

21st Century Fake News

4-8 players, 4 hours,
by Malcolm Campbell and Mo Holkar.

A re-skin of [Fake News](#) by Mo Holkar
(see Acknowledgements)

GM Script

This document is the integrated GM script, intended for use by the person facilitating the game.

The Premise (5 mins)

Explain the following to the players.

Much to the surprise of The Party and The Opposition, a new President with no political experience has been elected. They're a celebrity who campaigned on populist ideas - nominally as a member of The Party, although The President's policies aren't always well aligned, or even consistent. But through The President, The Party is in power, and they'd like to stay that way.

The setting is an exploration of contemporary populist politics - it will draw on news stories both from North America and Europe, blending them into one fictional narrative.

The characters are The President's spin team, working hard to make the government acceptable to the people by putting a favourable take on a succession of news stories.

During the course of the game, the players will work down a stack of cards containing news events which they must come up with a way as spinning as fake news, or into a positive narrative for The President. Different characters will have stronger loyalties to The

President, The Party, or The People - and different influences over the media. Their powers of invention will be more and more called upon, and their cognitive dissonance ever stronger. An overall storyline will develop and build to a climax.

Themes

The game includes themes of politics, military conflict, immigration and refugees. If these themes are upsetting for you, this might not be the game for you.

There are no sexual assault themes in this game and players will be asked not to introduce them, even off-screen.

Safety Mechanics (5 mins)

*Go through the safety mechanics even if players are familiar. **There are elements specific to this game (marked in red) that you should cover even if the players know these tools well.***

Lines and Veils, Cut, Brake, Open Door

When we play games that are largely improvised, there is a risk that material will be introduced that another player finds distressing. We want our games to be 'safe spaces' where we care about each others emotional wellbeing. So we use techniques to flag certain topics "off limits" from the start, and other techniques to allow us to redirect roleplay during the game.

Lines and **Veils** are two safety techniques used before the game starts. **If Lines and Veils were sent in advance, the game deck will have been edited to take account of them.**

A **Line** is a topic that you personally don't want to be included in the larp at all: you don't have to explain or defend why. So if you don't want to deal with stories about drug abuse in any way at all: you can declare it as a "line" and it will not appear in the story. You do not have to explain why.

A **Veil** is a topic that it's OK to have included in the larp, but you'd like it not to be discussed or played in any detail - it should happen off-screen, or only by reference. This can be for any reason and you don't have to explain why.

We ask that players send us Lines and Veils before the game if at all possible, so we can edit the list of cards used in this game if needed. It's OK to bring them up now at game start as well, though – in case there are topics you want other players to avoid.

We'll read out the list of Lines and Veils without identifying who submitted them and put them on display for the players to refer to during play

Cut and **Brake** are two safety techniques for use during play.

Saying "**Cut**" creates stops play immediately. Other players should repeat "**Cut**" until everyone has heard, and we will pause the game timer while players work together to resolve the situation. For example, in this game, if a news card is unexpectedly upsetting, we can stop the timer, remove that card from play, or improvise an alternative.

Saying "**Brake**" signals to other players that they should ease off the direction in which they're taking the story, and tone things down. It's more of a nudge, and we don't pause the game.

With both Cut and Brake you don't have to explain why you've called it. (Although you can if you want to.)

The Door is Open. This means that any of you can take a break, or leave the larp at any point. If it's getting too much for you, or you aren't enjoying it, for any reason – you can step out, without any blame or criticism or needing to explain yourself. And then you can come back and rejoin later, or not, as you prefer – either way is fine. Basically there's no pressure on you at all to stay in the larp if you don't really want to.

The President Fired Me - It's not necessary to do this to use the Open Door, but if you want to use an in-game method to step out of the game, you can just say "The President fired me". The President fires a lot of people. If you want to return to the game you can come back and just say "The President changed their mind". The President changes their mind a lot.

Describing The President (10 minutes)

Put the "Describing The President" sheet on the table.

Describing The President

Much to the surprise of The Party and The Opposition, a new President with no political experience has been elected. They're a celebrity who campaigned on populist ideas - nominally as a member of The Party, although The President's policies aren't always well aligned, or even consistent. But through The President, The Party is in power, and they'd like to stay that way.

As a populist, The President:

- claims to speak for the "will of the people"
- tends to frame politics in terms of what they oppose (usually elites)
- has been generally against a free press and in favour of executive power since elected.

Each player should in turn verbally answer one of the rows of the 'Describing The President' table, and have their answer agreed by the others (revise it if they don't agree), then write it down in the empty box by the question. Don't fix the answers of questions yet to come while you do this - e.g. The President's name is decided last.

What manner of celebrity was The President before they started a political campaign?	
What is known of The President's upbringing before they were a celebrity?	
Populist policies are often "against" something, without really stating what the alternative is. What's the first thing The President is against?	
What's the second thing The President is against?	
What's the third thing The President is against?	
What was The President's campaign slogan?	
What is The President genuinely good at?	
Is The President's gender and sexuality relevant to this game? If so, what are they?	
What is The President's name?	

