PROVOKE

BREAK DOWN

DISRUPT

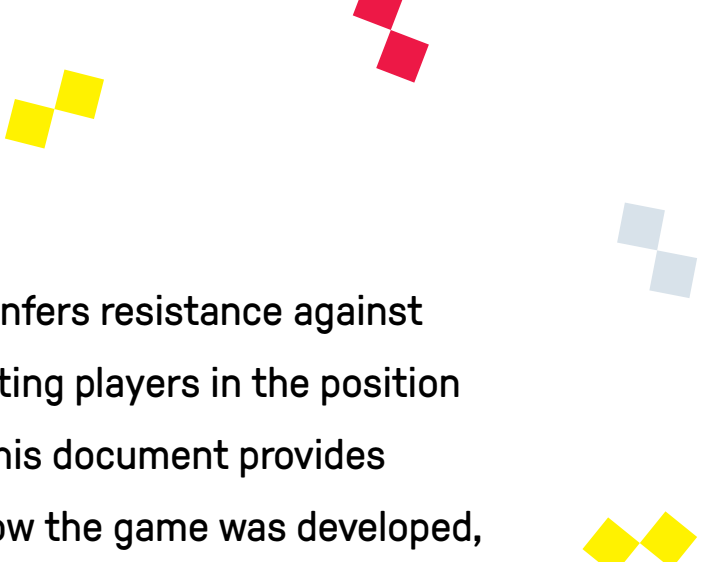DESTROY

FRIGHTEN

SHOUT

BAD NEWS

JUNIOR

INFORMATION SHEET

ATTACK

CHEAT

FALSIFY

STRIKE BACK

The Bad News Junior game confers resistance against bad online information by putting players in the position of the people who create it. This document provides background information on how the game was developed, how it works, and what it is based on. It also goes into the concept of disinformation in a broader sense, and explains how the game covers its various aspects. This document is meant as an explainer for educators who wish to use the Bad News Junior game as a teaching tool. It also provides links to additional information that educators might find useful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

HOW WAS THIS GAME DEVELOPED?

The first version of this game was written for audiences age 15 and up. This version was originally written in Dutch and launched in November of 2017. This Dutch-language version can be played here. After this, an English version called Bad News was developed by DROG and researchers at Cambridge University, based on insights from social psychology and academic work on media manipulation.

Bad News Junior is an adapted version of intended for children of primary school age (approximately 8-10 years old). It is shorter in length than the original version, and focuses on fewer aspects of disinformation. Both the language and the themes in the original game have been adapted to be suitable for a younger audience.

The visual and graphic design was done by Gusmanson.

WHAT IS DISINFORMATION?

The term 'fake news' has become ubiquitous in media coverage. While it certainly has its uses, it doesn't do a very good job at describing the full breadth of the concept. What we call 'fake news' refers to news that has been entirely fabricated or made up. Snopes is one of the websites that keeps track of stories like this. Examples are not hard to find: headlines like "Australia to forcibly vaccinate citizens via chemtrails", "Melania Trump bans White House staff from taking flu shot" and "Muslim doctor refuses to treat Christian girl on board a flight" are but a Google search away.

However, a news item doesn't have to be entirely made up to be insidious or misleading. To capture the broader scope of the various ways to mislead audiences, we prefer to use the term 'disinformation'. Unlike 'misinformation', which is simply information that is incorrect, disinformation involves the intent to deceive. Propaganda, then, is disinformation with an explicit or implicit political agenda.

WHY IS DISINFORMATION A PROBLEM FOR CHILDREN?

Disinformation is commonly used by a variety of parties, including some governments, to influence public opinion. Social media are a particularly fertile breeding ground for such attempts. To give an example: around 47 million Twitter accounts (approximately 15%) are bots. Many of these bots are used to spread political disinformation, for example during election campaigns. Recent examples of influential disinformation campaigns include the MacronLeaks during the French presidential elections in 2017, the PizzaGate controversy during the 2016 US elections, the various "alternative" explanations surrounding the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in July 2014 and the rumors circulating in Sweden about the country's cooperation with NATO.

Children are growing up with the internet, and spend a significant amount of their time online, chatting with friends, playing games, and finding information. Inevitably, children will also come across things on the internet that may be harmful, deceptive or in some way dangerous. Learning to recognise what such deceptive content looks like is a key skill required to navigate the internet in a safe and responsible manner.

BAD NEWS JUNIOR
HOW DOES IT WORK?

