Preamble: A Social Production Game and Vehicle for Citizen Political Participation in California

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a market-based social game in which players earn and trade influence—expressed as Influence Dividends (“ID”)—as currency, with the ultimate goal of drafting and qualifying low- to no-budget California ballot initiatives. The game’s working title is “Preamble,” after the famous second preamble of the United States Declaration of Independence.

Ballot initiative proposals would be subject to a 269 word limit, which equals the length of the famous second preamble to the Declaration of Independence. The 269-word limit and link to the Declaration of Independence underscores that important political documents can be brief, while further serving to solemnize and lend excitement to the game atmosphere. The 269-word limit also indirectly responds to the legal requirement that ballot initiatives limit their scope to only one subject; it is difficult to cover more than a single subject in so few words. This encourages players to limit their focus to simple and discrete issues.

Game-play moves through five stages, which are described in further detail below. In brief, they are the Quiz, Think Tank, Marketplace, Policy Lab, and Enactment Streams. The general dynamics are that players develop expertise and earn ID in the Quiz Stream, develop policy ideas and spend ID in the Think Tank Stream, express policy preferences and spend ID in the Marketplace Stream, remix policy ideas and spend ID in the Policy Lab Stream, and earn ID in the Enactment Stream. The game mechanisms intend to educate players about policymaking while rewarding them for contributing their labor to generating real ballot initiatives. In particular, rewards would be greatest for participating in the Enactment Stream, in which players volunteer to gather the signatures necessary to qualify a ballot initiative, thereby circumventing the prohibitive cost of a traditional signature-gathering campaign.

INTRODUCTION

California’s ballot initiative system has been part of California governance since 1911. It was originally meant to facilitate democratic participation and accountability by allowing voters to bypass the legislature to directly enact pieces of legislation. The reality, however, is that the process has become money-driven, which serves as a barrier to individual voter participation. Ballot measure campaigns are extremely costly, running into the millions of dollars on average, which is well beyond the reach of an average individual Californian.

One approach to improve the system would be to drastically deemphasize the role money plays in policy-promotion, decrease the cost of entry to policy-making, increase competition among proposals, and increase grassroots voter education about policy-making to engender critical thinking and accountability. Developing social-media-driven, open-source governance techniques to formulate ballot initiative proposals could serve these objectives.

California’s ballot initiative system and technology-savvy culture makes direct open-source governance possible to imagine. This paper aims to explore the extent of this possibility and to propose a model for making social-media-enabled, user-drafted legislation a reality. In so doing, this paper draws from political theory, law, economics, and sociology, particularly with respect to the game-design theories that underlie social-game websites.

This paper proposes a market-based social game in which players earn and trade influence—expressed as Influence Dividends (“ID”)—as currency, with the ultimate goal of drafting and qualifying no-budget California ballot initiatives. The game’s working title is “Preamble,” after the famous second preamble of the United States Declaration of Independence.”
CALIFORNIA BALLOT INITIATIVE SYSTEM

California’s ballot initiative system entirely shares competency with the elected legislature, permitting voters to directly enact statutes and even constitutional amendments. The constitutional rules governing initiatives require, in brief, that they (1) be limited in scope to only one subject; (2) apply equally to all political subdivisions of the State of California; and (3) be structured as all-or-nothing propositions (no conditional or alternative subparts).

The most challenging aspect of qualifying a ballot initiative process is obtaining sufficient petition signatures. At present, initiative statutes require 504,760 petition signatures, while constitutional amendments require 807,615. Initiative proponents may employ either paid or volunteer signature gatherers. The average cost of qualifying an initiative in California currently exceeds $1 million, with paid signature gatherers earning between $1 and $3 per signature. It is rare for campaigns to rely on volunteer gatherers.

CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

Incentives to Play

A core challenge is how to effectively incentivize participation. After all, Preamble aims in part to replace paid labor—signature gatherers—with volunteers, where volunteers have rarely if ever succeeded. It furthermore seeks to engage players in challenging intellectual work without any prospect of a traditional reward.

