake news and disinformation ahead of time, rather than just reacting to it?

Suggested answers: Peer-reviewed studies have shown that exposing people to common disinformation techniques can sensitize people to disinformation in the real world. Let us watch a couple videos that give a good example of this kind of exposure:

[share screen/project/share link to this site, and play 2-3 videos: <https://inoculation.science/inoculation-videos/>]

Instead of simply imparting facts about specific truths and untruths, these kinds of media experiences give players an understanding of the general tactics used by disinformation actors. The lies will change day to day, but the tactics tend to be the same. And the lies will always spread faster than “fact-checkers” can debunk them. That is why another name for this kind of “inoculation” therapy is “pre-bunking.”

Teacher suggested close/summary: Learning about disinformation in this way is just like being exposed to a weaker version of a disease, which is how a vaccine works. It helps you build resistance, so that when you are confronted with deception in real life, you will not be easily fooled.

Let’s Play Cat Park!

Okay, so we have spoken a bit about the science of inoculation and how we can build resistance to fake news by being exposed to it ahead of time in a controlled environment. Now, we are going to see how this works in practice, with an even stronger version of inoculation: active inoculation via a video game.

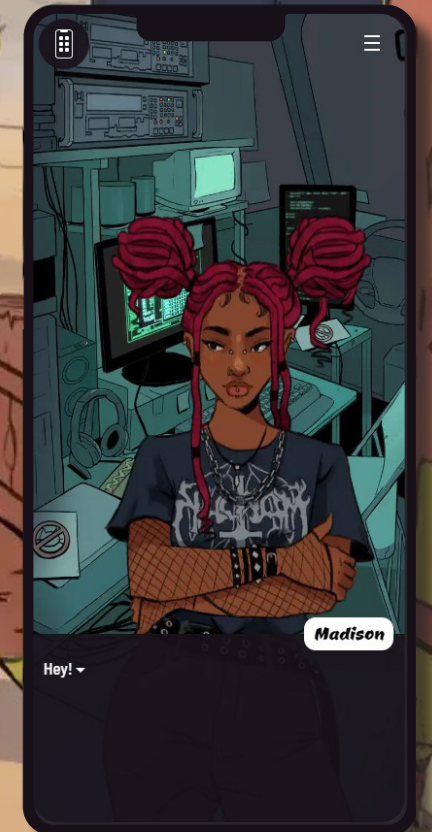
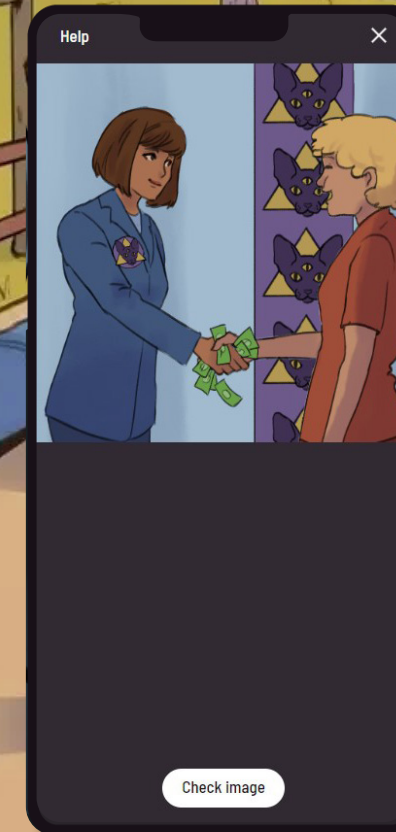
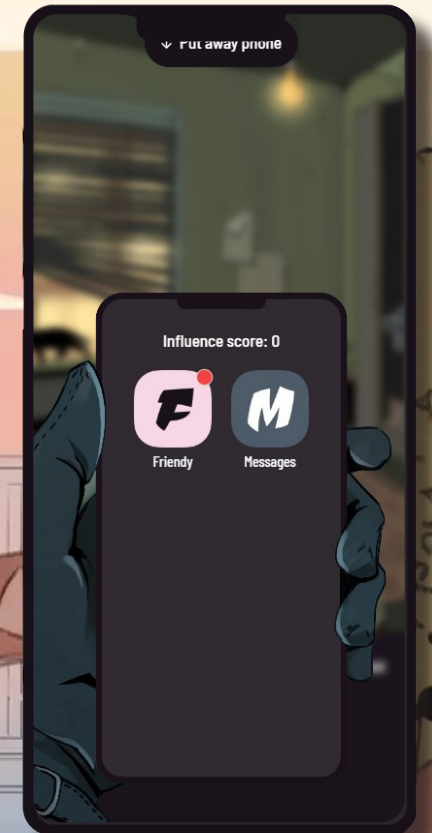
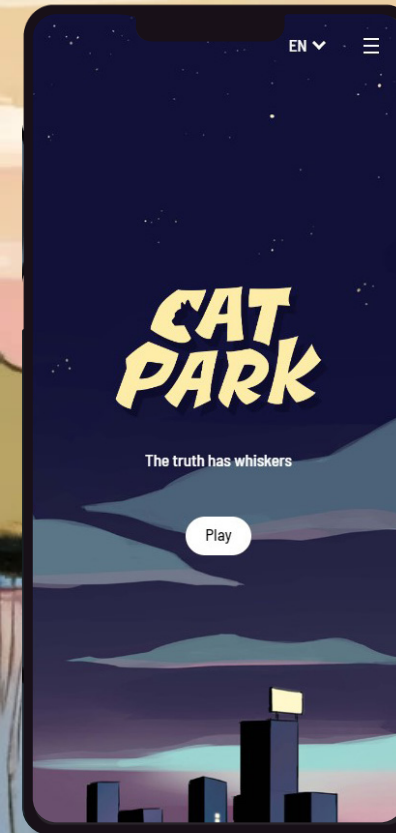
Estimated Time:

25
minutes

Teacher/Trainer prompt: First, a quick, question. Why do you think actively experiencing disinformation in a game might be more effective than just watching videos about disinformation?

Suggested answers: When you actively make decisions about an experience, you are more likely to feel that it is important, and to understand it. So that is where this game comes in. Studies by psychologists at the University of Cambridge found that games do an even better job than videos, infographics, or simple text at conveying resistance to disinformation. But enough about the science: let us play the game!

[Play game as a group, let students choose dialogue options; or let students play in small groups of 2-3; or play individually; ask them to take the pre- and post-game quiz, if you have the time; ask them to write down their scores to share with the class]



Discussion

Estimated Time:

20
minutes

Teacher/Trainer prompt: What did you think of the game?

Teacher/Trainer prompt: What resonated the most about the characters?

Suggested answers:

"Hot Headlines": Melonie's emotional language and hyperbole, verbs like destroy, save, betray, adore, demolish, ruin; adjectives like outrageous, amazing, elite, evil; nouns like freedom, love, hate, pride, terror. And use of ALL CAPS to draw attention.

Memes: Madison's meme-machine produced fun, attention-grabbing media that is easy to share, that appropriated pop culture like movies and TV, and ultimately are oversimplified (which is why their efficacy is often limited).

Conspiracies: Marvin's allegation that powerful figures (cats and their enablers!) are working in secret to forward a sinister agenda. They are reinforced with limited evidence. They can be appealing because people are generally uncomfortable with uncertainty. Conspiracies provide explanations for often mysterious events and in this way are reassuring. They give people a sense of control and a coherent explanation ("connect the dots!"). And they often have a scapegoat: a person or group who is blamed for the whole thing.

Manipulated media: Marvin's simulation of the photo manipulation is more real than the game made it seem. Artificial Intelligence (AI) programs today are free to the public and can allow us to create very convincing false images, not just deep fakes but also "cheap fakes." Of course, the flip-side is, people become skeptical of documentary evidence since they know it can be faked. There is no way a single picture of the "Loch Ness Monster" would convince anyone today. So we need to be aware of the contrary tendency to not believe anything, to lose a common sense of truth because "everything is fake."

Polarization/Radicalization Rhetoric: the Magnus character's "call to action". The final step is mobilizing a "disinformed" populace into the streets with a clear call to act against perceived enemies, internal or external.

Teacher/Trainer prompt: Have you ever seen in real life the tactics you simulated?

Teacher/Trainer prompt: Why do you think the counter disinformation tactics did or did not work in the end?

Suggested answers:

Carmen's tactics had only limited effect because lies do their damage immediately, and fact-checking after-the-fact will always be at a disadvantage.

People become skeptical of all "truth" and "truth-tellers."

When people become convinced of a conspiracy theory, anyone challenging it becomes "part of the problem."

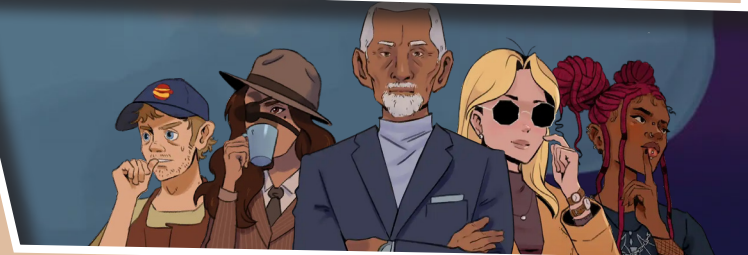
Memes and other short media are better at arousing emotions (and entertaining) than they are at inspiring self-reflection.

Teacher suggested close/summary: Media literacy, and especially digital media literacy, is a critical skill to help you navigate the 21st Century. Hopefully after playing *Cat Park* you feel better equipped to discern between reliable and unreliable information – to be more skeptical of sensational headlines, memes, and possibly manipulated media. The truth has whiskers!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[can be projected or shared during/after class]

- [Other counter-disinformation games](#)
- [Prebunking science](#)
- Media literacy videos: [Crash-Course](#)
- How to Spot Disinformation online, from the world's leading expert org, the Poynter Institute: <https://www.poynter.org/shop/fact-checking/how-to-spot-misinformation-online-july-2021/>
- [Global Digital Literacy Certificate Program](#)



CAT PARK

The truth has whiskers

Play

