

From emotional hooks to conspiratorial claims: A teen-focused game for reflecting on misinformation interactions

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Abstract

Teens encounter misinformation daily, however often lack practical strategies for recognizing how emotional manipulation, faux expertise, and conspiracy cues shape their perceptions online. We present *Wolpertinger Social*, a web-based interactive game that combines narrative gameplay with lightweight modelling of user interaction patterns to foster awareness of misinformation tactics. The game features three chapters corresponding to common misinformation tactics (emotional triggers, expert-making and conspiracy framing), where players make choices and receive immediate feedback explaining why content is manipulative (or not). A follow-up assessment task reinforces learning, and a final profile summarizes interaction patterns in a reflective manner. By focusing on users' responses to misinformation cues rather than factual correctness, the game promotes pattern recognition and self-reflection in a safe environment. *Wolpertinger Social* showcases how narrative immersion and choice-based interaction can support pre-bunking before teens encounter manipulation in real-world feeds.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Web-based interaction**; **Natural language interfaces**; • **Applied computing** → **Interactive learning environments**.

Keywords

misinformation, media literacy, teen audiences, educational game, interactive narrative

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1 Introduction

Digital platforms have reshaped how information is produced and consumed, with implications for teens' everyday encounters with

news [10]. As social media increasingly displaces traditional media, teens encounter news alongside entertainment, memes, and peer-generated content [11]. This fragmented flow makes it harder to distinguish between factual reporting, opinion, advertising, and manipulated content, especially as news often appears incidentally while scrolling [3]. At the same time, rapid news cycles and algorithmic amplification accelerate the spread of misleading claims, limiting verification opportunities even for motivated users [10].

This challenge is compounded by how teens engage with online information. Despite high self-reported confidence in misinformation detection, they often rely on superficial cues, such as visual design, virality, or trust in the source, rather than deeper evaluation [1, 4, 11]. Social dynamics further amplify spread: content is shared for humour, belonging, or trends, even when credibility is uncertain, and emotionally charged posts prompt rapid reactions [4]. For example, on platforms like *WhatsApp*, where trust in peers is high and verification is rare, misleading content can spread quickly [4]. Interpretation and response vary with personal interest, context, and prior engagement, shaping whether content is questioned, ignored, or shared [10, 12]. This highlights the need for interactive systems supporting reflection on how users engage with misinformation, rather than focusing solely on factual correctness.

In response, governments and educators have emphasized the need for media and information literacy that goes beyond checklists, and helps users to understand the political, economic, and technological forces shaping today's information environment [1]. Interactive approaches, particularly serious games and prebunking interventions, have shown promise in helping users recognize common manipulation techniques and build resilience to misleading content [1, 5]. Building on this, we present *Wolpertinger Social*, a conversation-based game that introduces teens to misinformation tactics through narrative, dialogue, and simulated social media interactions. The game focuses on experiential learning as a way to model how misinformation operates, aiming to offer an engaging entry point for critical reflection and skills development to support misinformation resilience.

2 Wolpertinger Social: Overview

Following earlier misinformation-awareness games (e.g., *Bad News* [1]), *Wolpertinger Social*¹ adopts a social media-inspired narrative format to help teens recognize common misinformation tactics. Players navigate a simulated feed of posts and replies, choosing

¹The game can be accessed at: <https://wolpertinger.cp.jku.at>. A video of the gameplay can be found at: <https://youtu.be/XSv8Oln8-2U>.



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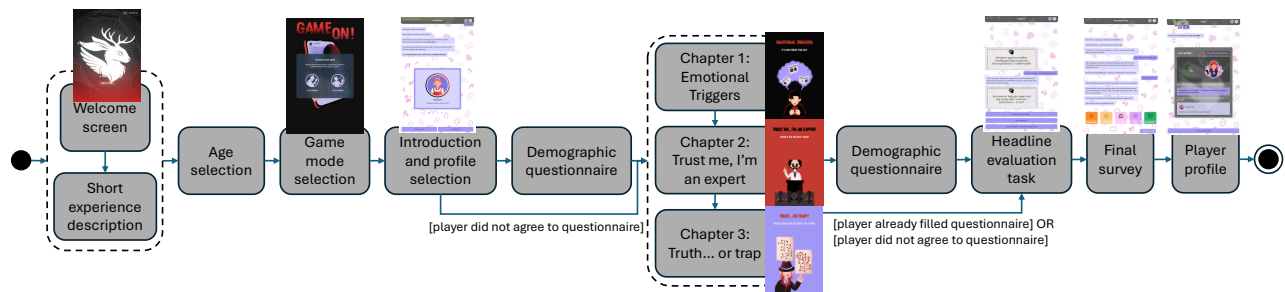


Figure 1: Overview of the Wolpertinger Social gameplay pipeline

how to respond (e.g., agree, ignore, or question). The game is structured into 3 chapters (emotive phrasing, fake expertise, conspiracy framing), each highlighting a particular misinformation tactic and combining short narrative scenarios with explanatory feedback.

