



## **Information Integrity Online**

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# Introduction

## **Given Scenario**

*It is election season in Georgia, and you are working for the state government's office and are in charge of mitigating disinformation and false rumors regarding the election. The disinformation is spreading fast, and the people of Georgia are having a hard time trying to distinguish between what is false and what is true. What do you do?*

## **Background**

Since the 2016 US presidential election, the use of digital tools by malicious agents to provoke political uncertainty has

become a major issue in election integrity. While much of the tampering in the 2016 election was undertaken by foreign assets using anonymous robocalls, text messages, and social media bots, the 2020 election introduced issues of domestic election interference. Social media conspiracy campaigns, promoted in mainstream news sources by major figureheads (former President Donald Trump among them), have made it more difficult for voters to distinguish fact from fiction.

Following the contentious 2018 gubernatorial election

in Georgia and the national upset of 'blue' Georgia in the 2020 presidential election, instilling media literacy in Georgia voters has never been more important.

## **Requirements**

Constraints given to us by our advisor stated that our artifact must:

1. Be digital, and
2. Not further perpetuate disinformation or false rumors in the process.

# Ideation

*initial thoughts*

We cast a wide net in our initial approach to addressing online information integrity, by asking  
*“How can we combat the effects of disinformation on voting?”*

After brainstorming, we came up with three potential ‘umbrella’ approaches.

## **Interactive Physical Installations**

Physical installations can reach a wide and varied audience, and, unlike digitally-native tools, has the advantage of existing outside of the echo chambers users build for themselves online. The physicality of these installations taps into the natural curiosity of potential users, and can be placed in various venues, from grocery stores to bus stops.

## **Social Media**

Early proposed social media approaches included that of a Public Service Campaign encouraging media literacy, and a TwitterBot. Our research indicated that prebunking, or pre-emptive debunking of fake news, is more effective than debunking false information that has already spread. A TwitterBot could potentially fact check users in real time.

## **Mobile Games**

While we were unsure as to how we could tie this into misinformation, we knew that mobile games are popular and highly accessible. A gambling game, in particular, had the potential to appeal to the older side of our demographic.

# Ideation

*narrowing the scope:  
identifying a demographic*

No online space is inherently safe from disingenuous information.

While further developing our idea, we began to question which demographic we would

1. have the most success in targeting  
*and*
2. have the greatest social impact as a result of our targeting.

Addressing digitally native conspiracies came to mind first: the QAnon conspiracy, incubated in the online bulletin board 4Chan, gained enough social traction as to be partially responsible for the Capitol insurrection on January 6th, 2021. However, reaching out to conspiracy theorists is not just a matter of correcting informational misconceptions, but also initiating deradicalization—a process outside of our problem space.

In this vein, we realized that targeting independent voters

had the most potential for wide scale social impact without entering into the domain of deprogramming. In the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial race, Republican candidate Brian Kemp won by only 1.39% (Almukhtar et al., 2018). Likewise, the 2020 presidential election had Democratic nominee Joe Biden prevail in the state by 0.23%, or a mere 11,779 votes (Kim, 2020). In such close races, addressing online misinformation has the potential to sway elections.

# Ideation

*narrowing the scope:  
independent voters*

## Independent Voters: Who are they?

*% of each group who are (figures read down)*

	Republican	Democrat	Independent
Male	51	40	56
Female	49	60	44
	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
White	83	51	61
Black	2	22	9
Hispanic	7	18	18
Other	5	8	10
Ages			
18-29	14	19	25
30-49	30	31	37
50-64	29	27	23
65+	25	21	14
HS or less	41	35	38
Some coll	34	30	31
Coll grad	20	24	23
Postgrad	5	11	8

(Pew Research Center, 2019)

According to a Pew Research study published in 2019, Independent voters are most likely to be white or hispanic men between the ages of 18 and 49.

## Where can we find them?

Sports bars, dog parks, music festivals, and the gym were all locations we imagined our target demographic might congregate. We also posted the question "Where do you hang out when you're outside the house?" on the social discussion site Reddit, in the r/AskMen subreddit. We received 14 responses: nearly all responses which included a public forum (i.e, not one's own home or the home of a friend) mentioned bars.

