

Transformative Play for Building Resilience to Misinformation

Abstract: This study explores how *transformative play*, a form of experiential learning where players engage with and reshape a fictional world, can be used to build resilience against misinformation. Through the design of an educational escape room – *The Euphorigen Investigation* – the research demonstrates how immersive, narrative-driven gameplay fosters critical reflection, emotional engagement, and epistemic growth. Transformative play positions participants in meaningful roles within complex, uncertain scenarios, prompting them to confront their assumptions, biases, and vulnerabilities. As players navigate puzzles involving misleading data, deepfakes, and manipulated media, they experience the disorientation of being misled; an emotional turning point that catalyzes self-awareness and critical thinking. The game’s design encourages collaborative sensemaking and peer dialogue, aligning with theories of transformative learning that emphasize context, reflection, and identity transformation. Findings indicate that such gameplay experiences can shift perspectives, enhance critical media engagement, and support the development of more inclusive and adaptive ways of knowing.

Keywords: Transformative play, misinformation, escape rooms, experiential learning

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1. INTRODUCTION

The digital landscape today is marked by an overwhelming presence of misinformation and disinformation. These trends present profound challenges to the functioning of democracies, where citizens’ informed judgment is essential (Rubin 2022). The spread of unreliable content on social media has damaged public confidence, blurring the line between what is true and what is false and producing an unstable information ecosystem. While traditional pedagogical interventions around misinformation have often emphasized didactic, skills-based approaches to media literacy (Dumitru et al. 2022; Kozyreva et al. 2024), game-based approaches, including transformative play, highlight the potential of experiential, affective, and contextually embedded learning processes (Glas et al. 2023; Kiili et al. 2024). This study explores how transformative play, through the design of educational escape rooms simulating social media dynamics, can cultivate critical awareness and epistemic resilience in navigating conflicts between truth, influence, and platform incentives in an era of algorithmic persuasion and synthetic simulacra.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF MISINFORMATION IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

The rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media has created a complex and conflict-ridden digital landscape, challenging public trust, democratic engagement, and ethical information sharing (DiMaggio 2023, Shapovalova 2024). Its influence has been visible in high-profile cases such as Brexit, the anti-vaccine movement, and the election of Donald Trump on two occasions (Lewandowsky 2024; Starbird et al. 2023). These episodes illustrate how Western democracies become increasingly vulnerable when the foundation of an informed citizenry can no longer be taken for granted (Kippin 2024; Blaive 2025).

But what is meant by misinformation and disinformation? Misinformation refers to misleading information, meaning information that is false and spread without necessarily having the intention to cause harm, in contrast with disinformation, which is deliberately intended to mislead (Armitage and Vaccari 2021). Misinformation and disinformation are not new phenomena, but they have gained greater and more serious significance in the digital age. This is partly because it has become easier to create misleading content and partly because false information can be shared more easily, for example, on social media (Shu and Liu 2022). Additionally, there is a risk that new large language models (LLMs) may hallucinate and spread misinformation (Hao et al. 2024). Specifically, LLMs may create simulacra, where artificial intelligence, using synthetic data, presents a copy without an original (Poster 1990, Cunningham 2024). As Mark Poster asserts, “To Copy an Original means, in the mode of information, to create simulacra” (Poster 1990, 10).

While there is broad consensus that misinformation constitutes a significant problem in the digital age, particularly with the advent of artificial intelligence, which further necessitates critical engagement with the issue (Yan et al. 2025), there is less agreement on how to equip citizens with the knowledge and skills to navigate these complex information environments. But perhaps the issue is not solely about identifying the “correct” knowledge. Equally important is learning how to engage with new information, not with dismissive cynicism, but with healthy skepticism and the ability to navigate and assess the media landscape. This involves developing an understanding of when skepticism is warranted and when it is necessary to engage in deeper exploration through such processes as infrastructural meaning making, “a power-sensitive, material-discursive understanding of how people, sources, and content converge and are shaped in practices that are part of infrastructural arrangements” (Haider and Sundin 2022, 65).

