

## Law & Policy Teaching Competition 2014 – Entry #8

### Soviet-Style State Media, Gatekeeping, and the Chilling Effect: Using a video game to explore media ethics and free press issues

**Introduction:** Early in the media law and ethics course I teach, I like to introduce core free speech and free press concepts such as the chilling effect and the marketplace of ideas before setting up the role of the First Amendment in helping to protect these values in the United States. I also note how different things are, and have been, elsewhere around the world.

To help students understand living in a society where the government or other outside political forces control the press, I have them play a free video game called “Republia Times.” The game is set in a 1980’s-era Soviet-style republic, and the player is the editor of the state newspaper. The player’s performance in publishing items favorable to the state to show one’s loyalty while also interesting enough to build audience help ensure the kind treatment of the editor’s spouse and children. Publishing news bad for the state or leading to declining readership results in negative consequences for the family and the player.

The purpose of this assignment is to give students a fun but challenging way to understand the pressures a gatekeeper faces when his or her decisions are shaped by government power and the whims of the audience. Students must tackle concepts such as self-censorship and self-preservation. And a twist at the end of the game makes the futility of official state-run media apparent.

**Rationale:** Millennial students like video games. Millennial students also like selfies. This assignment calls for both, allowing students a fun way to engage in the class while creating discussion points on free press philosophy and media ethics.

In addition to reading about the dangers present when the government controls the press, students have an opportunity to experience it and to empathize with news media pressured both by political tyrants who demand rigorously controlled messages and those who would rebel against those in charge in the name of freedom and revolution. Players must decide whether a photograph of the country’s ruler in drag is worthy of publication, or how to place stories about government corruption, celebrity marriages, tax increases, or reduced rations.

To ensure that students have played through the game as an assignment, they are asked to take a picture of themselves with the end-of-game screen. This provided another level of interaction that students enjoyed, with several sharing their results on their public Twitter account with comments about the assignment rather than merely uploading the photo to the class electronic dropbox.

**Explanation of Implementation:** Students were told in class about the assignment, with the instruction that the student had to play the game until it reaches a conclusion, either with the termination of the editor or a successful second term as editor. When the final screen was reached, students were required to take a photo of themselves and the final game screen and to upload it to the class

dropbox account in the online course management system. After class, a link was sent via email to the online game at <http://dukope.com/index.php#trt>. Students had two days (48 hours) to complete the game.

The game itself takes about 15 to 30 minutes to complete. The game was designed by Lucas Pope, a software developer who created it for a gaming competition, and the gameplay is simple, using drag-and-drop actions with graphics and gameplay action similar to 8-bit computer adventure games of the late 1980s. The Soviet-era universe he envisions later became the basis for the popular game "Papers, Please." (see screen shots of the game in the appendix)

On day one of the game, you are informed that the war with neighboring Antegria is over, and you have been appointed editor-in-chief of the *Republia Times*. But citizens are not loyal to the government, so you are only to pick stories that "highlight the good things about Republia and its government." You are also told that you have three days to raise the public's loyalty, and that as a precaution, "we are keeping your wife and child in a safe location." If you do poorly, it is noted that "your family has lost several privileges." You are also instructed that "the public is interested in sports, entertainment, and military matters. They are also fascinated by the weather," so you should choose stories of those sorts to build audience.

Each day takes a few minutes to complete, and you are fed a stream of headlines coming across a wire on the left side of the screen. You drag and drop these items, choosing the size and placement of them on the front page of the newspaper. Positive stories begin to dwindle and negative ones more common as the days pass, and on the seventh day, you begin receiving transmissions from rebel forces over the wire with request to sow dissent among the public, with the promise that your family can be rescued if you do. Here, the tables turn, as the player frantically must decrease loyalty before being noticed and being purged. The twist is that there's no way to win: If you sow dissent, the rebels win, your family is lost, and you are appointed editor of the rebel group's new state newspaper, which makes the same demands as the previous leadership. If you remain loyal to the state, the newspaper is discontinued in favor of electronic publication, and your family is lost as well.

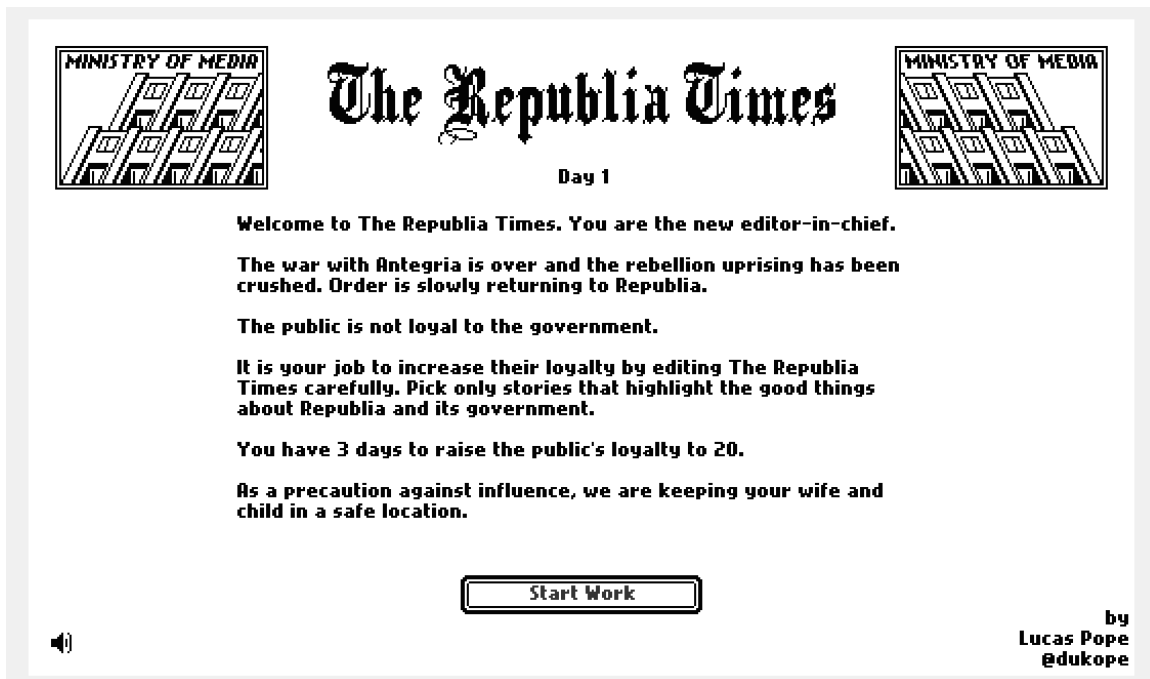
When students return to class, we use the game as a way to talk about dealing with external pressures of power and audience, of balancing news and entertainment to satisfy audience, and how easy it is to ignore information embarrassing to those in control if they hold power over you and your family. The assignment is done in conjunction with the students reading the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics (<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>) and chapter 2 of *Communication and the Law* (Hopkins, ed., 2014) by Paul E. Kostyu and Kathleen K. Olson, "The First Amendment in Theory and Practice."