*"Bars for bingo and trivia night. Cocktail bars. Buffalo Wild Wings for sports."*

*"The pub. A mates [sic]. The beach."*

*"Other people[']s houses. The bar. Arena."*

*"My go-to bar..."*

Some responses were not so helpful.

*"Obligatory your moms house."*

# Ideation

*narrowing the scope:  
new approaches*

## A Hybrid Approach

Given our newly-selected target demographic, we decided to move forward with a hybrid of two of our original approaches: a video game which also doubles as a physical installation, in the vein of vintage arcade cabinets. Placing a physical game in a social setting, like a bar, has not only the advantage of reaching people outside of their online echo chambers, but the potential to create dialog about the game even amongst onlooking strangers.

## Setting the Bar

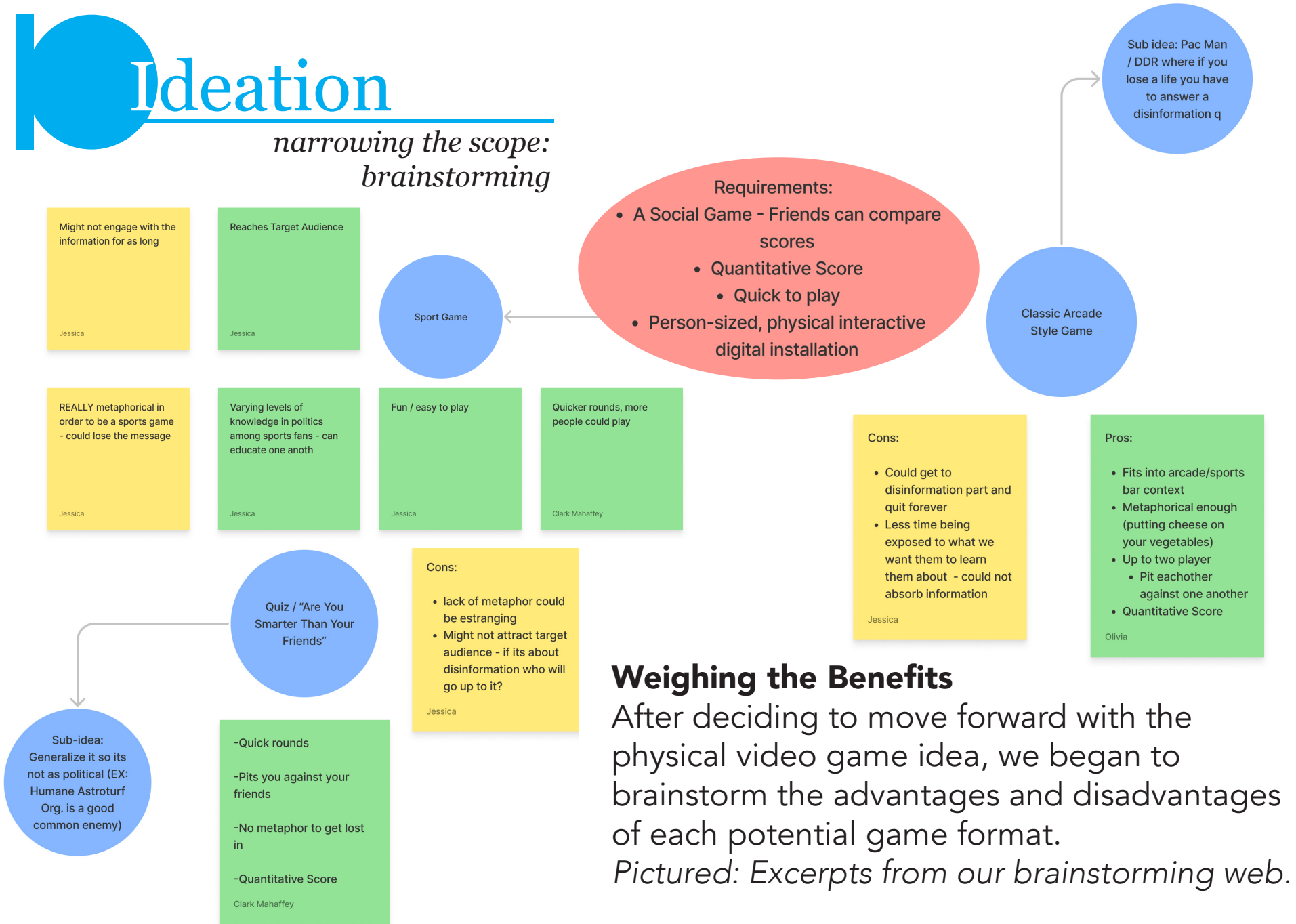


*Pictured: The crowd at Punchbowl Social  
(McKibben, 2018)*

We crafted our game to be played in a place like **Punchbowl Social**, a bar in The Battery development in Cobb County. Home to Truist Stadium (and consequently, the Atlanta Braves), The Battery is a major draw for sports fans from all over the state—not just metro-Atlantans. Additionally, fans of baseball are more likely to be independent voters than fans of other springtime sports (Gough, 2021).

# Ideation

*narrowing the scope:  
brainstorming*



## Weighing the Benefits

After deciding to move forward with the physical video game idea, we began to brainstorm the advantages and disadvantages of each potential game format.

*Pictured: Excerpts from our brainstorming web.*





# Surfin' the Web

*conception*

