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VIDEO GAME DRAWS YOUTH TO COMMUNITY MEETING

'Participatory Chinatown' video game brings new audiences into neighborhood planning processes

BOSTON, MA — Video games have the power to lower barriers to participation in the urban planning process, according to the results of a project that kicked off last week in Boston's Chinatown neighborhood.

Although video games are typically thought of as “just for fun,” last week more than 50 Chinatown-area community members gathered to play “Participatory Chinatown,” an immersive 3D video game that puts residents in the driver's seat as they shape the future of their neighborhood.

In most communities, including Chinatown, attracting younger residents to planning meetings has been a challenge. Participatory Chinatown attracted an audience with an average age of 30.

“The meeting exceeded our expectations,” said Eric Gordon, assistant professor of New Media at Emerson College and co-principle investigator of the project. “The room was bursting with energy as people played the game. The dynamic mix of young and old, seasoned and new to the process, is what community life should be like.”

The project, created through a partnership among the Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC), Emerson College faculty, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), and software development partner Muzzy Lane Software, asks players to complete “quests” as one of the game's virtual residents, allowing them to walk the neighborhood streets in someone else's shoes.

“Residents were thrilled to discover their favorite hang-out spots or even their homes in the game,” said Janelle Chan, Acting Executive Director of ACDC. “Cheers broke out after residents received the results of their deliberation. I don't remember ever seeing or hearing that at a community meeting.”

Community meetings are based around using the game in real time, as attendees experience a combination of physical deliberation, virtual interaction, and Web-based input as a way to gain access into serious community decision-making.

“In these meetings, the emphasis isn’t just on the computer simulation, but on the process and the deliberation that happens in between gaming sessions,” said Holly St. Clair, Director of Data Services for MAPC. “Our hope is that when people have a collective experience through the video game, and then talk about it, they’ll gain a better understanding of the complexities of Chinatown, and then they can plan together for the future of their area.”

The results of the community meetings will feed into the 2010 Chinatown Master Plan. The game is also available as a single-player game on the Web at www.participatorychinatown.org.

“We believe in the positive potential of immersive games, and this is a great example,” said Bert Snow, VP of Design for Muzzy Lane Software. “Developing Participatory Chinatown has been an interesting challenge, and it’s a good fit for our Sandstone game platform, which is built with this kind of serious-game project in mind.”

The Participatory Chinatown team will travel to Washington, D.C. on **May 12, 2010** to present the project to senior White House Staff in conjunction with National Lab Day, an Obama Administration initiative to bring hands-on learning into the science classroom. For more information, visit www.nationallabday.org.

Participatory Chinatown is funded by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning Competition. For more detailed game results, check soon at www.participatorychinatown.org.

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The **Asian Community Development Corporation** (ACDC), a 22-year old community-based organization, serves the Asian American community of Greater Boston, with an emphasis on preserving and revitalizing Boston’s Chinatown. ACDC develops physical community assets, including affordable housing for rental and ownership; promotes economic development; fosters youth leadership development; builds capacity within the community and advocates on behalf of the community. For more information, visit www.asiancdc.org.

Emerson College is the only comprehensive college or university in America dedicated exclusively to communication and the arts in a liberal arts context. It is internationally recognized for excellence in its fields of specialization, which are communication, marketing, communication sciences and disorders, journalism, the performing arts, the visual and media arts, and writing literature and publishing. For more information, visit www.hub2.org.

The **Metropolitan Area Planning Council** is a regional planning agency serving the people who live and work in Metropolitan Boston. An independent state agency, MAPC’s mission is to promote smart growth and regional collaboration. MAPC is guided by its regional plan, “MetroFuture,” which engages the public in stewarding the region’s future. For more information, visit www.mapc.org.

Muzzy Lane Software is an innovative developer of 3D single and multiplayer games. Based in Newburyport, Mass, the company creates its own branded games and works with partners to produce private-label games based on the company’s Sandstone platform. Sandstone delivers true 3D games in the browser, as a web service, with tight integration between the games and the web. Muzzy Lane provides simple web tools that support the customization of Sandstone games. For more information, visit www.muzzylane.com.