

# Participatory Design through Responsible Games

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**Participatory design has gained widespread recognition since 1997, when Russel Ackoff outlined the idea in “Systems, Messes and Interactive Planning.” This paradigm has revealed the democratic potential of design by considering the public as a primary contributor, while designers are enabler in the design process. However, the prerequisite knowledge needed at every stage of the design process forms a barrier between participants and design. To eliminate such barrier, designers and planners often simplify problems in controlled environments, like games and playful events, for the participants. Although this solution might seem legitimate from a technical perspective, questions of agency, ethics and methodology arise. Is the general public still a genuine contributor when filtered through games and toy approaches? How would a planner or designer employing such a methodology ensure the quality of the outcome?**

The reductive adaptation of problems and environments often leads to discontinuity between proposals produced by the general public and executable plans. Thus even while taking advantage of the general public’s knowledge, the “solution” becomes a new problem yet to be solved. Moreover, the design process remains controlled by a few specialists when designers and planners actually manage to bridge the gap. Participatory design has become purely formal, allows planners and designers to shirk responsibility, and provides politicians a tool to control public opinion. Presently, there is no methodology efficient enough to incorporate non-professional planners/designers directly into the formation of an executable design project without major exclusion.

Consider the games “Circo” and “PLAYtheBLOX.” Developed by Luis Moreno Mansilla, Luis Rojo and Emilio Tuñon, Circo is a game where participants send articles and written ideas on bulletins to each other. PLAYtheBLOX, by Vancouver Design Nerds, places participants around a table to create a sketch. Such games are great for a handful of participants to explore problems at their initial stages. However, in both cases the selected participants become a part of the design team and then design for the general public, which is very different from enabling the general public to contribute their own design.

Although design games such as Alex Gilliam’s “Chocolate Cake Urban Workshop” allow for a larger range of participants to play a significant role in design, these games ultimately neglect the individuality inherent to the design process. The public is still treated as one uniform body, and thus only

represents majority voices. Massive contributions from a broad range of participants is too complicated to be integrated by coordinators.

The gap between how participants can respond to a problem and what is necessary for an executable project is inevitably turning the participation of the general public into a formal step in the design process. Participatory design is continually used to avoid responsibility for decision making by designers and planners. This problem requires a sophisticated system which allows for and adapts to extreme amounts of participants. This paper will discuss the key factors and parameters of such a system, including participant number, scale, rule and influence by examining several games and traditional solutions used in participatory design in urban planning.

## INTRODUCTION

Participatory design is a method considering the public as a primary contributor, while planners and designers provide their expertise as enablers that allows the users to make design decisions and build for themselves. However, the prerequisite knowledge needed at every stage of the design process forms a barrier between participants and design.

It is a problem that planners and designers as enablers needed to address. It is common, as a solution, the participants would be given simplified toolsets or systems as an interface, such as simplified construction methods and design games to engage in the design process. However, the toolsets, problems, and information are often oversimplified in such situation, turning participatory design a game of mimicry of the discipline, which often produces formal rituals, or less-desirable results in the design and build process.

This simplification can be taken as what in John F.C. Turner means to let dwellers be in control of the situation<sup>1</sup>. John F.C Turner is a British architect who was born in 1929, and he works on self-managed home and neighborhood building in South America, the US, and the UK. During 1957, when most of the architects in the western world suggested top-down approaches towards design, he went to South America and started his journey towards Bottom-Up design methods. He is inspired by Patrick Geddes, who is a biologist, sociologist, and an innovative town planner. Geddes developed a series of diagrams that describe the environment as a system, which is supported by the synthesis of elements existing in it. The idea of Bottom-Up designs can be read in these diagrams,