The game works in a simple and straightforward way: players are shown a short text or image and can react to them in a variety of ways by choosing one of the options that the game presents to them. After a brief introduction to the game's main mechanics, players are asked by their (fictional) school principal to run the school website. Their goal is to get as many followers as possible while also making sure that their credibility-level stays high enough (if it drops to zero, the game is over).

There are two ways in which their score is measured: 'followers' and 'credibility'. Their goal is to get as many followers as possible while also making sure that their credibility-level stays high enough (if it drops to zero, the game is over).

As it is impossible to cover all aspects of disinformation in great detail, we have chosen to cover some of the most common aspects of it in the game. Each aspect is covered in a separate scenario. After going through a scenario and finishing it successfully, players receive a badge for their efforts. The game breaks down into 3 badges: disguise, emotion and manipulation.

BADGE BREAKDOWN

DISGUISE

The purpose of this badge is to show that some things on the internet can *look* legitimate and convincing, but do not necessarily have to be.

Players first learn about Twitter, which is a common outlet used to spread disinformation on the internet. After learning about the platform, they are asked to put something on Twitter that is not true but sounds convincing (e.g. 'school will be closed tomorrow!'). Some of their (fictional) classmates will believe this story, but not many.

The school principal then asks the player if they want to run the school website. Players pick a name for the site, as well as a slogan. They are then asked to post the same Tweet again. This time, they are believed by more people than before (even though the fake news is exactly the same), because they now look like a legitimate news source and have a much bigger reputation.

Supplementary reading:

More information on online impersonation can be found here, here and here.

EMOTION

Emotional content is content that is not necessarily 'fake' or 'real' but deliberately plays into people's basic emotions such as fear, anger or empathy. The aim of this badge is to show how players can make use of these emotions in their content.

This is the first badge where players produce content for their school site. They are asked if they want to write emotional content or just report the facts. If they choose the latter, the game informs them that deliberately using emotions is a good way to gain followers. Players can then choose which emotions they want to play into: fear, anger or happiness. If they choose happiness, the game tells them that negative emotions (such as fear and anger) are very often used by fake news makers to convince their audiences, and that they should try it out. They can then choose to make their followers either angry or afraid by sending another Tweet from the school website's Twitter account, for example by spreading rumours about the principal wanting to ban summer vacation or give children who watch SpongeBob detention. After this, players are prompted to also use a visual image to scare or frighten their followers; the point of doing this is to make clear that visual images can be a very powerful way to convey a message, regardless of whether the message behind the image is true.

Supplementary reading:

More information on the general use of emotional content in media can be found here, here and here.

MANIPULATION

The general point of this badge is to show how one can manipulate language and news items in such a way that they benefit its producer. The school website that players are running needs more content. Players are therefore asked to look for rumors that are circulating in the school that may frighten or upset children (e.g. the school will only serve leek and carrots for lunch, or ban video games). The rumor is not true (the principal denies it), but players are prompted to use the facts creatively. The point here is to show that a story does not have to be a lie to be deceptive; a lie can get you caught, but a clever manipulation can sometimes work much better.

Players then choose a headline for their article on the school website about the rumor. There are two good options (which use exaggerated language but aren't technically lies) and one bad option (where the headline is a direct lie). If players choose the bad option, they are asked to try again.

The final trick that players learn is impersonating people online. In this case, they create a fake Twitter account for the principal, who they can make it look like is saying that the rumor is actually true. The game explains that this is how many news sources operate in real life.

Supplementary reading:

This paper looks at the effects of polarization on people's ability and willingness to recognize 'fake news'.

More information on the use of Twitter bots and 'computational propaganda', including real-life examples, can be found here, here and here.

USE IN CLASS OR GROUP

The game takes approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. It is suitable for use in classrooms. We recommend dividing students up in pairs and having them play the game together while actively thinking about what they're doing. In our experience, the game gives players decent (albeit somewhat limited) insight into the various tenets of disinformation and makes clear how easy it is to manipulate information.

AGE RESTRICTIONS AND SENSITIVITY WARNING

The game was written to be suitable for children age 8-10. It contains some potentially emotionally charged content. The game does not employ violent imagery, swear words or other offensive language. However, since players are prompted to take on the role of the 'villain' and manipulate their classmates and principal, they might experience some mild psychological discomfort about the decisions that the game pressures them into making.

BAD NEWS

This game was developed by researchers at Cambridge University and DROG, a Netherlands-based platform against disinformation. For more information about the game and its development, or if you have ideas or feedback, we're very happy to hear from you. Ruurd Oosterwoud, founder of DROG, can be reached at ruurd@wijzijndrog.nl. Or visit DROG's website at www.aboutbadnews.com