**Student Learning Outcomes:** As a result of this assignment, students (who may have limited experience in dealing with official pressure on their expression as a journalist) should understand the justifications for protecting speech and press from government interference such as discovery of truth, enabling informed governance, the watchdog role of the press, and promoting stable change.

Additionally, students should be able to discuss the role of power in shaping the decision-making of news media, and students should gain an understanding of the importance of the First Amendment in promoting freedoms that have not been as robustly protected in other countries and eras.

Finally, students should be able to apply the core ethical concepts of the SPJ Code of Ethics (particularly the “seek truth” and “act independently” commands) to analyze their decisions, and the consequences for those decisions, in the game.

Appendix – Screen Shots of Republia Times



**MINISTRY OF MEDIA**

# The Republia Times

Day 1

**Welcome to The Republia Times. You are the new editor-in-chief.**

**The war with Antegria is over and the rebellion uprising has been crushed. Order is slowly returning to Republia.**

**The public is not loyal to the government.**

**It is your job to increase their loyalty by editing The Republia Times carefully. Pick only stories that highlight the good things about Republia and its government.**

**You have 3 days to raise the public's loyalty to 20.**

**As a precaution against influence, we are keeping your wife and child in a safe location.**

**Start Work**

by  
Lucas Pope  
@dukope



Today's issue has been printed and distributed.

#### RESULTS

Loyalty: 23 (+11)  
Readership: 312 (+62)

- \* There are many interesting articles. You have gained readers.
- \* The included articles have increased your readership's loyalty to the government.
- \* The paper's increasing readership has expanded its influence.

Readers  
312 (+62)



Go to Sleep



# The Republica Times

Day 4



You have completed your first task. The Great and Honorable Leader is pleased.

Continue to print positive articles and maintain a loyalty of at least 20.

We must now work to increase readership. More minds is more power.

Attain at least 400 readers by the end of day 5.

#### Article Positioning

Article placement has no effect on loyalty or reader interest. Only the size and content of stories matter. Use your vast artistic and design experience to arrange articles in a way that pleases you.


Start Work

Readers  
390



by  
Lucas Pope  
@dukope


Day 7



6 AM - 6 PM

End Day

Readers  
688



30  
Loyalty

### News Feed

**\*\*\* We can rescue your Family. Sow disloyalty to strengthen the rebels. You have 4 days. \*\*\***

- Terrorist bomb explodes on northern bay Ferry. 600 People missing
- Republia National Team has won the global Football tournament
- Terrorist rebel hideout near Central Chem destroyed
- Republia National Football Team has lost the regional Finals to Antearia
- Weather: Expect unseasonal snow in the south
- New Fall TV Programming will Focus on Republia's rebuilding
- Mega-group HusseinBoyz admits to not singing on any albums, can barely dance

Drag Articles to Paper


## The Republia Times

### Republia Wins Football Crown!

Blizzard Incoming?

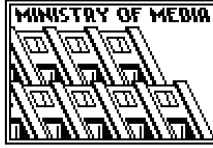
Rebels Routed At Factory!

HugginBoyz: Talentless After All!



# The Democria Times

Day 11



**We have done it!**

**Thank you my friend! Without your efforts the rebellion would have failed once again. A new era for our beloved nation begins!**


**I'm truly sorry that we could not save your family.**

**We need someone with your skills to talk with the people. Come back tomorrow for your new position.**


**Long Live Democria!**

Let's Go!

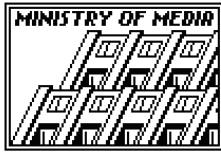
Readers  
1488



-30  
Loyalty

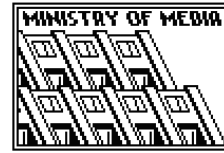


by  
Lucas Pope  
@dukope



# The Republica Times

Day 11



**We have reviewed your file.**

**Your performance is: -DISASTROUS-**

**The Great and Honorable Leader has decided that printed paper is old technology. The Ministry of Media will be moving to focus on online communications.**

**Your services are no longer required. Your family has been eliminated and you will be reassigned.**

Readers  
1483



Accept Fate



by  
Lucas Pope  
@dukope