

A 3-D approach to community meetings

By Joanne Wong

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Local academic and community partners brought a new dimension to community meetings. On May 4, 2010 community members gathered to learn more about current local resources and to provide input into the future state of Chinatown—seemingly normal topics to cover at a community meeting, but with a slight twist. “Participatory Chinatown”, a role-playing game that models a 3-dimensional Chinatown, complete with street signs, building names, and newspaper stands all in minute detail, was installed in over 30 laptops at the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association office. Meeting attendees, stationed at each laptop, navigated their way through a digitized Chinatown eliciting specific information from individuals and other avatars on the streets in order to make informed decisions on individual preferences.

Integrating 3-D gaming technology into a community meeting developed through a collaboration effort between several organizations: the Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC), Emerson College, and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. Eric Gordon, Assistant Professor of Visual and Media Arts at Emerson College, initiated the idea and stressed the importance of continuous dialogue and feedback to shape the future of Chinatown. Despite the nature of the game, the exercise is serious business.

Likewise, Executive Director of ACDC, Janelle Chan, explained the meeting as “another format to help community promote and discuss issues and get into deeper conversations about the neighborhood...it introduces a whole new element to the meeting itself and a new audience to the meeting.” Input and feedback during the game will feed into the Master Planning Process, an effort to expand Chinatown by developing the area south of the Turnpike. Bill Moy, of the Master Planning Process oversight committee, emphasized the importance of participants’ comments, which will help drive and establish a “future anchor” for the development project.

The interactive game consisted of two phases: Part One, which depicts the current state of Chinatown, and Part Two, which illustrates the potential future expansion of Chinatown.

In Part One, each participant is assigned a character, ranging in age from a college student to a senior citizen, who is in need of either employment, housing, or a place to socialize. Participants make their way around Chinatown to locate decision cards that will impact their final choice for the best interest of the character. Throughout the quest, participants are encouraged to “drop coins” to leave comments to express interest, preferences, and observations on certain aspects of the neighborhood. At the end of the 30 minutes, each participant prioritizes three choices for the character, based on the individual’s finances, resources, and preferences. A point system, consisting of how well matched the character is to the final decision, dropped coins, and interaction with other avatars, is used to determine the final score.

Part Two allowed participants to act as themselves in one of three model scenarios for the area south of the Turnpike: (1) majority residential, (2) majority commercial business, and (3) mix between residential and commercial. Participants indicated the features, including but not limited to affordability, jobs, identity, green space, walkability, and businesses, that mattered the most to them. Within these scenarios, participants navigate through the streets and observe the proposed changes to the current space. The goal of this latter part of the game is to offer a visual and allow community members to

sense how such changes may affect their lives, as residents and visitors of Chinatown. Greater affordability, but fewer jobs and parking space; more research and office buildings, but less green space; more shops and restaurants, but less housing opportunities are all variable parts of a larger vision to expand Chinatown southward in the long-run, and items that community members should begin thinking of and talking about.

Meeting facilitator, Holly St. Clair, Director of Data Services at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, was pleased with the high turnout for the meeting, which attracted young professionals, students, and parents, who brought their children along. When asked about the motivation and drive for the implementation of the 3-D game, St. Clair attributed its successful development to the youth volunteers at ACDC, who gave continuous feedback during the testing phases of the game and became “the heart and soul of the effort.”

Next steps for the development team: aggregating the data and evaluating the feedback from the game to help inform the Master Planning Process. Then, on to National Lab Day in DC, where Boston’s “Participatory Chinatown” will be placed on a national platform as an exhibit to inform other local communities of innovative developments.

To learn more about “Participatory Chinatown” or to continue the game online, please visit:

<http://participatorychinatown.org/>

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