## **From Our Brainstorming Web, An Idea Took Shape**

Surfin' the Web was conceived as an arcade game to be played on a large screen in front of an audience, ideally in a bar. Players stand on a balance sensitive board to control motion, and use a wireless, handheld controller to make 'swiping' gestures at the screen. The player would be carried forward through the space of the game at a constant speed, similar to the mobile game Temple Run. In the initial design of the game, players were shown a type of misinformation and two tweets; they were then asked to identify which tweet belonged to the given category.

Tweets selected for the game fell into one of the seven categories of misinformation and disinformation as identified in *Disinformation and 'fake news'*, a report by the UK House of Commons (Wardle, 2017).

## **Types of Mis- and Disinformation**

### **Fabricated Content**

Content which is completely false.

### **Manipulated Content**

Content which features distorted information.

### **Imposter Content**

Content which comes from someone impersonating another, usually trustworthy, source.

### **Misleading Content**

Content framed in such a way as to be potentially deceitful.

### **False Context**

Genuine content shared with false context.

### **False Connection**

Content provided is genuine, but the headlines, captions, and other body elements do not accurately represent the content.

### **Satire and Parody**

Social commentary presented without malice, but which still has the potential to be misleading.

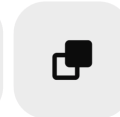
# Surfin' the Web

*curating an aesthetic*

SURFIN DA WEB ...



More ideas



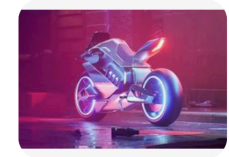
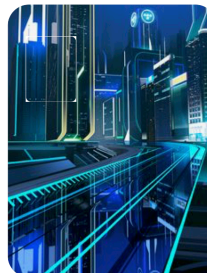
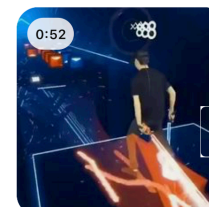
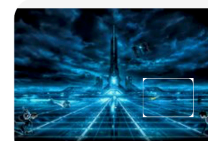
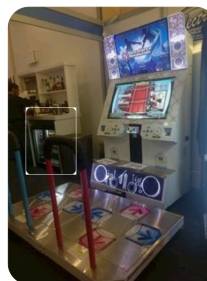
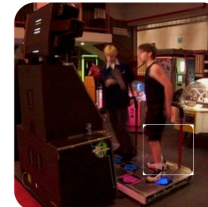
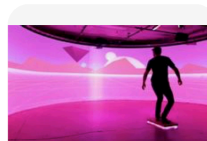
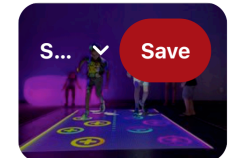
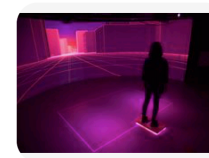
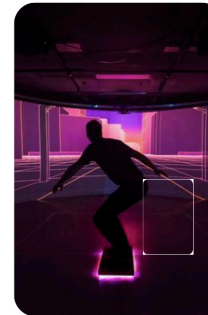
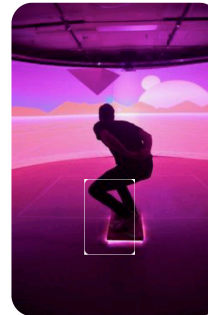
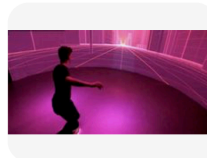
Organize



