

Playing games? It's a serious way to win community backing for change

Written by Anthony Duckworth, Assistant Professor, Australian Urban Design Research Centre, University of Western Australia

How would you and your neighbours triple the number of households in your street block in order to keep your cherished suburb thriving and do your bit to tackle urban sprawl? You have a number of choices to make. Where do the new homes go? How big should they be? What do you do with the old houses on your street? How do you maintain the leafy, open qualities you all love? How can you build an even better community and help the environment?

To help you do this you can now play a physical “[serious game](#)” using a range of pieces that help you and your neighbours create your future suburb on a scaled model. So take a game pack, read the guide, look at your new household characters, select your pieces and get cracking. Remember there is no wrong answer, you are here to collectively create your future *suburb*.

This is exactly what the Fremantle community did as part of developing a new small housing policy, [The Freo Alternative](#). They played a specially designed game, [Game of Freo Life](#).

The Game of Freo Life in action.

It's one of several physical interactive games/models I have developed over the past few years with the team at the Australian Urban design Research Centre ([AUDRC](#)). The aim of these games is to get communities meaningfully participating in the future layout of their local areas.

How do these games work?

All of the games use three-dimensional scaled and interactive physical models that reconstruct familiar urban environments. Participants can then change these models and examine the results.

The tactile nature and design of the games allow a wide range of community members to get highly involved in debates and decisions about their built environment. The physical and colourful approach is broadly appealing and fun, promoting a collaborative approach – who doesn't love a good board game?

Serious games allow people to collectively imagine and help design their urban environments.

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This leads to a better understanding in the community of the trade-offs necessary in planning urban areas. It also gives policymakers and project managers important information about the values and preferences of locals.

Serious gaming not only provides the means for effective engagement, but also makes this process highly appealing.

The concept of playful participation underpins serious gaming. Engaging in play tends to diminish individual interests and promote social groupings and exchange. It's also not obligatory – individuals can choose how much they want to get involved.

In addition, if play doesn't have a set end point it can actively promote experimentation and exploration.

Planners are seeing the benefits

Serious gaming isn't necessarily a new idea, but understanding of its application to community engagement has more recently [developed](#) .

The serious game used in the engagement strategy for The Freo Alternative was recognised with the Planning Minister's Award at the 2017 Planning Institute of Australia (WA) Awards. It's a coup for research to contribute so directly to gazetted policy and serious gaming was instrumental in achieving this.

Since then interest in and demand for tactile serious games have flourished. Serious games have been used to tackle challenges as varied as suburban infill, citizen-led housing, main street revitalisation, urban forest strategies, regeneration area master planning, adaptation of seniors housing, industrial area catalysts, and town-centre visioning. (A selection of these projects can be seen [here](#) .)

What sort of games have been developed?

One of the most recent games, Streets Ahead, reconstructed entire sections of Albany Highway

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in the inner-Perth suburb of Victoria Park to help explore the potential of the main street environment. This included the use of “golden tickets” for imagining and positioning new enterprises in the historic shopfronts.

The model elements were specifically designed in response to feedback from community members about their perceptions and hopes. The game outcomes formed the basis for a series of urban design recommendations.

While the suburban infill model and its various incarnations, such as [Pimp my Suburb](#), remain the cornerstone of the serious gaming applications,

[Master my Plan](#)

moves into the realm of precinct-scale planning and urban design. Operating at 1:1,000 scale, this game playfully engages concepts of transport and movement, different building types, subdivisions and open space networks using different blocks and tiles.

Master my Plan has attracted a development grant to integrate the physical gameplay with digital mapping to provide real-time measurements of participants' physical designs in terms of health outcomes, sustainability and economic feasibility.

Expansion into the digital realm seems exciting, but it is the playful, tactile and collaborative nature of the physical games and models that seem to provoke positive outcomes. Through this process people seem to develop a more tolerant and reflective mindset, creating the possibility of reaching meaningful agreements about a common future.

Anthony Duckworth works for the Australian Urban Design Research Centre which receives funding from agencies within the State Government of Western Australia and various Local Governments.

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