



In-Game Political Advertising 2.0: Taking the Message to the Targeted Masses

If you're of a certain age, you remember an early educational computer game called The Oregon Trail. You started out on the east coast with a wagon, a few supplies, a few fellow travelers, and a dream to make it to Oregon territory to set-up a homestead. You learned a few interesting things along the way, about history and early computer graphics programming, namely: cholera, dysentery, snakebite and typhus are all unpleasant ways to go; Oregon Trail programmers had a rather un-PC take on Native American History; your entire expedition could be felled by a broken wagon wheel axel; and early computer games moved very, very slowly.

Historical and programming unpleasanties aside, it's pretty easy to see what made The Oregon Trail so popular (besides the captive audience). It was one of the first forays into using computer games not just to entertain, but to educate. While the educational gaming market has grown exponentially since The Oregon Trail, it continues to evolve in innovative ways. One recent innovation involves the subtle teaching of political gamesmanship combined with the potential for in-game advertising from actual candidates and policy stakeholders.

For the People is a recently-released "fantasy politics" Facebook game where players become the fictional 436th member of the House of Representatives. Over time, players will encounter avatars representing all of the real members of the various House Committees when they bring bills and amendments up for vote. Those members are portrayed in the game with their actual voting records on any specific issue being incorporated – so no fudging the record. Players immerse themselves in the full gamut of their roles as elected officials, and not just the glamorous parts. Players must negotiate with lobbyists, participate and debate in Committee meetings, and perhaps most realistically, start campaigning immediately to get re-elected. (Perhaps the next version of For the People will include having to do FEC filings, raise money from special interest groups, and ensure Appropriations money for a new baseball stadium in your hometown).

What makes For the People unique among traditional educational gaming is its potential as an in-game advertising platform for candidates, PACs, and other organizations with policy-based special interests. For example, say you represent a large environmental rights group and you want people to contact their Congresswoman to vote against a piece of logging legislation pending in the House Natural Resources Committee. In 2013, the For The People will allow you to have your actual piece of legislation debated as the game is played, with the imbedded ability for players to learn more about the issue, without ever leaving the game. The possibilities for candidates and interest groups to engage potential voters and advocates in a variety of interactive ways are endless.

In-game advertising is not a new phenomenon, but it did work its way into the collective conscience in 2008 when the Obama campaign spent \$44,465 for online advertising with the Massive Corporation. A small buy to be sure for what was otherwise a multi-million dollar campaign, but it did represent an entrée into a new frontier – reaching potential voters in an unexpected context. (And if you think gamers are all fourteen year old boys who can't vote anyways – a recent study by the Entertainment Software Association estimates that the average gamer is 30 years old). In 2012, the Obama campaign has advertised across a spectrum of gaming platforms – Madden NFL 13, free online game site Pogo.com, as well as in mobile games like Tetris. For the record, the Romney campaign has said to have advertised in games as well, but has not stated which ones.

It's probably still too early to tell if in-game political advertising is poised to take a bigger share of overall political advertising dollars. Like a lot of late October/early November political advertising, in-game political advertising sees a lot of its revenue late in the election process, and mainly in the swing states where campaigns are desperately trying to reach key undecided voters at the last second. While in-game political advertising does have the advantage of reaching potential voters and advocates on a very targeted level, it also runs the risk of annoying potential voters via an interruption in the game, perceived or real. It's also worth noting that gamers, like the general population, could have sensitivities to receiving candidate or issue advertisements that conflict with their personal beliefs.

The future of in-game political advertising might lie in the development of new platforms and consoles that can seamlessly merge the message with the flow of the game in a way that is both engaging and unobtrusive to players – no easy task, but an important consideration if in-game political advertising wants to grow its share of the market.