If you draw on aspects of The President you've defined when creating news stories, they will have more effect.

We'll start by defining what sort of President we all work for.

Each player should in turn verbally answer one of the rows of the 'Describing The President' table, and have their answer agreed by the others (revise it if they don't agree); then write it down in the empty box by the question. Don't fix the answers of questions yet to come while you do this - e.g. The President's name is decided last. Once everyone has answered one question, collectively answer the rest.

If you draw on aspects of The President you've defined when creating news stories, they will have more effect.

Choose a character (10 minutes)

Spread out the character cards on the table and invite the players to choose the one that they think they would most enjoy. On the back of each character card are some questions for players to consider, but they don't need to share these answers or even decide now. (Optional: Players can use the "Suggested Red Lines" list to help them think of relevant red lines for the last question on the back)

When everyone's chosen, each player introduces themselves to the others, with name and a sentence or two of description - don't include the "not sure" text or any secrets, and try to tell the others how they would see you, not entirely what's true.

Once everyone has decided on characters, we'll seed some initial links between the characters. Each will draw a card from the Relationships deck, which contains the following cards:

+	+	-	-
~	~	Choose + or -	Choose + or -
Join			

For a four player game, use only the + and - cards

For a five player game, use the +, -, and Join cards

For a six player game, use the +, - and ~ cards

For a seven player game, use the +, -, ~ and Join cards

For an eight player game, use the +, -, ~ and Choose cards

The players who draw identical cards will get together for a few moments and determine how your characters knew each other already, and what they think about each other. If the symbol is + the relationship should be positive, if the symbol is - the relationship should be negative, and if the symbol is ~ the relationship should be “up and down”, with both positive and negative aspects. If the card says choose + or -, you can decide between you whether the relationship is positive or negative.

If there are an odd number of players, one player will get a Join card, this means they should choose a pair of other characters to join for the discussion, and somehow will be part of that relationship.

For six or more players, repeat this process so everyone is involved in two connections. Let people who aren't happy with their second

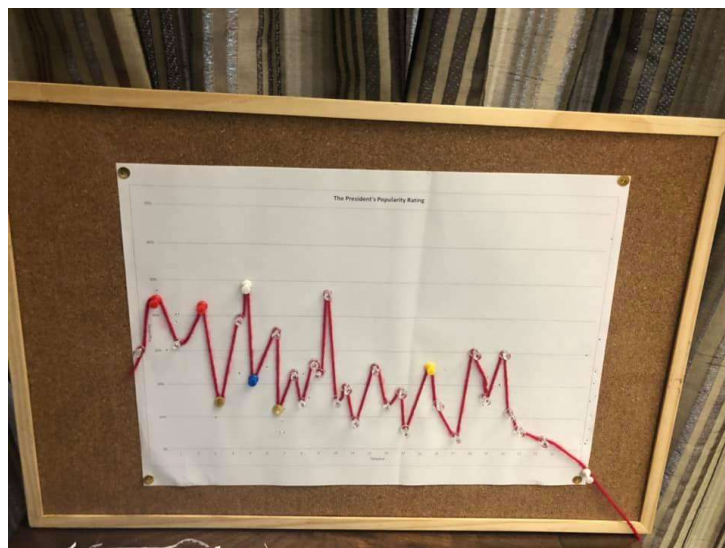
choice (e.g. they got the same person, or they have two negative relationships, or two Joins), swap with someone else to get a relationship that works for them.

News cycle setup and explanation (5 mins)

- *The popularity chart should be on the wall. It can be updated with a pen, or with string and pins on a pinboard.*
- *The GM should have the stack of news cards handy, in numerical order. Stories 101, 102, and 103 should not be in the deck - they are only introduced along with the advanced boosters.*

Popularity

Explain the following to the players, indicating the popularity chart.



Popularity Chart at the end of the game

We did this one with pins and wool, but you can use a pen

A chart on the wall will show The President's popularity rating. It starts at 30%. No-one is quite sure how such an unpopular

President could have been elected. Good stories about The President will increase the rating, while bad ones will decrease the rating. The President will be angrier the more the rating is below 50%. It will always be below 50%.

This is entirely arbitrary and is decided by the GM in response to what the players do, and the progress of the story. It's there for players to react to - and the story of the game is about the press team.

The President is not played, but players are free to improvise their end of phone calls from The President where he's unhappy with them. The President will always be unhappy with them.

Timeline

Explain the following to the players.

The game is set in The President's press room, where his Press and PR team gather to discuss and react to news stories of the day and introduce their spin to the media to try and manage The President's popularity.

Time is mostly chaotic by design. Time on the popularity chart progresses as the GM processes news stories and spin items. From a player perspective, time should feel a bit like binge-watching a political TV series that makes no explicit reference to how much time is passing. There are a series of conversations, scenes and reactions that blur into each other.