Preamble adopts several established theories to address this. A crucial background concept comes from the field of psychology. Csíkszentmihályi (1988): 30-31, has developed a concept that he calls “flow,” or the state in which humans engage in self-motivated work and perform optimally in so doing. McGonigal (2010): 39, observes that flow-inducing activities are “all challenging endeavors with a clear goal, well-established rules for action, and the potential for increased difficulty and improvement over time. Most importantly, flow activities [are] done for pure enjoyment rather than for status, money, or obligation.” Flow is most reliably achieved
through game-play, specifically via game-structures that combine “self-chosen goals, personally optimized obstacles, and continuous feedback” mechanisms that communicate success and failure. Preamble adopts these observations about flow as its foundation.

Preamble builds on this foundation by further adopting four “intrinsic reward” mechanisms that McGonigal (2010): 52, distills from the field of positive psychology: (1) satisfying work; (2) clear indicators that make success obvious to individuals and their peers, while also permitting a sense of improvement over time; (3) opportunities for social connection; (4) a sense of greater purpose.

The economic concept of social production also informs Preamble’s theoretical underpinnings. Benkler (2010): 85, observes “the sheer effectiveness of large-scale collaboration among individuals once they possess, under their individual control, the physical capital necessary to make their cooperation effective.” In the context of peer-to-peer sharing, Benkler notes that distributed excess computing power and network connectivity make it efficient to freely share public goods once produced. Benkler (2010): 86, further observes that through such networks “users construct together systems with capabilities far exceeding those that they could have developed by themselves, as well as the capabilities that even the best-financed corporations could provide using techniques that rely on components they fully owned.”

In one sense, Preamble parallels peer-to-peer networks as a system for capitalizing on distributed excess computing power and network connectivity to encourage its users to share a public good: knowledge. Stiglitz (1999): 308-309, has demonstrated that knowledge is a public good. Likewise, knowledge and the ideas it spurs are the essential building blocks of policy-making. Preamble thus aims to enable their efficient sharing.

Preamble also promises functional incentives. Through playing, players develop expertise and gain experience relevant to real-world policy advocacy. They also advance through knowledge hierarchies based, essentially, on peer-review and the approval of collectivized expertise. Players who perform well could therefore point to their Preamble performance as an indicator of their real-world qualifications.

Preamble could furthermore serve as a no-budget, open-source instructional tool for educators. High school civics teachers, for example, could implement Preamble as part of their lesson plans. They could offer their students real-world incentives like school credit to reward their in-game performance. Also, since the game itself is open-source, teachers could either encourage students to play within the broader Preamble community, or run a limited iteration of the game within a single school or school district.

**GAME MECHANICS**

**General Provisions**

**Player Profiles.** Players create individual profiles to track and display their achievements within the Preamble community. Profiles can be either real or fictitious. Players can link their Preamble profiles with one another’s, as well as with profiles on other social networking platforms, such as Facebook or LinkedIn.

**Influence Points and Promotion Hierarchy.** Players earn Influence Points for a variety of activities within certain substantive categories, i.e. law, economics, finance, etc. Earning IP within category advances players through a promotion hierarchy, ranging from 0 to 20, which reflects the level of expertise a player has earned within that category, i.e. “Level 3 Economist.” IP expire very slowly, at the rate of 1/12 of total saved points per month. This causes players to slowly lose their level within a promotion hierarchy, absent continual upkeep. Players achieving Level 20 in a category would permanently lock in that level, through would still lose IP over time at the rate of 1/12 per month, thus reducing their Influence Divided (see below).

**Influence Dividend.** Each month, players receive “influence dividends” (“ID”) equal to their total number of IP at the end of the prior month. Players also receive ID through royalties (see below) and other activities. ID is Preamble’s currency for expressing political preferences. Players spend ID at various procedural moments in order to influence outcomes.

