

Leaked State Department Memo Reveals US Gov't Funding 'Disinformation' Video Game 'Cat Park'

Report Highlights – Highlighting UK Partnership, Counter-Brexit Themes

- America First Legal recently obtained a leaked memorandum from the US State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC), detailing the GEC's production of a "counter-disinformation" video game called *Cat Park*.
- The game is intended to work [like a "vaccination"](#) in young people [to "inoculate"](#) them against ["sensational headlines, memes"](#) and so-called ["fake news"](#) online.
- Per the GEC memo, *Cat Park* is based on [psychological behavior modification research](#) from the University of Cambridge's [Social Decision-Making Lab](#).
 - [The GEC memo reads](#): "Cat Park is based on "inoculation theory" research pioneered by the University of Cambridge's Social Decision-Making Lab. Much as vaccinations work by exposing subjects to an innocuous strain of a virus in order to trigger an immune response, empirical studies indicate that the controlled experience of responding to disinformation through a game can build cognitive resistance to disinformation in the real world. This concept is also known as 'pre-bunking.'"
 - [According to the GEC memo](#), the Social-Decision Making Lab found that after playing *Cat Park*, "players are 19 percentage points more likely than a control group to spot disinformation and 15 percentage points less likely to want to share disinformation after playing."
 - The final frame at the end of *Cat Park* links to the ["Inoculation.Science"](#) website, [maintained by two UK universities](#): University of Cambridge and University of Bristol.
 - To appreciate the extreme bias and political bent of Cambridge's Social Decision-Making Lab, recent "disinformation research" from them [includes](#):
 - Climate change: [Climate of conspiracy: Meta-analysis of the consequences of belief in conspiracy theories about climate change; Responding To Climate Change Denial](#)
 - Targeting US conservatives: [Meta-analysis reveals that accuracy nudges have little to no effect for US conservatives](#);
 - Covid: [Prebunking messaging to inoculate against COVID-19 vaccine misinformation: An effective strategy for public health](#);
 - Election issues: [Democratic Norms, Social Projection, and False Consensus in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election](#)

- Cambridge University Social Decision-Making Lab and University of Bristol “disinfo” researchers have explicitly targeted Brexit supporters and the Brexit movement for the past 5 years:
 - [Joint studies by Cambridge and Bristol](#) (the exact two universities who run the [Inoculation.Science](#) page linked to in *Cat Park*) described their work to “vaccinate against fake news” as specifically targeting “Brexit” because it is “populism on steroids”
 - [June 2017 presentation](#) by Dr. Sander van der Linden specifically targeting Brexit
 - [Public commentary](#) by both Cambridge and Bristol U disinfo researchers specifically targeting Brexit
- GEC is working directly with the British government for roll-out of these “counter-disinformation” video games (*Cat Park* and its predecessor, *Harmony Square*) and adopting the games in schools.
 - [GEC memo](#): “GEC has collaborated with the UK Cabinet Office to develop supplemental media literacy lesson plans and promotional materials. A media literacy lesson plan for *Harmony Square* is downloadable from the game’s website in English, Latvian, Russian and Ukrainian.”
- Harvard University’s *Misinformation Review* notes that *Cat Park*’s predecessor, *Harmony Square* (also GEC-produced), is [specifically intended to inoculate](#) against “election misinformation” and “political misinformation.” The GEC’s psychological impact therefore is intended to translate into direct political impact.

GEC Roll-Out

- [Per the GEC memo](#), the US government officially launched *Cat Park* on social media three week ago, on October 24, 2022. Embassies were instructed to “Consider asking your Ambassador or other well-known official to play the game online with a locally popular influencer, academic, journalist or government official.”
- US Embassies were also [encouraged](#) to “[draw] on exchange program alumni, youth networks, members of the Digital Communication Network, or other influencers” to “carry the message and promote the game.”
- Launch plans also [included](#) “Possible events [that] could include discussions with journalists, academics, educators, game developers, gamers, and cat people about the game, local challenges around disinformation, and how to promote media literacy.”
- [The GEC stresses](#) *Cat Park*’s inclusion into the curricula of schools “for middle and high-school or university-age players.” Specifically, [the GEC notes](#) *Cat Park* “could be readily included in media literacy, history, civics, political science, or international relations

curricula.” The GEC further notes to “consider approaching ministries of education or other authorities about adoption of the games into lesson plans.”

The *Cat Park* Game Itself

- Aimed at young people aged [15 years and up](#), *Cat Park* purports to be a “noir adventure” where a player takes on “the role of a disinformation agent recruited into a shadowy social media pressure campaign.”
- In the game’s plot, the player assumes the role of a social media user who makes memes and news headlines to energize local citizens to stop the construction of a local park for cats (hence, *Cat Park*). Then, the player, realizing they have been *spreading disinformation*, must repent for their memes that resulted in the park getting canceled.
- This government-funded game establishes a moral framework in which complaining about wasteful spending by government elites – spending which comes at the expense of “improving city roads,” “objections of locals” and “our kids” — is framed as *spreading disinformation*.
 - [Cat Park - Generate Headlines About Elitist Pets \(rumble.com\)](#)
 - [Cat Park - Generate Headlines About Burning Money \(rumble.com\)](#)
 - [Sample screenshot 1](#)
 - [Sample screenshot 2](#)
 - [Sample screenshot 3](#)
- *Cat Park* therefore gets young people to subliminally perceive that social media posts opposing government corruption are primarily done by *disinformation purveyors*.

Quotes

- Quotes from Foundation for Freedom Online Executive Director Mike Benz:
 - “*Cat Park* is not about stopping disinformation. Rather, it is about stopping a psychological affinity in young people to social media posts associated with populism or with movements challenging government waste, fraud and abuse.”
 - “The success of *Cat Park* appears to be measured by whether young people are ‘vaccinated’ against populism after playing the game — not by whether they are ‘vaccinated’ against so-called ‘fake news.’”
 - “*Cat Park* is not pro-America. It’s simply anti-populist. This appears to be the State Department picking winners and losers in the marketplace of political beliefs, not protecting Americans from foreign disinformation.”

- “It’s disturbing enough to see taxpayer dollars expended on psychological ‘behavior modification’ video games produced by the government. But when the government then targets belief systems skeptical of the government, the State Department is replicating the world presaged by Orwell.”