

Computer game gives people shot at managing budget

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Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., shows his Budget Hero shirt at the Wilson Center's re-launching of the "Budget Game" on Capitol Hill in Washington Wednesday, July 13, 2011. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)

(AP) -- Think you might do better than President Barack Obama and congressional leaders in picking and choosing what government spending to cut - or taxes to raise - to stave off a debt showdown that could wreck the economy? A new computer game gives you, too, the chance to play "Budget Hero."

"Budget Hero 2.0" is an update of an original version that came out in 2008. It shows players just how difficult it might be to carry out their grand policy objectives - universal health care, extending the Bush tax cuts or ending foreign aid - and still keep the government from either becoming irrelevant, or going broke.

"Our timing turns out to be perfect," said former Rep. Jane Harman, D-Calif., who resigned this year to head the Woodrow Wilson Center, a nonpartisan think tank that developed the [game](#) with American Public Media.

Harman said the game is a valuable teaching tool, particularly now as the president and Congress butt heads over the future course of government. Players get insights into the "difficult choices involved in reducing the deficit and raising the debt limit," she said.

Among the first players to test their skills at the unveiling this week of the new version were Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, the top Republican on the Senate Budget Committee, and Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo.

Udall said he had two kids in college and "I've been a real nag about video games," but that "the point of this game is to educate, to empower us."

The new version, updated to reflect the increasingly dire financial situation and such new factors as the House Republican budget's approach to Medicare, allows players to pick from some 100 policy cards as they try to earn "badges" that reflect their political leanings. Fiscal conservatives can try to earn a tea party badge, defense hawks a national security badge or environmentalists a green badge.

The game starts in the year 2021, based on [Congressional Budget Office](#) numbers showing what happens to the government's budget if there is no change in current policy. Players, by using their policy cards, change the course of history.

Before clicking on a policy, the player can check out the pros and cons. Raising the Social Security eligibility age to 70 for those born in 1973 or after would save \$152 billion over 10 years but would also mean a 10

percent loss in benefits for those now in their mid- to late 40s.

In a quick demonstration of the game, two college students, one taking typical Republican positions and the other Democratic, showed just how difficult it will be to save the country. The Republican extended the Bush-era tax cuts, cut spending for the arts and humanities and reduced congressional budgets. The Democrat went after a green badge by raising the federal tax on gasoline and ending tax breaks for big oil companies, while also expanding health insurance coverage.

Both plans saw the government go broke - reaching a point where there isn't enough money to cover mandatory programs such as Social Security, Medicare and interest on the debt - in the 2030s.

"This game will lead you to the conclusion that there has to be structural change" in the big entitlement and revenue programs, said John Tanner, a former Democratic lawmaker from Tennessee.

Linda Fantin of American Public Media said the game has been played 830,000 times since the original version came out in 2008. The sponsors said they hope to get the new version into schools and universities by the fall semester. The game is free and available at <http://www.budgethero.org> .

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