Rather than presenting abstract definitions or asking players to generate misleading content, Wolpertinger Social exposes them to contextualized examples of manipulation that highlight subtle linguistic and structural cues that may otherwise go unnoticed. This design follows inoculation theory [7] and prebunking research [2, 6] demonstrating that resistance to manipulation can be strengthened by preemptively revealing and deconstructing common techniques before individuals encounter them organically. The game thus supports active experiential learning while avoiding role-play that may feel ethically uncomfortable or psychologically demanding.

Figure 1 illustrates the game flow. After a welcome screen and brief introduction, players select their age² and enter a reporter ID (allowing returning users to skip optional forms). Players then select a mode, complete a short narrative setup and profile selection, and may optionally answer a brief demographic questionnaire (gender, age range, world region; all with a "Prefer not to answer" option)³. The core experience consists of 3 chapters. The session concludes with a headline-evaluation task, a reflective profile summarizing interaction patterns and an optional post-game survey.

Narrative framing. Wolpertinger Social builds its learning experience around a playful narrative world centred on reported "Wolpertinger sightings"⁴. Using a fictional and humorous setting allows the game to explore misinformation without invoking real political actors or sensitive topics, supporting engagement in a psychologically safe environment. Social-media-style scenarios are platform-agnostic, reflecting familiar interaction patterns without emulating specific applications. Scenarios and headlines were informed by prior literature and iteratively refined to align with media literacy principles [1, 9], supporting awareness of individual response patterns, as a step toward behavioural change.

The game offers two complementary gameplay modes. *Truth Seeker* focuses on identifying emotional bait, questioning fabricated expertise, and recognizing misleading claims. *Chaos Mode*, in contrast, invites players to "play the villain" by experimenting with

how misinformation spreads by producing such patterns by amplifying emotional triggers, inventing authority cues, and constructing conspiratorial narratives. Together, the two modes reinforce the game's purpose: by understanding both how manipulation works and how it can be challenged, teens gain deeper insight into the mechanics of misinformation spread and detection.

To help teens step outside their own online identity and support reflective engagement, Wolpertinger Social includes player profiles (e.g., expressive, trend-driven, analytical, ironic, or observant) representing distinct patterns of social-media interaction without influencing gameplay. Players are informed that all actions take place in a closed simulation, ensuring psychological safety and avoiding confusion with real platforms.

The game is organized into 3 chapters, each centred on a misinformation tactic. *Chapter 1: "Emotional Triggers"* examines how emotionally charged posts (e.g., outrage, fear, or excitement) capture attention and drive impulsive sharing, making emotion a natural entry point as one of the most prevalent manipulation strategies. *Chapter 2: "Trust me, I'm an expert"* focuses on expert-making, showing how impersonation, dubious authority cues, and pseudo-expertise can make unreliable content appear trustworthy, particularly as teens often rely on influencers or authoritative-sounding sources. Finally, *Chapter 3: "Truth... or trap"* combines these patterns, illustrating how emotional triggers and pseudo-authority escalate into conspiratorial narratives through selective evidence and fabricated connections. Across chapters, players make simple choices (respond, question, ignore) and receive feedback, emphasizing pattern recognition over specific content, fostering transferable awareness. Chapters are brief and modular, supporting use in short interactive sessions. While misinformation spans a broader taxonomy, the game targets a small set of common, high-level patterns that are accessible to teens and foundational to more complex strategies. These tactics often co-occur and combine, enabling recognition of broader patterns while keeping the experience concise.

Headline evaluation task. After the chapters, players engage in a short headline-evaluation task reinforcing the cues introduced in the narrative. All headlines are fictional and inspired by Rodgers [9], illustrating how misinformation tactics can appear in everyday "harmless" content. The set mixes sensational and emotional items (e.g., "You won't believe what a zoo did to these adorable 2-day-old tiger cubs!!"), fear-inducing or ambiguous claims (e.g., "A baby got super sick just weeks after a vaccine. Coincidence... or not?"), and conspiracy-leaning prompts (e.g., "BREAKING NEWS! Weird sky glow spotted over Linz, is it aliens?"), alongside with informational headlines (e.g., "Local community plants 500 new trees in city park

²Players aged 12–18 are automatically directed to Wolpertinger Social. Adults may choose a headline-assessment task focused on identifying reliable/misleading content.