To-dos

A group Pinterest board allowed us to create a collection of images which we felt embodied the desired mood of our project. Curating this board allowed us to develop a unified aesthetic—we leaned heavily into the neon neo-classical arcade look of the ‘vaporwave’ movement.

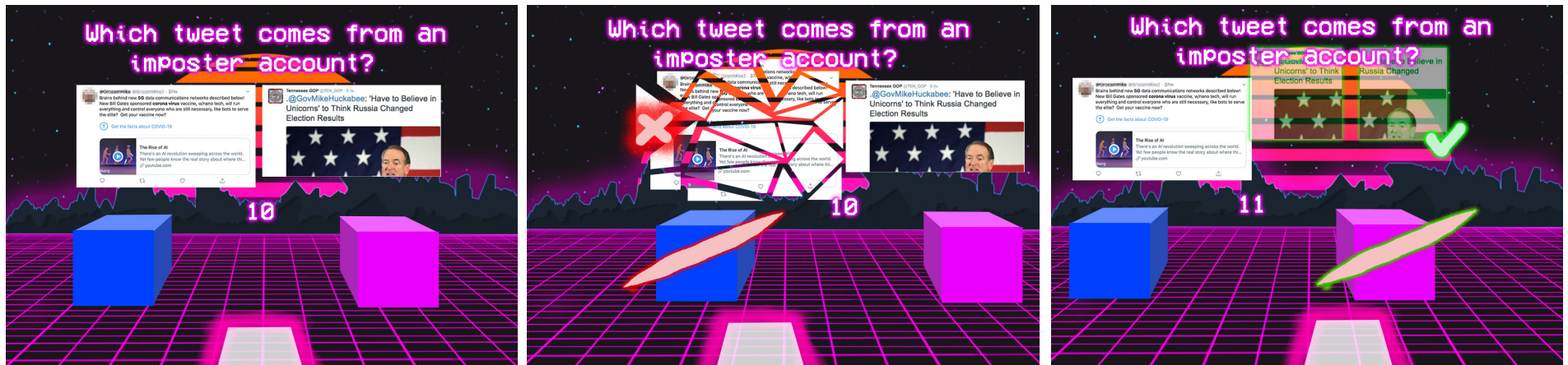
16 Pins



# Surfin' the Web

early designs

Our earliest design mockups used screenshots of tweets and pre-existing assets to visualize the game.



# Surfin' the Web

*user testing & feedback:  
prototype implementation*



## **Constructing the Prototype**

In order to prototype the game, we created all original assets in the Adobe Suite, and created mini-videos which were then put on a digital decision tree using the Adventr platform. Adventr—which bills itself as an ‘interactive storytelling’ medium—allows the user to create non-linear video narratives.

The ‘Wizard of Oz’ technique, in which the researchers manipulate an otherwise non-functioning prototype to make it appear as though it functions, was essential to our testing. Players were asked to step onto a Wii Balance Board, hold a Wii controller, and mimic the appropriate actions as the Adventr played on a projector screen. As players swiped and swerved, we selected the respective video to play on screen. Pain points were noted during testing and feedback taken afterwards.