The reasons people form beliefs in faulty information are multifaceted and given to various explanations, including:

- Cognitive deficits: The lack of critical thinking and particular skills such as information search and evaluation (Pennycook and Rand 2019; Lewandowsky et al. 2012).
- Psychological vulnerabilities: The influence of confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, continued influence effect, and other cognitive vulnerabilities (Ecker et al. 2022; Lewandowsky et al. 2012).
- Social influences: The influence of people’s multifaceted affiliations with various groups, both geographic and online, which exert social pressures that shape what types of information is shared and trusted (Aghajari et al. 2023).
- Epistemic conflicts: When disagreements arise around fundamental ways of knowing, including what counts as valuable knowledge (Barzilai and Chinn 2022).

The first explanation— cognitive deficits —is the domain of traditional media and information literacy. Curiously, even most misinformation games adopt this orientation despite the affordances of games to address these other factors (Wedlake et al. 2024).

This is where transformative play may play a role, as this form of learning game can challenge the way we approach media literacy. Transformative play has the potential to help individuals to recognize their vulnerabilities, identify the techniques being used to manipulate belief, and create situations where players need to confront and negotiate differing worldviews.

For example, to confront the reality of having been duped, however disorienting, is an essential practice for navigating today’s complex and misleading media environment (Levine 2020; Rubin 2022). This recognition can build critical self-awareness, prompting individuals to reassess information sources and credibility. By acknowledging their own susceptibility, they strengthen

resilience against manipulation and turn the experience of being duped into a valuable lesson for better decision-making.

Nevertheless, the degree to which transformative play can successfully address the psychological, social, and epistemic challenges is not entirely evident. Thus, this paper seeks to explore: How can transformative play be utilized as a tool to foster epistemic resilience to misinformation in democratic societies?

3. TRANSFORMATIVE PLAY AND LEARNING

Transformative play originally emerges from the context of digital games, wherein the game itself is designed to undergo a conceptual transformation (Barab et al. 2010). As the game environment transforms, so does the player. By engaging with and shaping the evolving game, the player's understanding, identity, and relationship to the content are reshaped. This occurs by situating the player in a meaningful context that makes the content personally significant. Through this engagement, the player is afforded the opportunity to influence and transform the game world. It is evident that this conceptual framework may be applied to other types of games beyond the digital format, provided that similar opportunities for exploratory and productive engagement are present (Bowman and Baird 2022).

Within this framework, learning is understood as situated and context-dependent, insofar as the learner is assigned an active role within a scenario that necessitates the application of disciplinary concepts and methods (Savin-Baden and Major 2004). By engaging with and resolving complex, context-specific tasks and problems within the fictional environment, the participant not only develops an understanding of the academic content but also undergoes a transformation in their self-perception, coming to view themselves as agentic subjects capable of applying knowledge in a productive manner (Squire 2005; Smith et al. 2018; Alfaiz et al. 2019).

Transformative play concerns processes of learning and is therefore particularly relevant to consider in relation to Jack Mezirow's concept of transformative learning (Mezirow 1978). According to Mezirow, the process begins with a situation that generates a sense of uncertainty or questioning. This situation creates an opportunity for self-reflection and critical assessment of one's existing assumptions. It may also involve recognizing that others face similar difficulties, which can contribute to a shared understanding. Such recognition can lead to the exploration of alternative actions and potentially new roles. In order to implement these changes, it is necessary to develop the relevant skills and competencies (Mezirow 2006):

Transformative learning is defined as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change. (Mezirow 2006, 26)

While Jack Mezirow is more focused on psychological personal development, some of his ideas may function in transformative play as well. Both theoretical frameworks concern themselves with the reconfiguration of an individual's worldview through a reflexive process wherein the subject contemplates their own understanding and positionality. Central to both is an acknowledgment of the salience of the socio-cultural milieu in shaping processes of learning and development. Consequently, active engagement and participatory involvement are deemed essential within the given situational or educational context. Each approach posits that such transformative processes may culminate in a heightened sense of competence and personal empowerment (Schugurensky 2002).