**Withdraw and Free Allocation.** In the Quiz Stream, once players spend ID, the transaction cannot be revoked. At any other time, however, whenever players can spend ID, they may also freely withdraw what they have spent and reallocate it. This allows players signal preferences without making a final commitment, while permitting other players to adapt to those signaled preferences. Spent amounts become irrevocable at the end of the relevant time period; they lock-in at the spending deadline.
**Transparency.** Who spent how much and on what is completely transparent to the entire Preamble community. Spending is tracked on individual player profiles as well as in proposal summaries in the relevant Wiki-style forums.

**Royalties.** Players can earn ID royalties when their ideas gain support from other players. Royalties only accrue, however, once the spending deadline has passed.

**Spending Caps and Policy Lab Account.** Players can only spend up to a certain portion of their total ID balance at various points in the game. For example, players can spend up to 1/3 of their total ID in the Think Tank Stream. Players do not need to spend the entire 1/3 of their total ID in the Think Tank Stream, however. Any leftover amounts are transferred to players’ Policy Lab Accounts, where they may spend freely on remixed policy ideas.

**Game Managers.** Preamble is overseen and supported by Game Managers (“GMs”), whose tasks also include interfacing with California government during the Enactment Stream.

**GNU General Public License v3.0.** All intellectual property comprising Preamble or generated by it, including the text of policy proposals, is copyrighted under the GNU General Public License v3.0 (“license”). In brief, Preamble and all that results from it are gratis and libre open-source works. Before joining Preamble, players must agree that anything they contribute to Preamble is copyrighted under this license.

**Quiz Stream**

The Quiz Stage is the entry point to Preamble. Players develop expertise and earn IP in the Quiz Stream. The quiz component serves to engage players in learning the necessary skills to craft ballot initiatives. It also serves as a means to ensure that players who advance to further streams are committed to playing, while excluding trolls and robots. The Quiz Stream runs constantly, not depending on any other stream in order to operate, even if no other streams are active.

**Quiz Topics.** Players answer questions in multiple choice quizzes in categories of knowledge relevant to policy-making (all categories except Community Organizing): Law, Economics, Finance, Political Science, History, Statistics, Natural Science, Engineering, and Media & Current Events.

**Influence Points and Rewards.** For every correct answer, players receive IP corresponding to the relevant question category; i.e. “100 Law IP.” Wrong answers are penalized only to the extent necessary to discourage random guessing. The amount of IP a player receives for correct answers for a particular category is subject to diminishing returns as the player’s level increases within that category.

**Creating Questions.** GMs create and curate a basic set of mandatory questions, i.e. “what are the 3 branches of government?” After achieving Level 5 in a given category, players are able to draft new questions for that category.

**Question Selection and Frequency.** Players face randomly selected questions within a given substantive category, with the level of difficulty matched to their level within that category. Level of difficulty depends on a question’s overall number of incorrect answers, and the average level of players who respond incorrectly. Players spend ID on questions to make them appear more frequently, up to 1/3 of total ID. Questions lose 1/12 their accumulated ID value (the amount of ID spent on them) each month, so as to require continual upkeep. Whoever drafts a question receives a 5% ID royalty for any ID spent on that question.

**Bad Questions.** Any player can flag a player-generated question for review by a randomly selected volunteer moderator, Level 15+ in the relevant category, who could give their approval or rejection. Any question receiving 3 moderator rejections would be removed from the pool.

**Advancing to Think Tank Stream.** Players must advance through 5 total hierarchy levels to move on to Think Tank Stage, but at least 1 level in law, either history or political science, and one quantitative category (Economics, Finance, Statistics, Engineering, or Natural Science).

**Think Tank Stream**

The Think Tank Stream is Preamble’s engine for policy development. It only activates once sufficient players have advanced from the Quiz Stream. Players form into randomly selected groups, within which, over the course of one month, they articulate problems, propose policy solutions, and generate commentary analyzing their preferred policy solutions. When the group does well, the entire group is rewarded. Likewise, when the group does poorly, the entire group is punished. Players have the opportunity to earn and spend IP and ID at several points within the Think Tank Stream. The Think
Tank Stream progresses in three phases over four weeks: the Problem Phase, Policy Phase, Evaluation Phase, and Evaluation Phase.

