

Chinatown planners hope game pulls crowd

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Input sought via video scenarios

By Jeannie Nuss, Globe Correspondent | May 3, 2010

Urban planners, community organizers, and new-media whizzes wanted to attract new voices to discuss the future of Chinatown.

So they developed a video game. In it, players wander through a digitized version of Chinatown as one of 15 characters in search of housing, employment, or social activities.

Tonight, residents will be able to explore three virtual scenarios for the possible development of the neighborhood when the game, "Participatory Chinatown," is unveiled at a community meeting.

"Right now, a typical planning meeting is a PowerPoint show," said Holly St. Clair, the director of data services at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, which joined the Asian Community Development Corporation and Emerson College to create the game. "You have to be confident enough in your views and your English skills to raise your hand. I think that can be quite intimidating for most Americans."

By converting community planning to a medium familiar to teens and young adults, these groups hope to target people who do not often voice their opinions about the future of Chinatown. Among them, said Janelle Chan, acting director of the Asian Community Development Corporation, are younger residents who translate the proceedings at meetings from English into Mandarin or Cantonese and other Asian languages spoken by many senior citizens who attend.

"Instead of translating for other people, we're asking people to come here and participate," Chan said.

The game, which is available in English and written Chinese, will be available online tomorrow. Another group session will be open to the public on Wednesday. The meetings tonight and Wednesday will be held at the headquarters of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of New England in Chinatown. Volunteers will be on hand to translate and help with technological glitches, from how to use a mouse to how to post comments.

Community organizers will sort through feedback on the games, and post some of the most popular comments online.

"There's an opportunity here where we can make this information a living document," instead of a paper that urban planners glance at every few years, Chan said.

The game incorporates differences in age, income, and ethnicity into the challenges of each virtual quest. Some characters have more money and fewer friends; others are part of blossoming social networks, but lack English skills to navigate the city. The diverse cast of characters is meant to bridge the gaps between the categories in real life.

"Imagine a young person becoming an older person," Chan said. "It's like, 'I can't get to this place because I walk slower.'"

Characters in the game include a mother of two who wears a floral print suit and crosses her arms while she waits for a player to finish a task, and a second-year medical student in search of a three-bedroom apartment where she can "wake up and roll to class."

A team of young adults interviewed Chinatown residents to put together the characters in the game. As they did, they learned more about the neighborhood.

"I never knew it was so hard to find jobs here because there's so many grocery stores," said Karen Cai, an 18-year-old senior at John D. O'Bryant School in Roxbury.

Her favorite character in "Participatory Chinatown" is a high school student who commutes from Brookline to Chinatown every weekend to have dim sum with his grandparents.

The game, which was privately funded, is the brainchild of Eric Gordon, an assistant professor of visual and media arts

at Emerson College who also worked on a video game for community meetings in Allston.

“This is not about replacing the community meeting,” Gordon said. “It’s about enhancing the community meeting.” ■

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