The distinction lies in the fact that the two emerge from disparate epistemological orientations: transformative play is rooted in the context of gameplay experiences, whereas transformative learning originates within the domain of adult educational praxis. Both emphasize the need to reflect on one's learning and frameworks, fostering cognitive and personal growth through introspection.

4. ESCAPE ROOMS AS AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO MISINFORMATION

Escape rooms are interactive, team-based games in which a group of players work together to solve puzzles and other challenges to achieve a particular goal in a limited amount of time (Makri et al. 2021; Veldkamp, et al. 2020). Escape rooms emerged in Japan in 2007 as a form of entertainment where gameplay takes place inside elaborately themed physical spaces tied to a story. Their popularity spread around the world and over time other formats emerged: boxed tabletop games, print-and-play packets, browser-based games, VR experiences, and more.

While commercial interests drove the global boom, escape rooms have increasingly been adopted as tools for education. A systematic study of escape rooms for learning found that in addition to providing an enjoyable experience, these games contributed to increased student engagement and motivation, as well as the development of soft skills such as teamwork, creativity, decision-making, leadership, communication, and critical thinking (Fotaris and Mastoras 2019). The study also acknowledged that escape rooms present certain challenges, notably that they often require time-consuming instructional design. Furthermore, it highlighted the need to align game content closely with learning objectives to avoid reducing the activity to superficial entertainment. Escape rooms can also serve as cost-effective instructional strategies that do not necessarily rely on expensive digital solutions or require complex programming. The primary objective is to develop learning tools that are effective in practice (Brown et al. 2019).

This literature reveals the potential of escape rooms not merely as playful diversions but as carefully crafted spaces for cultivating resilience against misinformation. The challenge for educators and designers is to move beyond simple puzzles and create experiences that echo the tangled realities of our information landscapes (complex, contested, and often ambiguous) without reducing them to confusion, triviality, or simplistic true/false dichotomies. For learners, the opportunity lies in rehearsing the arts of skepticism, verification, and shared meaning-making within an immersive, low-stakes environment where missteps become moments of insight. When narrative design and pedagogical intent are held in balance, escape rooms can nurture not only sharper critical faculties but also the collective habits of democratic dialogue, offering a tool of value to students, adults, and communities alike.

5. THE MISINFORMATION ESCAPE ROOM INTERVENTION

Against this backdrop, a research team led by the second author at the University of Washington has been developing misinformation escape rooms as an educational game for fostering resilience to misinformation.¹

The initial motivations and design considerations that informed the development of the team's first game — *The Euphorigen Investigation* — came from interviews with librarians and educators (Young et al. 2019), a review of the misinformation literature, and an assessment of

¹ Project website located at www.lokisloop.org.

prominent game-based interventions. From this scan we determined that an escape room offered the appropriate design affordances for addressing misinformation, in particular the capacity to develop:

- Experiential environments (e.g., for players to directly experience the emotions or consequences of being fooled);
- Contextually relevant narratives (to enhance engagement value and, presumably, learning outcomes); and
- Social and collaborative game-play (to foster peer learning and collective sensemaking).

The Euphorigen Investigation was released in 2021 as an online game to meet a demand for virtual library programming during the Covid lockdown era (Cho et al. 2023), with a packet version for in-person play made available the following year.

The narrative revolves around a brain-boosting supplement (Euphorigen) and the plans of the government to add it to the public water supply. Players assume the role of an investigator who must track down evidence to determine whether the supplement is safe or not. The first three puzzles involve misleading headlines, manipulated charts, and deepfake social media profiles.