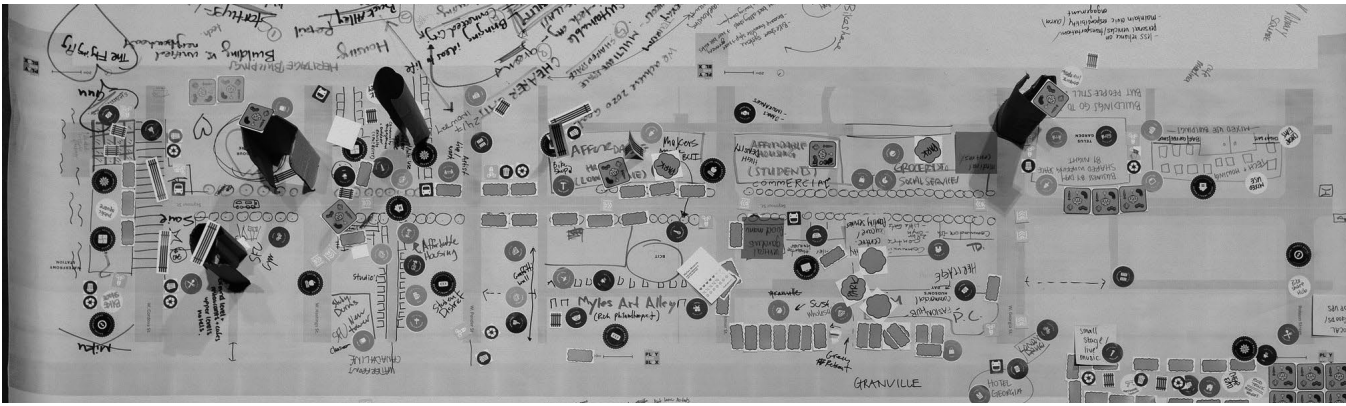


Figure 1. A example of the out come of PlaytheBLOX by Vancouver Design Nerds, Vancouver Design Nerds

where the environment that we're living in is not a pre-determined design, but a result reflecting the contribution of all participants.

### **CROWD ENABLING: THE PROCESS OF SYSTEMETIC MIMICRY AND SIMPLIFICATION**

Turner did an extensive survey of self-help housing and neighborhoods in South America<sup>2</sup>, and he suggested that people are experts of their own problems. Including government aided housings in Venezuela, he described a building system developed by the government, which uses only simple combinations of materials and techniques that the public would be able to handle. It is a system pre-determined by the government and the designer, in order to eliminate the difficulties that participants might encounter in the building process. However, there is not much public participation during the process of design and decision making in this example. In other words, the people are only being enabled in laboring and maintenance in such participation, making this adaptation a toy version, or an Ikea version of the design and build process, that the participants have no agency in decision-making.

To enable the public to participate in the decision-making involves the simplification of the process of production and exchange of ideas in a certain understanding of the discipline. Communication in design discussion requires a deeper knowledge of the discipline and a proper interface. For example, Circo<sup>3</sup>, a new form of architectural communication in 1993 developed by Tunon architects, is in a form of speculative short essays, which is typewritten, printed on folded A4 sheets, and mailed to a circle of participants.

These short essays are idea-driven and to the point of architectural discourse as well as open-ended. It can be considered a mind game that encourages participants to develop concise ideas that trigger deep discussion, and it is a platform that allows the participants to construct ideas on other's talents. However, it is not an interface for the public which does not have the mindset as designers and planners do, and it only allows a smaller group of participants at a time.

Therefore, designers and planners again, adapted these forms of communication with the technique that Venezuela government has used—creating games of mimicry that reduce and simplifies information, to let participants that are not familiar with planning and design feel more in control, and at the same time, increases the number in participants in each event. For example, PLAYtheBLOX<sup>4</sup> developed by Vancouver Design Nerds. It is a board game that's for participatory design for neighborhoods.

### **COMPROMSSION: THE LIMIT CAUSE BY DIVERSITY AND DEMOCRACY**

PLAYtheBLOX takes a simplified drawing of the site as the play area while assigning roles with different professions, skills, resources, and limitation to each participant. The assets in the game mimic elements exist in reality, such different forms of greenery and infrastructures. and together they created an interactive system which is capable of representing planning ideas. Ideally, when the participants are playing, they will make specific design decisions that produce executable outcomes. But since this is a game of mimicry, the product of the system is not much more than a rough sketch, which would again rely on planners and designers to take over the place of decision making and design.

It is something to be expected when giving same interfaces, systems and applying the same rules to a group of participants with high diversity in knowledge. And it becomes more obvious as the participants grow in number and diversity. In examples such as Alex Gilliam's Public Workshop<sup>5</sup> held in Vendome neighborhood in Montreal. In this event, Gilliam included all kinds of participants such as commuters, passersby, local kids, politicians, news media, college students and cheerleaders..., into this design game for the design of neighborhood. In this game, they build a 7-foot-long cake as the new master plan of the neighborhood. Taking cakes as the play area, assets in this game are treats and candies, which are not strictly representing any particular element on the street.

