



OPEN SECRETS: The Game of Wikileaks

Ruleset -- Version 1.0 || Tim Hwang -- April 5, 2013 || tim@timhwang.org

BACKGROUND

There ran in the January 26, 2011 issue of the *New York Times* an article by columnist Bill Keller entitled, “Dealing With Assange and the Wikileaks Secrets.”¹ The article relates the curious story of how the *Times* editorial staff became involved in the release of over 250,000 diplomatic cables by Wikileaks in 2010 and continuing into 2011 -- a series of events later dubbed “Cablegate”.

Most interestingly, Keller describes a tense tightrope walk taken by the *Times* editorial staff as it juggled dealing with a secretive and unreliable source holding an unprecedented leak of classified information, and an Obama administration at once threatening and cajoling in an effort to mitigate the exposure of its information.

The purpose of this game is to simulate in some simple form the shifting and complex strategic relationships between press, government, and Wikileaks during this period.

MATERIALS

- * One (1) Secrets Deck
- * One (1) Government Action Deck
- * One (1) Set of Role Cards
- * One (1) Four-Sided Die
- * Set of Counters

THE PLAYERS

Open Secrets can be played with three to six players. In the game, players take on the role of a different organization that played a part during the events of Cablegate. These roles can be distributed randomly to each player, or chosen based on preference.

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/magazine/30Wikileaks-t.html?pagewanted=all>

- * The Government - One player plays the role of the Government. While possessing significantly more resources and a range of tools not accessible to other players, the Government is confronted with the problem of mitigating a constant and largely irreversible leaking of secrets to the public.
- * Wikileaks - One player plays the role of Wikileaks. Founded by Julian Assange in 2006, the organization seeks to bring about radical transparency through publication of media leaked to them by anonymous sources. Despite having access to a constant flow of potentially explosive information, Wikileaks requires the assistance of the Press to ensure that the leaks have their maximal effect on global affairs.
- * The Press (The Guardian, The New York Times, Der Spiegel) - Up to three players can represent a different prominent press outlet. With a huge distribution network and editorial credibility, these organizations exercise significant influence over how these leaks are perceived by the general public. However, their main source -- Wikileaks -- has interests only sometimes convergent with theirs. They are forced to both collaborate and compete, with each other and with the other parties involved.

OBJECTIVE

During the game, each player will possess a certain number of *credibility counters* -- which represents the social capital and public standing that allows the players the flexibility to act.

The objective of Open Secrets is to be the player with the highest number of credibility counters at the end of the game.

GAME OVER

The game terminates under two conditions:

- (1) The game ends when one player runs out of credibility counters: at that point, the winner is the remaining player with the highest number of credibility counters.
- (2) The game ends instantly when all the cards in the Secrets deck have been drawn. At that point, the winner is the player with the highest number of credibility counters.

SET UP

- (1) Distribute Cards: Distribute cards to players. The Government player takes five cards from the Secrets deck and five cards from the Government Action deck into their hand.

- (2) Distribute Counters: Distribute credibility counters to each player. The Government begins with 50 credibility counters, Press players each receive 30 counters, and Wikileaks receives 20 counters.
- (3) Distribute Projects: Distribute the cards marking Projects to the respective Wikileaks and Press players. The Government projects should be shuffled into the Government Action deck.

TURN PHASES

Each round of the game consists of three phases:

- (1) The Leak Phase: At the beginning of each round, the Wikileaks player rolls the four-sided die, and draws that many Secret cards from the Government player. The Wikileaks player may choose to pull these cards from the face-down Secrets deck or directly from the hand of the Government player.
- (2) The Action/Upkeep Phase: Starting with the Government, players each take a turn. On each player's turn, the player can take one of the following different actions --

- * **Publish Secrets**: A player may publish any number of *Secret* cards by taking them from their hand and putting it down face-up in front of them. Each *Secret* card has a certain number of points.

- * Wikileaks: When a Wikileaks player publishes secrets -- the point value may then be distributed to increase or decrease the credibility counters of any other player (including themselves). Points not distributed are wasted. This represents the spin that may be placed on a story to bolster the credibility of Wikileaks, spin the story against the Government, or criticize the mass media at large.

- * The Press: When a Press player publishes secrets -- the point value of the Secret card is first *tripled*. The Press player may then choose to distribute the resulting points to increase or decrease the credibility counters of any other player (including themselves). Points not distributed are wasted. The tripling bonus represents the size and credibility of traditional media in publishing this content.

- * The Government: When a Government player publishes secrets -- the point value of the Secret card is always deducted against the Government.