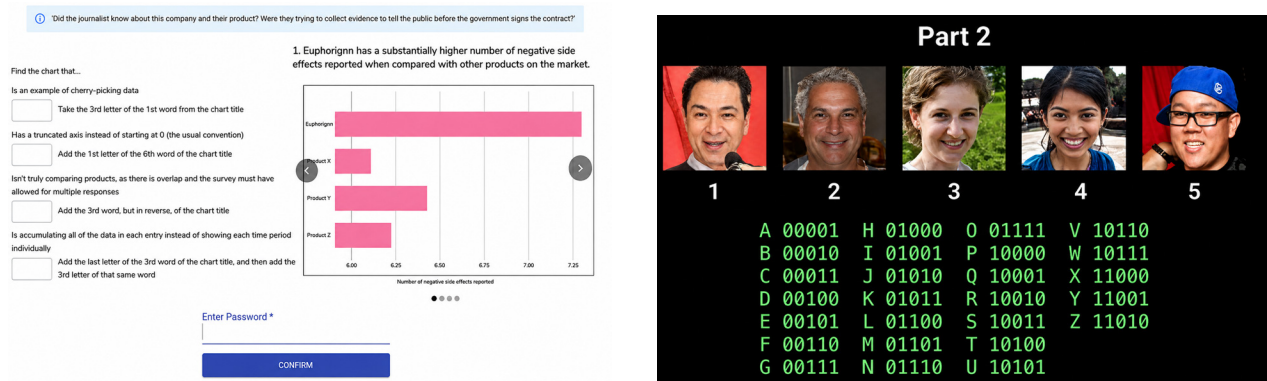


Figure 1: Screenshots of game puzzles: misleading charts and AI-generated images

Correct answers to these puzzles reveal the password to access a video that has been recorded by a prominent scientist who has the definitive evidence about Euphorigen. Players watch the video in which the scientist states that Euphorigen has failed trials and should not be added to the water supply. Players then share the video to get the word out, convinced that they have won the game. But then a message appears indicating that the video was a deepfake, and that in the real video the scientist concludes that the product is a real innovation. This plot twist is the critical learning point as players now realize that they have been fooled and misinterpreting earlier evidence. In the final sequence of the game, players must track how far the deepfake video has spread and share the authentic video to undo the damage.

The game concludes with a 15-minute debrief where the game host (e.g., librarian, teacher) facilitates a group discussion about what transpired in the game, their reactions, and sharing of personal experiences and strategies with misinformation. Game literature suggests that the opportunity to reflect on an experience and the real-life implications is when most learning occurs (Lederman 1992; Schwägele et al. 2021). For instance, in the game players do not have the option to not share the deepfake video, prompting discussion during the debrief of how much agency one has on social media when the platforms incentive sharing, liking, and other forms of engagement.

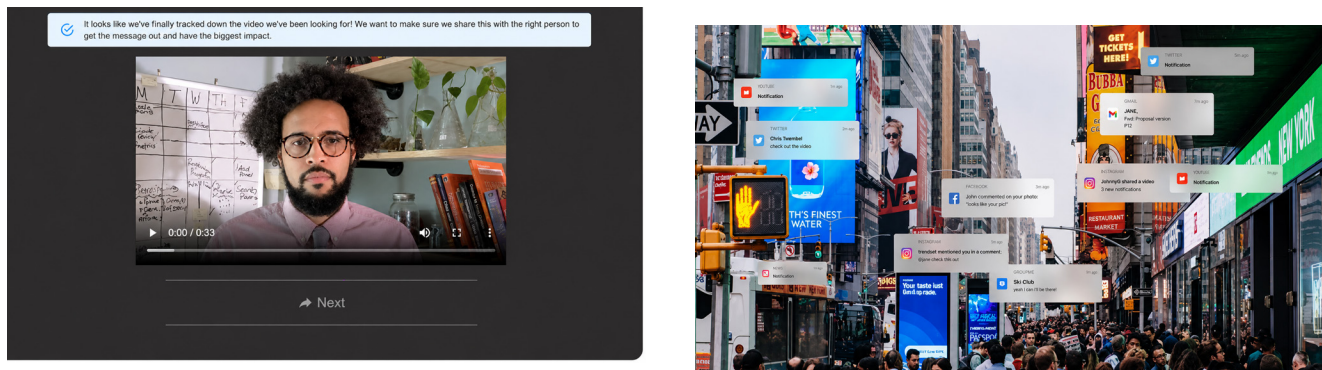


Figure 2: Screenshots of deepfake video, and video going viral when shared with the public.