**Think Tank Formation.** When there are sufficient numbers of players who have moved through quiz stage, randomly selected groups of 30 players are formed into Think Tanks.2 Players interact within Wiki-style forums that only that Think Tank’s members could access. As a default, players can only be in one Think Tank at a time, except for those with any Level 20 specialties. Level 20 players are able to participate in n+1 Think Tanks, where n=the number of Level 20 specialties.

**Player Specialties.** Players are treated as specialists in the category of their highest level, or at their option in the case of ties between categories. Level 15+ players can award IP bonuses for good performance to Level 15+ players in the same category.

**Problem Phase: 1 Week.** Players brainstorm up to one problem each, limited to 140 characters, and propose them in via a Wiki-style forum. During the week, players spend ID points, up to 1/12 of their total balance, on problem proposals. Players can freely withdraw and reallocate any spending during this week. The problem proposal with most ID at the end of the week moves on to the Policy Phase. Players receive a 5% ID royalty for any amounts remaining spent on their proposals at the end of the week.

**Policy Phase: 2 Weeks.** Players draft and propose up to one 269-word policy solution each to the problem via a Wiki-style forum. During the two weeks, players spend ID points, up to 1/6 of their total balance, on policy solutions. Players can freely withdraw and reallocate any spending during these two weeks. The policy solution with most ID at the end of the week moves on to the Evaluation Phase. A proposal’s author could continually edit the proposed draft legislation until three days remain in the phase, at which point all policy proposals are locked. Players receive a 5% ID royalty for any amounts remaining spent on their proposal at the end of the week.

**Evaluation Phase: 1 Week.** Players break into forums based on their specialties to issue 135-word comments on the draft legislation. Players draft up to one 135-word comment each and propose them via Wiki-style forums. During the week, players spend ID points, up to 1/12 of their total balance, on comments. Players can freely withdraw and reallocate any spending during this week. The comment in each forum with most ID at the end of the week moves on. Players receive a 5% ID royalty for any amounts remaining spent on their proposal at the end of the week.

**Suboptimal Outcomes.** If there are no proposals during either the Problem or Proposal Phases, the Think Tank loses and disbands. Players lose all royalties collected in that particular Think Tank. If there are no proposals in a specialty forum during the Evaluation Phase, all players in that specialty forum lose 1/12 of total IP. If at the end of any phase there is only one proposal on the table, players lose all available ID funds for that phase, which automatically go to the one proposal, whose author receives a 15% royalty.

**Advancing to Marketplace Stream.** The policy proposal with the most ID at the end of advances along with its comments to the Marketplace Stream.

**Marketplace Stream**

The Marketplace Stream is where policy proposals compete against one another. Players throughout the Preamble community can evaluate policy proposals and their comments and vote for them by spending ID. Policy proposals surviving the Marketplace Stream advance to the Enactment Stream.

**Marketplace Cycle.** The Marketplace Stream runs constantly, in calendar-month-long cycles, i.e. January, February, etc. Whenever a Think Tank finishes its four-week schedule, its policy proposal qualifies for the Marketplace Stream of the following month. For example, if a Think Tank finishes in January, its policy proposal would qualify for the February Marketplace.

**Voting.** During a Marketplace Cycle, players from the entire Preamble community “vote” on proposals by spending up to 1/3 of their total ID balance. Players can freely withdraw and reallocate any spending during the calendar-month cycle. Players receive a 5% ID royalty for any amounts remaining spent on their Think Tank’s proposal at the end of the month. Any leftover ID in players’ accounts at the end of the month would automatically transfer into their Policy Lab Accounts.

**Advancing to Enactment Stream.** The policy proposal with the most ID at the end of the Marketplace Stage moves on to the Enactment Stage. Any policy proposals not advancing to the Enactment Stream would instead go to the Policy Lab Stream.