- * **Suppress Secrets:** Any player may suppress any number of *Secret* cards by removing them from their hand and then placing them in a discard pile. These *Secret* cards are removed for the remainder of the game and are no longer recoverable.
- * **Build Project:** Players can also elect to build a *project*. These represent standing initiatives that each player can put resources into building that have a continuous effect on the game. Each project has a certain cost in credibility counters to activate, and an upkeep of credibility counters to keep the project in effect. This represents the resources the organization must put into the project to keep it ongoing. Multiple projects may be built in a single turn.
- * **Play Action Card:** The Government player also has unique access to a hand of *Government Action* cards. These can be played when dictated on the card: some are limited to being played on the Government turn, some can be played at any time.
 - * Risk: Action cards come with *risk* - a number between one and four that indicates how difficult the action described by the card is to pull off. When these cards are played, the Government player rolls the dice. If they roll a number below the risk number, the card takes effect. If not, they pay a penalty as indicated by the card (usually a loss of a certain number of credibility counters).

After taking an action, the player then expends a number of credibility counters as upkeep for the various projects that they currently in effect. A player may choose to deactivate any project by simply choosing not to pay the upkeep cost. This project may be revived on a later turn for the same activation cost.

Secrets may be traded and revealed amongst the players at any time while these turns are ongoing. No agreements among players made during the game are considered binding on the players.

- (3) The Draw Phase: After the players have taken their turns and it returns to the Government, the Government then draws up to five *Secret* and five *Government Action* cards. If the Government has more than this number of cards, no cards are drawn.

STRATEGIC PRESSURES

The game is designed to put each player under different, asymmetric pressures:

- * The Government: The Government has a wide variety of different levers it can use to threaten, cajole, and damage other players. However, these levers come

with more or less risk. Because it is rarely certain what Secrets have been lost and how damaging they are, the Government players must try to match the riskiness of their intervention based on the actions they observe the other players taking, and work to isolate the Press and Wikileaks from one another.

- * The Press: The Press has enormous power to shape the effect of published Secrets. However, the raw material it needs (Secrets) is monopolized by another player who wants to eventually overtake them. Their game is to assess how much they should collaborate with an untrustworthy ally, and when to begin making sure they get the better part of the deal.
- * Wikileaks: Since it starts with the lowest number of credibility counters, Wikileaks needs to eventually overtake both the Government and the Press in credibility. However, early on they need to partner with the Press in order to survive and effectively attack the Government. As such, they need to find a way to creatively convert their monopoly on secrets into superiority in credibility counters through bluffing and dealmaking.

THE DECKS

There are two decks, the Secrets deck and the Government Action deck. A general sketch of the effect of each card is described below.

Government Action Deck

The Government Action has access to low risk cards (risk value: 3 or 4) - standard strategies that the Government can use in an attempt to control the message.

- * Downplay The Story (risk: 4) - reduces the effect of all stories published
- * Get in Front of the Story (risk: 4) - reduces the effect of a single published story
- * Distract (risk: 4) - publish Secret in hand in exchange for Secret published by other player
- * Spin The Story (risk: 3) - allows for redistribution of damage/gain from publication
- * Denounce (risk: 3) - low fixed amount of damage on successful roll
- * Legal Action (risk: 3) - steal a card back from another player

There are high risk cards (risk value: 1 or 2), which have more powerful effects. These are either covert measures or other politically unpopular methods that directly strike at the other players. These moves threaten significant blowback if discovered or attributed to the Government.

- * Discredit (risk: 2) - cause discard of one secret currently held by another player
- * Disinformation (risk: 2) - medium fixed amount of damage on successful roll
- * Mole (risk: 2) - force other player to take a certain action for their turn
- * Cyberattack (risk: 1) - cause discard of all secrets currently held by another player

- * Surveillance (risk: 1) - see all cards in the hands of other players
- * Arrest / Detain (risk: 1) - high fixed amount of damage on successful roll

Secrets Deck

These will be drawn from the actual stories published by NYTimes during Cablegate. Generally, there will be military cables (high value), diplomatic cables (middle to low value), and non-story cables (with no value at all).

PROJECTS

Each player has access to different sets of *projects*, which create continuous effects on the game. The Wikileaks and Press projects may be selected and activated at any time. The Government projects are shuffled into the Government Action deck, and may be only activated when in the Government player's hand.

Press

- * Insider Leak - Press can pull Secrets in leak phase from other players
- * Featured Coverage - "featured" Secret is considered published repeatedly once per Press turn
- * Special Investigative Team - can take two actions per Action/Upkeep Phase
- * Friends In Government - Press can draw and use Government Action cards
- * Open Public Repository - number of Secrets can be "stored" and immune from Actions

Wikileaks

- * Manning - always draw four Secrets in the Draw Phase
- * Wealthy Benefactors - can take two actions per Action/Upkeep Phase
- * Rally Activists - limit hand size of one of the other players
- * "Insurance Policy" - on use of a high risk card against WL, publish all Secrets held
- * Compromise Systems - player cannot activate Projects while this is in effect

Government

- * Pressure The Banks - all Projects of target player have higher creation/upkeep costs
- * Pressure The DNS - all Secrets published by player reduced to the value of 1 point
- * Increased Internal Surveillance - all cards drawn from Government hand during Leak Phase
- * Special Operations Fund - can discard all Government Action cards and redraw as an action
- * Harden Networks - limits to only one Secret leaked in the Draw Phase