6. UNDERSTANDING *THE EUPHORIGEN INVESTIGATION* THROUGH A TRANSFORMATIVE PLAY LENS

Following interpretive traditions in qualitative inquiry (Walsham 1995), we next employ a theory-driven interpretive analysis, applying the framework of transformative play (Barab et al. 2010) and transformative learning (Mezirow 2006) to analyze *The Euphorigen Investigation*. This analysis is motivated by and draws on the first author's familiarity with transformative play and transformative learning theory. In applying this lens to the intervention we hope to illuminate the potential of such games for ongoing design efforts around confronting misinformation.

In *The Euphorigen Investigation*, players start with a sense of *uncertainty* and *questioning* of whether the brain-boosting supplement should be added to the water supply. This fictional setting has real world parallels (i.e., utilities routinely add fluoride or cleaning agents to the water), thereby creating a relatable and *meaningful context*. Throughout the game, players encounter *complex, context-specific tasks and problems* in the form of puzzles that simulate misinformation tactics.

Players play an *active role* by applying *disciplinary concepts and methods* to decipher these tactics, and the collaborative format of the game allows players to recognize how *others face similar difficulties* since everyone experiences the game's climax when they inadvertently share the deepfake video. The most significant *transformation in their self-perception* occurs through the realization that they are vulnerable to believing misinformation. This is a critical learning point since the third person effect posits that people tend to believe that others are more susceptible to media messages than themselves.

Transformative play theory places heavy emphasis on the learning environment as *situated and context-dependent*. Since releasing *The Euphorigen Investigation*, we have engaged in several co-design projects to develop escape room games for particular communities (e.g., popular music fandom, breast cancer patients) and cultural settings (e.g. Czechia, Turkey, Ghana). In one experimental study employing narrative transportation and identification theory that compared two of our escape rooms, we found that context significantly affected the game experience (Devasia et al. 2025).

Transformative play and learning theory is also evident in the debrief component of the escape room. The debrief allows for self-reflection and opportunities to engage in collective sensemaking through sharing of IRL experiences and perspectives.

This interpretive analysis has aimed to demonstrate how misinformation resilience can be advanced through the intersection of transformative play, transformative learning, and contextually grounded design. While much existing research on media literacy emphasizes individual cognitive

skills, this study extends the conversation by showing how narrative-driven, collaborative games create embodied experiences of vulnerability and recognition, thereby addressing psychological tendencies such as third-person effect and fostering deeper critical awareness. Moreover, by incorporating co-design with specific communities, the project advances understanding of how cultural context shapes both engagement and efficacy, contributing not only to educational game design scholarship but also to broader debates on how to build media literacies that are situated, participatory, and socially meaningful. In doing so, it positions escape rooms as more than instructional novelties as they become testbeds for theorizing how people learn to navigate, resist, and reimagine the infrastructures of misinformation.

7. CONCLUSION

To feel duped, to realize that you have been misled despite your best intentions, is a jarring but necessary emotional reckoning in today's disinformation-saturated world. It is precisely this visceral experience that transformative play, through carefully crafted escape rooms, seeks to elicit and leverage as a catalyst for critical reflection and epistemic growth. Interventions like *The Euphorigen Investigation* illustrate how an educational game can move beyond checklist-style fact-checking strategies by creating environments where players encounter their own vulnerabilities, collaborate amid uncertainty, and begin to develop a greater sense of agency. Rather than treating misinformation as a problem of individual ignorance, this game recasts it as a collective, structural challenge—one that must be met with curiosity, humility, and an unflinching willingness to question one's assumptions. In the battle for democratic integrity, cultivating resilient thinkers who can hold space for complexity may be our most potent defense.

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