# Surfin' the Web

*user testing & feedback:  
adjusting mechanics*

## **User Confusion**

In user testing, players expressed confusion about the 'swipe' or 'swerve' functionality. An appropriate learning curve is necessary in ensuring a game is replayable: keeping this in mind, we chose to rename the mechanic 'swipe or surf' rather than scrapping it altogether.

## **Accessibility**

In order to provide more options for play and to make the game more accessible, we decided to add a 'handheld' option, in which the game is played using only the remote control.

Additionally, the amount of text on screen, combined with the speed of the game, had the potential to stratify user performance based on reading speed. As a result, we pared the decision making down to one tweet: the player must decide whether the given tweet is an example of the given piece of disinformation (swiping indicates 'yes,' while surfing indicates 'no').

# Surfin' the Web

*visual evolution*

## Formatting Tweets

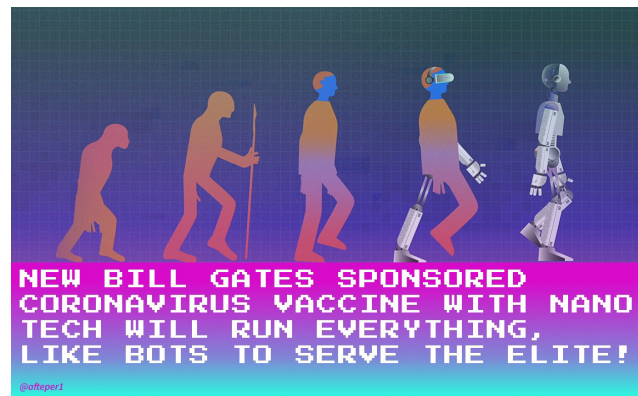
All tweets used in the game are real; however, we reformatted them from their original Twitter appearance into a format more visually cohesive with our game.

Early feedback revealed difficulty with reading the text, and called for increased contrast between the text and background.

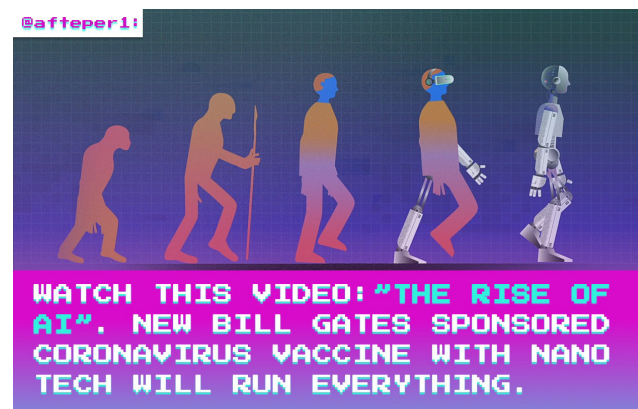
Additionally, while we set out to make a game with educational value, we did not want it to merely be an 'educational game' with no replay value. As such, non-political tweets were also added to the game in order to lighten the mood.