³The questionnaire may reappear later if initially skipped, ensuring participation remains optional while allowing users to provide input at a more convenient point.

⁴The Wolpertinger serves as a metaphor and cultural anchor. Its hybrid appearance mirrors how misleading content often merges unrelated elements to seem credible. The game is part of the project "Breaking News: Wolpertinger sighted in Linz!" An Interactive Experience Exploring the Mechanics of Misinformation, presented at the ARS Electronica 2025 Festival in Austria, where the Wolpertinger is culturally fitting.

this weekend.") to encourage contrastive reasoning rather than simple pattern matching. For each headline, players choose a primary category⁵: 1) appeals to emotions, 2) hints at a conspiracy, or 3) "just normal"⁶. By grounding the activity in fictional, low-stakes scenarios, it emphasizes pattern recognition over factual correctness judgment, supporting awareness of how language can mislead. Afterward, players receive a playful profile (e.g., "The curious believer" or "The cautious explorer") reflecting their overall response patterns. These profiles are not evaluative but provide encouraging, reflective feedback to reinforce curiosity and critical thinking.

Final player survey. After the headline task, players may complete an optional survey on their news habits and perceptions. The survey adapts questions by Notley et al. [8] to fit the context and tone of the game, with all items including a "Prefer not to say" option. It covers 3 areas: news perception (e.g., its importance and relevance), news sources and trust (e.g., how often they get news from different channels) and misinformation awareness and experiences (e.g., confidence in telling misleading from real news). All items use closed-ended response formats, including Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions. Responses are collected anonymously and used only in aggregate to understand how interactive experiences may support teens in navigating news and misinformation. The survey serves both research and design purposes, capturing players' prior experiences while informing system improvement, potential future personalization and adaptive feedback.

3 Implementation and User Interface

Wolpertinger Social is a web-based application with a Python backend and a React frontend⁷. While playable on desktop, it is optimized for mobile devices, where the vertical layout and touch interactions better mirror social-media use. Players can adjust accessibility settings (e.g., font size and message speed). Language (English or German) is selected at the beginning of the game and remains fixed throughout the session. Chapters are locked to a linear order and cannot be skipped. Chapters share a consistent interface, with small variations (e.g., colours or icons) indicating the misinformation tactic in focus. Interaction is fully click-/tap-driven, with players selecting responses and navigating the simulated feed through simple UI elements. The game logic is driven by a JSON-based engine, where each step defines speaker, text and transitions. Although players can choose between several responses, Wolpertinger Social is fully scripted, all paths converge to ensure that core learning moments are consistently presented, with only minor loops or detours including feedback on the choices.

4 Conclusion and Future Work

Wolpertinger Social is a game aiming to help teens to recognize common misinformation tactics in low-stakes contexts. By focusing on patterns such as emotional manipulation, fabricated authority, and conspiratorial framing, the game encourages reflection on how users interpret and respond to misleading content.

⁵Fake expertise is not included as a separate category, as it typically depends on contextual cues (e.g., source or identity) rather than headline phrasing alone.

⁶Preliminary observations from the ARS Electronica exhibition indicate that most players chose the *Truth Seeker* mode. Correct classifications generally outnumbered incorrect ones, with most confusions occurring between emotional and conspiratorial headlines. More than 70% of players answered at least half of the headlines correctly, and approximately 45% identified eight or more headlines accurately.

⁷Code can be found at: <https://github.com/hcai-mms/wolpertinger-social>

Future work will focus on broadening the game's reach, including extending the game to additional languages (e.g., Spanish), creating culturally adapted versions headlines and scenarios, introducing alternative narrative themes beyond the Wolpertinger, and adding misinformation tactics. Early findings are encouraging, but broader development is needed to obtain more robust and representative data. To this end, we plan to integrate the game into workshops and school settings, enabling structured evaluation and facilitating its use in media-literacy education. These extensions aim to position Wolpertinger Social as a flexible tool for strengthening teens' resilience to misinformation across diverse contexts.

Ethical use of data and informed consent. Wolpertinger Social was designed following privacy-by-default principles, ensuring that participation is fully optional and no personally identifying data is required, particularly given its teen audience. Players may use a reporter ID to skip repeated forms; these IDs are not linked to individuals and are stored locally without cloud synchronization. Before any optional data collection, players are informed in clear language about what data may be stored, how it will be used, and that all interactions remain within a closed simulation. All collected data are anonymized and analyzed only in aggregate.

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