

GLOBE EDITORIAL

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Chinatown, the video game

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WHILE PUBLIC participation is a hallmark of urban planning in Boston, it normally takes the form of long, often windy meetings. In the era of augmented-reality apps and Google Earth, planners need more creative ways to figure out what's on people's minds. A new effort called Participatory Chinatown offers an intriguing alternative. It uses a 3-D computer game to promote discussion of — and solicit comments about — the decisions facing the neighborhood.

The game, which goes live this week at participatorychinatown.org, is a joint initiative by the new media program at Emerson College, the Asian Community Development Corporation, and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. One phase of the game asks players to look at the neighborhood through the eyes of a fictitious character seeking work, social interaction, or a place to live. Another phase asks players to offer ideas for underdeveloped land between Chinatown and the South End.

About 45 people with homes, jobs, or community ties to Chinatown previewed the game at an unveiling event Monday evening. Players had to contemplate their basic priorities: Is it more important that the neighborhood be walkable, or preserve its Chinese identity? Other issues were more nitty-gritty: Should Shawmut Street, Washington Street, or Harrison Avenue be the southern gateway into Chinatown? Players' responses should prove helpful to the Boston Redevelopment Authority, which is updating its master plan for Chinatown.

While Participatory Chinatown isn't a substitute for community-planning meetings, it does highlight some shortcomings of the traditional approach. Not everyone participates equally in such meetings. Developers, dogged activists, and retirees are always well-represented. People who work late are not. Computer games attract a different audience. At the unveiling event, many game players were in their 20s; some were only 14. People of all ages will be able to play it at home, when they choose.

The Chinatown game didn't come cheap — a \$170,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation helped it along — but creating such simulations will get easier over time. Historically, citizens have participated in planning mainly by watching a consultant outline a plan and then responding to it. A richer approach could produce better decisions. ■

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