**Enactment Stream**
The Enactment Stream is where policy proposals attempt to leap from the virtual world of Preamble to the real world of California electoral politics.

**Enactment Stream**. The Enactment Stream cycle for a particular policy proposal begins when GMs file a Request for Title and Summary (“RTS”) with the Office of the California Attorney General. The GMs would fund the $200 filing fee. GMs file RTSs at least 281 days before the next election, so as to allow the full 150 days to circulate petitions before the 131-day deadline. The enactment cycle runs until the relevant California election, or the policy proposal fails to gather sufficient signatures.

**Signature Gathering and Validation**. Players earn Community Organizing IP by gathering unique, valid signatures. Signatures are considered unique and valid once they are cross-checked against California voter registration records and approved by three other players, each of whom receive Law IP for their efforts.

**Media Campaign.** Players earn Media & Current Events IP by connecting their social media accounts, such as Facebook and Twitter, to their Preamble profiles, and using them to promote policy proposals. Within Preamble, players also can create and share policy advertising media in a Wiki-style forum, which other players can download and distribute freely. To share a particular advertising media item, players must secure the approval of at least two of three randomly selected Level 15+ Media & Current Events specialists. Players who design such media receive Media & Current Events IP.

**Enactment Bonus.** Any players who contribute to a successfully passed initiative win bonus IP in the categories corresponding to whatever roles they played in the process.

**Policy Lab Stream.**

The Policy Lab Stream is where players create new policy ideas by remixing old ones.

**Open-source Reject Pile.** Any draft legislation not surviving the Marketplace Stream goes to the Policy Lab. Players are free to access these drafts at any time, and for any purpose, subject to the GNU license.

**Policy Remixes.** Any single player can remix old policy ideas into new potential Marketplace Stream entrants. Any such remixes must combine 3 or more rejected policy proposals. In so doing, a player can delete up to a total of 269 words and add an equal number of words back. Players cannot otherwise rearrange words. To advance to the Marketplace, remixes must survive the Lab Market.

**Lab Market.** The Lab Market runs continually on a calendar-month cycle, following the same procedures as the general Marketplace Stream. Players can enter one proposal per month in the Lab Market. At the end of the month, the Lab proposal with the greatest amount of ID enters the next general Marketplace cycle.

**Lab Account.** Leftover ID from other Streams accumulates in players’ Policy Lab Accounts. Players spend ID from their Lab Accounts on policy remixes in the Lab Market. Players receive a 5% ID royalty, transferred to their main ID account, for any amounts remaining spent on their proposals in the Policy Lab at the end of the month.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper presents only Preamble’s conceptual outlines. It blends a variety of academic theories and established game dynamics at an abstract level to construct a plausible game-design proposal. Many pragmatic questions remain, however. The IP and ID system, for instance, requires a fine-grained economic analysis. Similarly, the precise corporate nature and funding of the GMs each require detailed legal analyses to ensure compliance with state and federal elections law.

Part of the hypothesis in a game design concept is that the game will be to some extent enjoyable. The game has to be enjoyable in order to work. Nevertheless, the greatest uncertainty in Preamble’s design is whether game dynamics are enough to incentivize the pain-staking task of collecting the half-million petition signatures needed to qualify a ballot initiative. Fortunately, the threshold might be low. In Preamble’s favor are many examples of not-obviously-fun, yet breathtakingly successful crowdsourcing, like when The Guardian tapped its readers to sift through over 77,000 documents detailing the expenses of Members of Parliament in less than 24 hours. Whether Preamble can follow suit is impossible to know without play-testing it.
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“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. — Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.”

ii This randomness responds to the concerns about faction that James Madison articulated in Federalist No. 10, available at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Federalist/10, in which he wrote:

By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.

There are two methods of curing the mischiefs of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects.

In controlled settings such as Preamble, there might be a third method “of curing the mischiefs of faction,” at least as they arise among repeat players: random sampling.