Just be aware that the popularity chart will move forward and be updated even if you don't respond to new stories.

News Stories

Show the players Story 0 as an example. Explain the following to the players.

A series of cards will be introduced at roughly 5 minute intervals. These cards contain negative stories about the Country and The President either in newspapers, on TV or on social media. In

response to each card, the players can collectively write a social media, newspaper, or TV piece to try and “spin” the story to be good for The President. A few sentences are enough. Then give the “spin” to the GM, who will update The President’s popularity. Expect The President’s popularity to decline later in the game, no matter what you do. They’re really not a good President.

You may give your spin to the GM written as social media posts, press releases, or news stories. Or you can briefly roleplay press briefings and private chats with journalists with the GM as you wish. The GM will assess the impact.

A few sentences are enough for each piece - just give the flavour of your message.

You can split into teams to work on more than one reaction at once, or leave some events with no response. It’s entirely up to you. With a lot of players you won’t be able to all work on the same story.

Boosters

Place three of each basic booster card (Targeted Campaign, Leak, A Friend of the Show) on the table. The GM should hold back the advanced boosters (Bot-Nets, Catch and Kill, Buying the Network).

Explain the following to the players.

The booster cards on the table can be given to the GM along with a news item you’ve written, to make it more effective. A character with the appropriate media specialisation must have been involved in writing the story and must hand the card to the GM along with the spin they have written. For example, a character who specialises in social media will be able to boost the effectiveness of a story they release through social media. There are three boosters per media

specialisation - a fourth, advanced, booster becomes available once you've used one of the basic ones.

Preparing for End Game

Explain the following to the players.

During play, secretly make notes on whether you think the other members of the press team are working against The President or The Party. This will be important at the end of the game.

The Press Secretary

Explain the following to the players.

The GM for this game will be playing the part of The President's Press Secretary. This is an administrative role that brings you news releases (cards) and updates The President's popularity rating. If you need to discuss any aspect of the game with the GM, your character can have a conversation with the Press Secretary, so that it doesn't break the flow of your game.

The Press Secretary may occasionally tell you how unhappy the President is with you. Sometimes the President may be happy, but it won't last long.

Let the players practice a response to the example news story.

The news cycle (2 hours)

This section is GM instructions, don't read to the players.

Set an interval timer for 5 minutes. Each time it goes off, give another news story to the players from the deck. If you take a Story 101-103 card out, put it and the next story out simultaneously.

You can either let the players turn over news stories themselves when a timer goes off – or you can use the timer to hand them

stories. If you do it yourself you can add stories faster when the game feels slow and back off when it's too frantic.

The popularity chart should generally decline from 30% at the start of the game to 10% by story 22 and 23. There's a faint grey line on the chart to show this trend. When the players spin stories effectively it should go up, but as new stories come out it should go down - with an overall downward trend. Keep the average close to that grey line.

Make the players actions meaningful - yet overall, The President is doomed.

Keep timeflow chaotic. Update popularity as players give you spin on them. Don't worry about them skipping stories or giving you a couple out of order. But keep the timeline moving forward at the same sort of the pace the stories are coming out.

Feel free to take on the role of the Press Secretary and tell the characters how the President is unhappy with them. It's particularly useful to do this when the characters think they are doing well.

Boosters

When players use a Booster on a story it should have much more effect – whether that's a bigger upswing, or a bigger downswing. Possibly not the way players expect, the public are fickle. The first time a Booster of any type is played, give the players the Advanced Booster of that type. Advanced Boosters should have even more significant increases in impact, even if the story isn't so strong. Playing an Advanced Booster adds the related news story to the story cards. For example, if "Catch and Kill" is played, Story 101 is added somewhere between story 11 and story 17 in the deck. If story 17 is already out, it's not added. These stories instruct the players to take the following story at the same time when they come out.

The endgame (5 minutes)

After dealing with the last card (marked FINAL card, which I usually border with red), The President's government falls.

Give each player a voting card to complete – with these, they will determine the fate of their characters after The President's removal. Note that they should vote for what they think will happen, not what they think should happen. They should ignore any characters who weren't used in this run of the game.

Tally the votes together and establish and discuss the majority outcomes for each character. If there are ties, design an intermediary outcome by mutual agreement.

Acknowledgements

21st Century Fake News is a re-skin of "Fake News" by Mo Holkar - made with his permission.

It's been re-skinned to take a dark look at populist politics in the 21st Century, drawing on both fiction and real life as its sources - and to expand the game to 3-4 hours in length.

The +/-/~ cards are based on an idea in "Women on the Verge", another Mo Holkar game (although used slightly differently).

Writeups of Cut, Brake, Lines and Veils are based on too many games to mention.

Thanks to Mo, and to all the playtesters and players of his original game who contributed to that design.

You can find Fake News here:

https://www.holkar.net/larps/fake_news.html

And many other great games by Mo here: <https://www.holkar.net/>