

Chapter 32

Durable Civic Technology: Minecraft as a Tool in Urban Planning Public Consultation

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ABSTRACT

Minecraft is a video game that allows players to interact with a 3D environment. Launched in 2009, Minecraft has surprisingly durable popularity. Users report that Minecraft is easy to learn and understand, engaging and immersive, and adaptable. Outside North America it has been piloted for urban planning public consultation processes. Five years ago, authors conducted research using key informant interviews. This study asked practicing urban planners in Canada to assess Minecraft's potential. Key findings address Minecraft's usefulness as a visualization tool, its role in building public trust in local planning processes, the place of play in planning, and the challenges associated with its use in public consultation. This chapter explores Minecraft's ongoing use, offers reflections as to how this game could effectively be used for public consultation, and concludes with key lessons for urban planners whose practice intersects with our digitally-enabled world, with a particular focus on new application possibilities in smart city planning projects.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the number of digital participation tools available to planners has been growing dramatically. The constant, rapid influx of apps, visualization tools and social media platforms has presented a challenge to planners who are faced with the work of evaluating how and why to use these technologies to engage the public. Of course, the need to assess new public participation tools is not new to planners. Planning researchers and practitioners have long recognized that appropriate tool selection can have profound effects on the success of a public participation process. In 2001, Richard E. Klosterman

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Durable Civic Technology

argued that “the way in which planners transmit information may be more important than *what* they say” because poorly chosen engagement methods can undermine the planner’s relationship with the public and impede their communication (p. 10). More recently, Code for America’s Jennifer Pahlka has argued that government should develop user-centered digital platforms in order to grow citizens’ faith in government: “My theory...is that you can start to believe that government can work” (Scola, 2013).

Although Pahlka’s organization focuses on developing *new* applications specifically for government, planners also need to be able to evaluate the usefulness of *existing* digital platforms that were developed for other purposes. These new applications, broadly categorized as “civic technology” often have an urban focus. From bus route trackers to apps that allow city hall to poll citizens’ opinions through SMS messages, now, more than ever, planners need to be better equipped to understand and evaluate how digital platforms can contribute to public consultation efforts. These initiatives can have a range of goals, including outreach, information sharing, collecting feedback, and dialogue. Different digital platforms are better suited for some of these objectives than others, but research is needed in order to identify those strengths and the context in which these tools can be effectively deployed. This research study looks at one digital tool in particular — Minecraft — and asks what potential, if any, do planners and municipal civic public consultation staff identify in using Minecraft as a tool for consulting the public in land use planning processes?

For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve planners, municipal staff, and consultants in Toronto (Canada) in the winter of 2014. Each of these respondents had significant experience with public consultation activities while only one third had any exposure to Minecraft. This study found that while using Minecraft has some challenges, this popular game also shows promise for deployment in planning practice. The chapter concludes with reflections about the extent to which this game could effectively be used for public consultation, and offers some key lessons for planners whose practice intersects with our digitally enabled environment with particular attention paid to those working in smart city efforts.

2. PLANNING, PUBLIC CONSULTATION AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Public calls to improve the effectiveness and inclusiveness of urban planning processes in North America began in the 1950s and 60s when members of the public argued that the planning process was undemocratic and that commonly used consultation methods failed to direct urban planning in a way that would serve their needs. Many planning scholars agreed. Particularly influential was Sherry Arnstein’s 1969 critique, in which she introduced the “ladder of participation.” Arnstein’s distinction between differing degrees of public involvement drew attention to the routine disconnection between public consultation and decision-making processes, and went on to inform countless discussions about how planning, as a profession, might better work with its public (Lane, 2005).

In the decades that followed, planning processes were ultimately transformed. Whereas public involvement in land use planning was previously limited to the public’s receipt of information about city plans, it began to involve a spectrum of activities. In this chapter, the term “public consultation” will be used to represent activities when local government (or agency) staff seek input from the public on land use planning related decision-making. Planning departments are now required and expected to be proactive in their involvement of a wide range of citizens, and planners have come under increasing pressure “to

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