Version 1



Version 2



Version 3

# Surfin' the Web

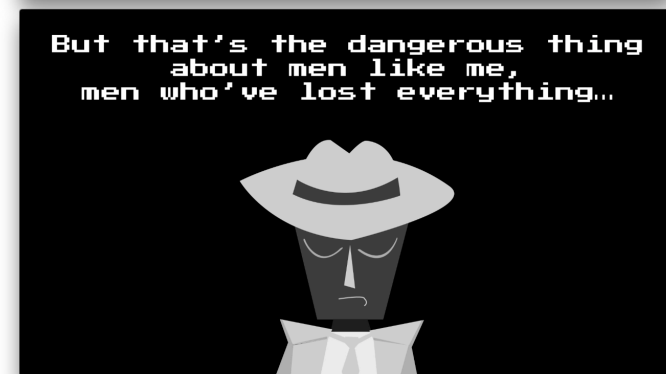
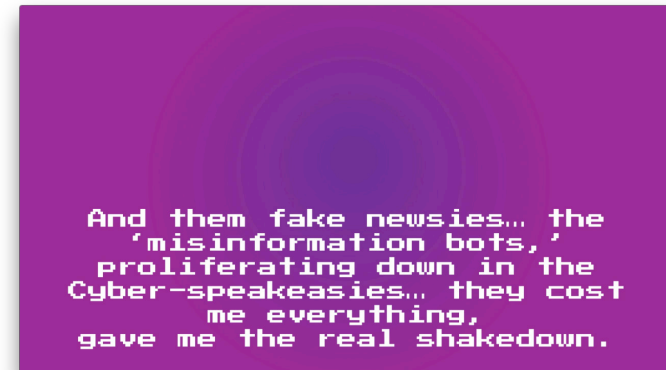
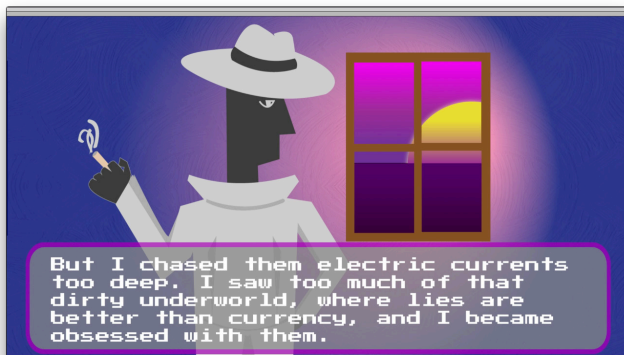
*exposition:  
aesthetics & masculinity*

## Addressing Motivation

In our initial prototype, users expressed confusion as to the background and goal of the game—why was the protagonist destroying misinformation?

To address this, we created an introduction video. The protagonist is a hard boiled film noir detective à la Humphrey Bogart, whose obsession with destroying misinformation has cost him his financial and emotional security.