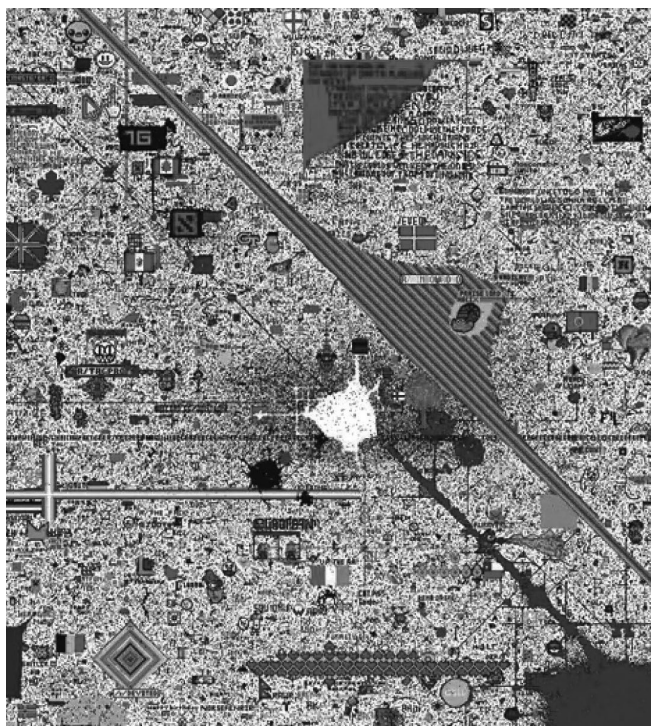


Figure 2. "Place" the social experiment on Reddit in progress 2017, Reddit.

Once again, because of the increasing number and tolerance of the diversity of the participants, the system, information, and all situation are being oversimplified. In order to create a universally friendly interface, the representation using cake and treats has become a distraction of real problems instead of a friendly introduction. The manipulation of assets as well as the game itself is no longer affecting real problems and elements of the very site that they are in.

Under this circumstance, these design games are acting as tools of education which promote certain ways of thinking and ideas, rather than an interface that integrate ideas from different participants and produces executable plans. It is often misused in political occasions. This manipulation is taking advantage of the playfulness of the game, to trick participants to accept the outcome from an oversimplified process. It is a type of game which makes creating illusions of participation much easier than conducting a substantial participation. The contribution of the public in this sense is not much more than a statistic reference such as votes for planners and designers.

#### DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN DIGITAL AGE

It's understandable why voting mechanisms are popular in participatory design. It is efficient for planners and designers to come up with a figure by vote that represents majority voices and take it as a statistic input in design decisions. But Although every vote counts not all of them would be presented in the end. It is an alternative of direct democracy because there would have been too much information to

process, too many ideas to integrate for the planners and designers if they were to consider every vote, and every voice.

The internet is always inspiring when it comes to mass participation. On April /1st 2017, there was an online social experiment on Reddit called Place<sup>6</sup>. It provides a simple interface for every participant to choose a color and place it to the canvas every 5 minutes. Over one million participants working together painting 16 million pixels of colors for 72 hours on this single canvas together, while the process has been recorded into a time-lapse video. They were following simple rules, communicating with each other, and thus created a dynamic environment on a 2D canvas that response to every user input, meaning every vote and every idea from every participant is presented. This is an extreme form of participatory production, the interface is minimalized, and it has almost no prerequisite knowledge, and it is allowing much more participants to join in the process.

It is the connectivity of the Internet as well as the designed mechanism of the interface that accelerate the exchange of information between the participants, while it offers an integrative platform for all inputs without being limited by space. These features developed in the digital age are the keys that activated the massive participatory event and allowed this single platform to take much more participant than a traditional workshop, as well as providing active and passive aiding for aligning the representation of the input to the context of the project. In this case, the final art piece.

#### PARTICIPATION BEYOND MIMICRY

Pokemon Go is a location-based AR game first launched in July 2016 By Niantic, which allowed players to engage and capture virtual creatures while strolling in the real environment. It became a frenzy of Pokemon in all ages. In Great Animal Migration a video shot with a drone by Mars Lin in Taiwan, showed 4000 enthusiastic participants racing to get to the beach for pokemon. Because of such situation, commercial regulation in such area is changed to suppress the overflowing tourists. In this example, the participants are not here for meetings, workshops, design events to change the program in such area, they are here to get Pokemon, however, it is their participation that changes the environment in such area. Although the result of this example is not constructive, it gives us an effective example of new possibilities of participation through games.

Maybe games of participation don't really have to be separated from our daily life, especially when we are in an era that everything is being recorded and analyzed by social media. In the world of Social media, every time we press like, every time we go to another city, we talk to someone, we click on a photo, we post an article, we are constantly participating in the forming of a new environment, establishing new ecology. While certain algorithm evaluates massive information that we

