

There's a nap for that: Romney's snoozy 'Mitt's VP' iPhone app
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Two mobile apps released this week offer insight into the presidential campaigns of Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama. "Mitt's VP" has some intelligent design behind it, but it ends up a riot of styles and is ultimately ungenerous in the extreme. At the same time, "Obama for America" is clean, Appley-looking and unconfusing. But what the two campaign apps really shed light on is what apps—anyone's app—ought to be in 2012.

At first glance, "Mitt's VP" uses rustic, Americana lettering as if it were a haberdashery window in the age of Grover Cleveland. That's pretty great. Any hint of Barnumism in a campaign seems like a healthy sign that someone is not taking the venture too seriously.

But that vibe turns out to be only pixel-deep. The app is quickly revealed as a banal, noxiously safe, wavy-bunting-on-the-dais bit of silliness, like a campaign website from the '90s. The *nineteen-nineties*. The collision of this nervous patriotism with the sheen of steampunk irony in the design is queasy-making.

But form is not the real problem with the app. What it lacks entirely is a reason for being. I guess it sorta promises access to veepstakes secrets, though time will tell whether app-holders will actually get the first public notification of the decision. (In 2008, the Obama campaign attempted to do the same with text-message subscribers, who instead found out almost three hours after CNN announced Joe Biden as his choice of running mate.)

For the casual downloader and app collector who wants a digital gumdrop or a nifty function now, there's bupkis. "Mitt's VP" is almost spitefully unrewarding for anyone who takes the time to download it.

The usual exchange in the App Store—I tried out both candidates' apps for Apple's iOS—is that users take the trouble to download things and sometimes pay for them and the apps, in turn, just give and give and give. Games and stuff to read and nuggets of info and ways to optimize the functioning of this and that. Apps should seem cornucopic. One thing they should not do is ask for donations.

It turns out that "Mitt's VP"—after dangling a promise of veepstakes secrets and a limited-edition bumper sticker—is chiefly designed to facilitate my joining mittromney.com so I can be data-mined, and my contributions and vote can be more heavily solicited.

The app wants me, without even trying to butter me up with a swell animation or something, to enter my street address and ZIP code. Evidently my copious Facebook info, which I lemming-like turn over to the app when I graciously sign in with my Facebook login, isn't rich enough for Romney and Co.

Street address?! I'm downloading an app, for Pete's sake. I don't give my street address

to apps I love, like Twitter's, or "Scramble for Friends."

I enter in my city's name and that's it. The app doesn't note the information shortfall and promises me a "limited edition VP bumper sticker" in my "mailbox" after the announcement is made. That would be a neat trick if Romney's people can find me using my city alone.

Even worse, the app promises that if I return to the app later I'll learn the name of the 2012 Republican vice-presidential nominee—but for now, I can go to the Web. Apps that throw you to the Web are barely apps, in my view. They're like suburbs with no retail or attractions that make you keep hitting up a whole other neighborhood.

Like many sloppy, greedy apps that are not worth the bytes they're ingrained in, "Mitt's VP" is junk. And that's not political. Romney's app looks weird, it asks for tons of data, and it gives nothing but promises.

The "Obama for America" app also landed me on the Web—barackobama.com—in record time. Content that's not optimized for mobile, like content topped with an address bar, is gummy and off-putting on a mobile device. What's hard to understand about that?

Still, Obama's app didn't ask for my address. Instead, it pinpointed me using my tablet's GPS. When I clicked on "Events" it pointed me to Obama phone banks that are blocks from my house. Wow. While this may have been more invasive, it seemed more helpful because it's more the modus operandi of apps. Without asking for too much from me, the app seemed like a service and not a solicitation.

Along the bottom of the app are widgets: Info, Events, Featured, Action and Donate. I liked the "Info" button especially, which pulls up, inside the app, the campaign's talking points, including claims about education, national security, "equal rights," "women's health" and other categories that are illuminatingly broken down. "Jobs & Economy" is one rubric; "Taxes" is another.

When alerted to various Obama-related events in my area, I was asked to RSVP, and no doubt that would send me to the Web. (So I refused.) But I did like the idea of "RSVP" on a button, and furthermore "Check it out" makes a good button label. That's how you get to the featured content (on the Web, yes) from the Obama app.

I found "Obama for America" genuinely useful—for news about the campaign's message, especially. It's so simple that it seemed like something designed for the National Gallery in Washington—like an immaculate, government-stamped design. Where the federal government and Apple have, for now, agreed to meet.

Romney's app just looked weirder in comparison. But then Romney himself (after his traveling press secretary's "kiss my ass" comment, especially) seems weird lately, too. Who would have thought that Romney would play the nuttier in this election? I guess it had to be one of them. And one thing we've learned about Obama—a lesson sealed by this app—is that, win or lose, he never, ever freaks out.

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