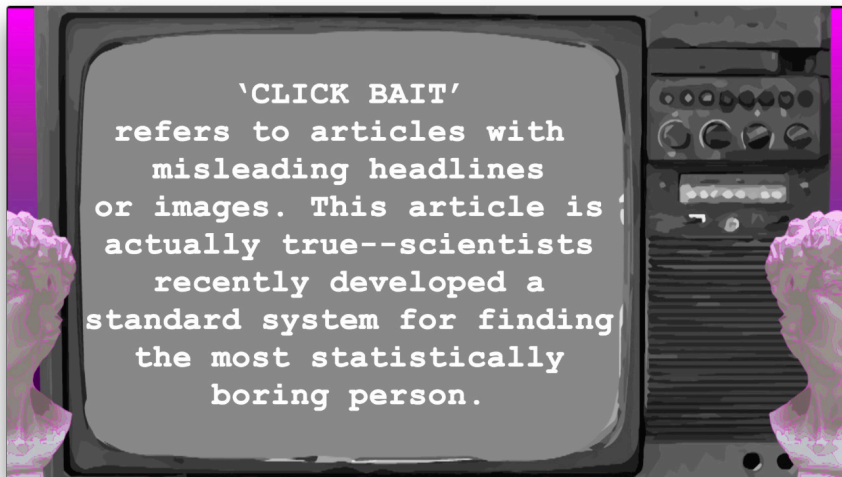
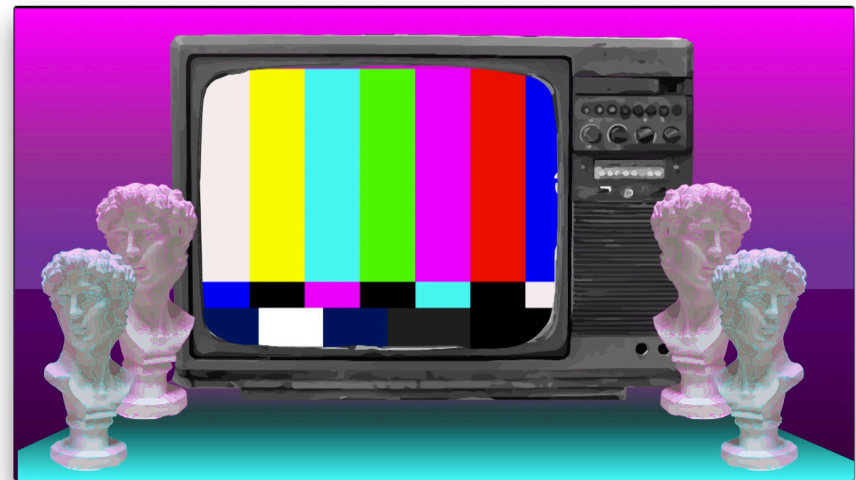
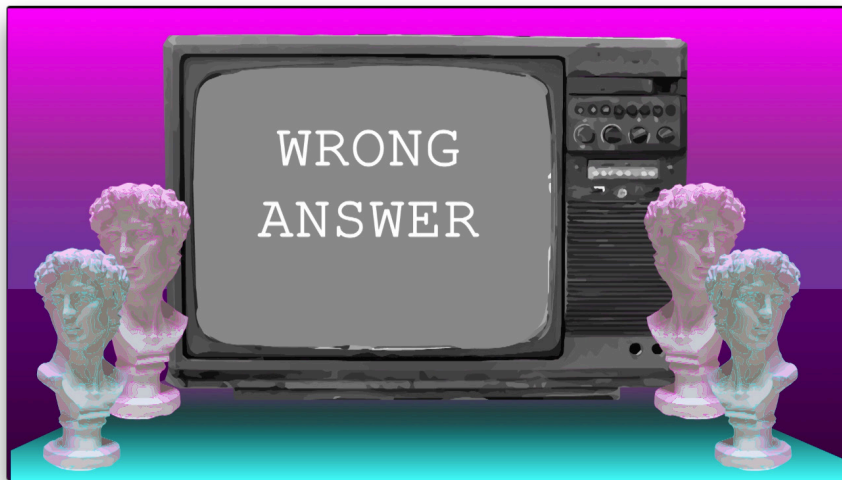
The aesthetic of the introduction remained cohesive with the vaporwave aesthetic established in the game itself. However, in compiling artistic references for the introduction, we noticed that we had unconsciously chosen artistic inspirations which leaned heavily into retro-nostalgia and idealized masculinity. Film noir and the neoclassical elements of Vaporwave both appeal to the idea of there being a time 'when men could be men.'





# Surfin' the Web

*incorrect answers*

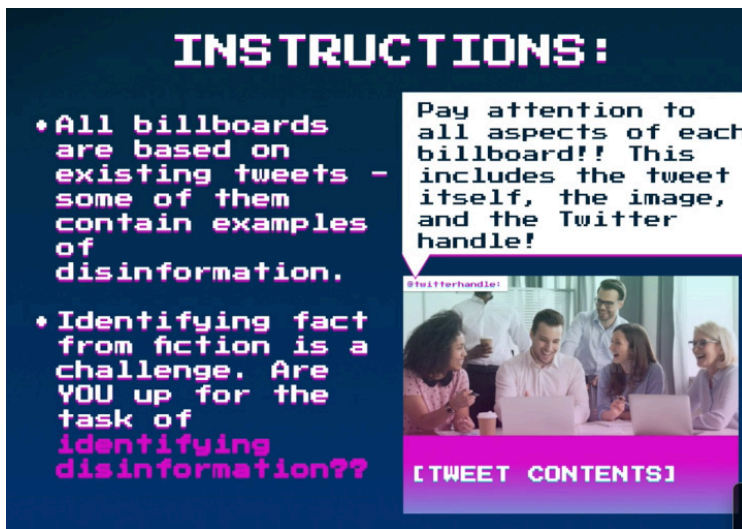
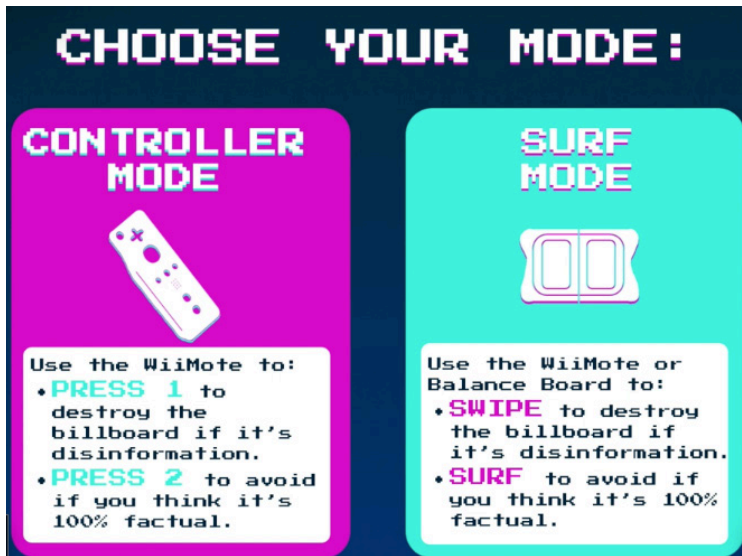