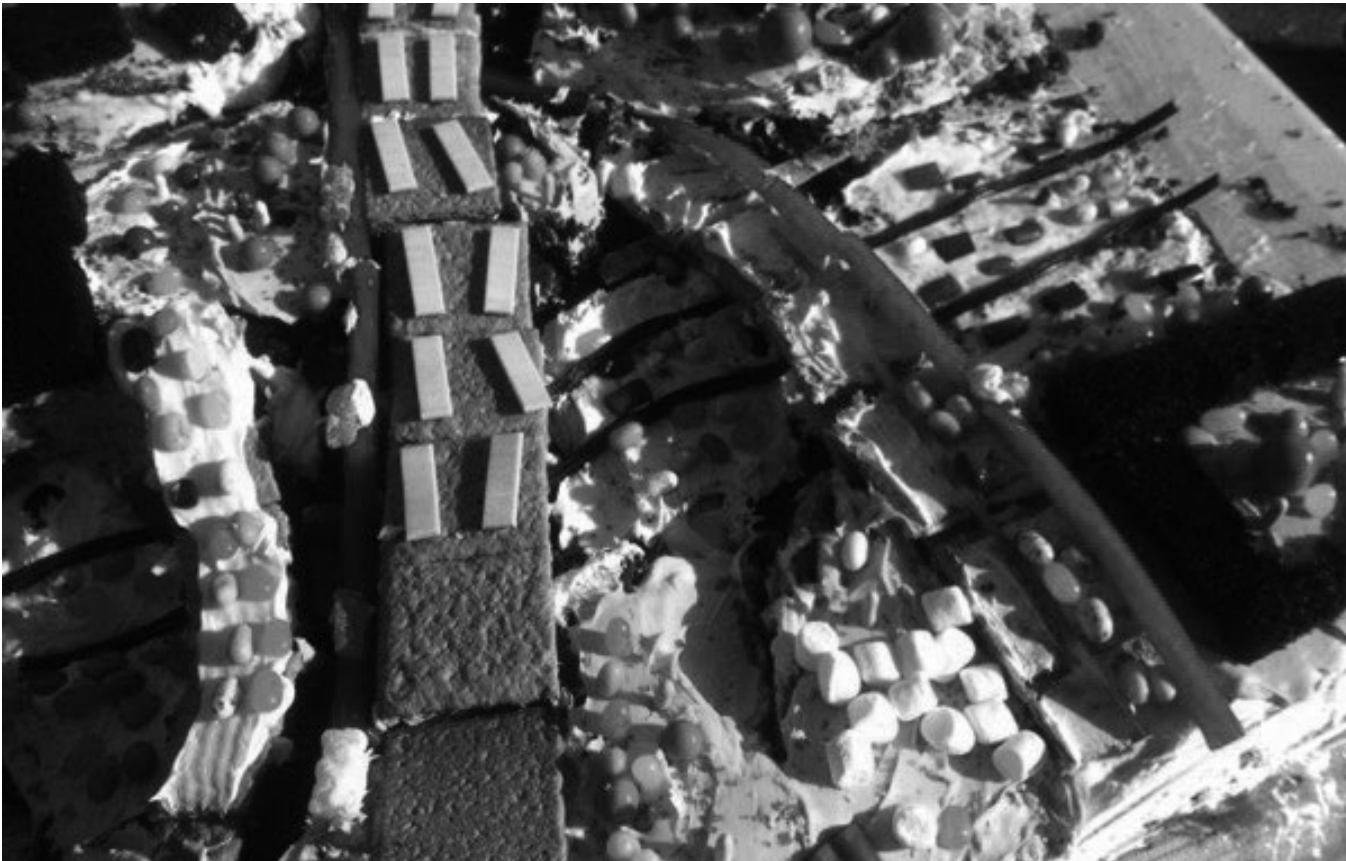


Figure 3. Public workshop By Alex Gilliam in Vendome Neighbourhood, Montreal, Alex Gilliam, copyright.

have generated from daily life, and focus closely on relevancy, content, quality, and variety. Which means, in this case, the participants don't even need to show up in events, using tools they are not familiar with to express their needs and thoughts. This technique has been used to run ads, but again, what if these techniques can be taken into the forming of new spaces, as a new way of establishing democratic designs?

If the purpose of participatory design is considering the public as the primary contributor, maybe it is not about enabling the public to do what planners and designers do, but about enabling planners and designers to read from their existing participation of everyday life.

#### ENDNOTES

1. John F.C. Turner, Robert Ficher *Freedom To Build*, (Macmillan, 1972).
2. John Wiley & Sons, *Architectural Design August 1963*, (Standard Catalog Company, 1963), 361.
3. Giovanna Bosari *The Other Architects*, (CCA, Spector Books, 2015).
4. Mitra Mansour, Sarah Hay "PLAYtheBLOX," (Vancouver Design Nerds, 2016).
5. publicworkshop "Project: Build A Six Foot Long Chocolate Cake Master Plan, Change A Place." (public workshop, 2010).
6. Matt Weinberger "Reddit's new 'Place' is forcing millions of users to work together to make something great." (Business Insider 2017).