## Back on Track

After initial feedback, we also created a 'Wrong Answer' animation with an explanation for when the player answered a question incorrectly. The animation simulates the player veering off the surfing track, in order to be redirected to the correct answer.

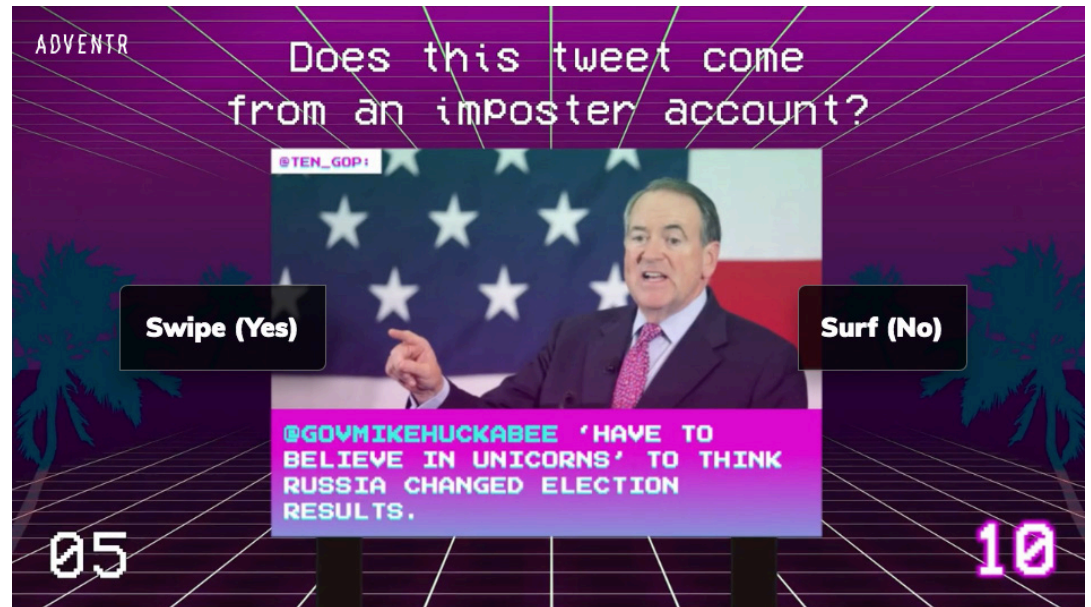
# Surfin' the Web

*final design*



## Gameplay

All user feedback converged in our final design, excerpts of which are pictured here.



# Surfin' the Web

*final thoughts & works cited*

## Reflections

- The design process was incredibly non-linear: while we were given the initial problem space of educating Georgia voters on misinformation, we had to chip away at the issue from different angles in order to define our demographic and final approach.
- Good team dynamics require freedom of thought and personal detachment from all ideas put on the table. The final product was the result of concerted teamwork from every team member bringing their own perspectives and helping to mold the idea.
- Address the heart of the issue, not the symptom—Surfin' the Web encourages media literacy and critical thinking when it comes to news, and is a form of prebunking rather than debunking.

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