The Jubilee Project: Social Change Gamification of Urban Sustainability Initiatives Via A Well Being Lens

An Applied Project by Robert Barton

Executive Summary

In confronting complex, interconnected urban sustainability issues, people play a key role as citizens and consumers in driving and shaping the social, environmental, and economic issues of the city. However, individuals can be easily overwhelmed by both the scale of actions needed and the contested normative space in which public issue discussions often take place in municipal politics. In addition to existing policy briefs, public dialogues, and scientific reports, fresh solution-oriented storytelling frames and public engagement approaches are urgently needed to shift the tenor of conversation away from knee-jerk reactions and entrenched ideological stances (Stoknes, 2015).

One such promising medium that has recently seen explosive growth is games and gamification. With a 2013 market share of $1.3 billion dollars that continues to grow, non-digital games open up a tremendous opportunity space to engage and educate people about sustainability issues (Gilsdorf, 2014). Successful examples of gamification in use for education and training by organizations today include Hilton Hotels employee training, MIT’s MBA program, and the Foursquare mobile geomapping app (Lerner, 2014; Giannetto et al, 2013).

The Jubilee project works to gamify social change in an urban setting through cooperative-competitive tabletop gameplay. In doing so, the project pushes players to cultivate the trust building, group ethics, resiliency in uncertainty, and tradeoff decision making competencies that are important when facing wicked sustainability issues (Sadowski et al, 2013).

The project also seeks to avoid contentious framings of urban issues by taking advantage of the links between sustainability and happiness. The shape of cities and environmental aspects of urban life have a significant impact on the qualities of people’s lives (Cloutier et al, 2014). Emerging research literature has shown the links between community sustainability and resident reported happiness, particularly around overlapping metrics in public health, urban walkability, community livability, and public green space (O’Brien, 2008, Cloutier et al, 2014).

For the Jubilee project, I have created a tabletop strategy game for 3-5 players that takes place in the fictional city of Pleasanton. Players are tasked with working collaboratively to maximize the
levels of happiness across the city during the games’ three rounds of play. In order to accomplish this, they must manage resources and accumulate social influence in order to play Action Cards that accomplish projects and initiatives and provide other rewards. However, in addition to their personal goals, players must also balance public goods by collaboratively maintaining public health levels (economic, social, and ecological). At the end of the game, players are scored both individually and ultimately collectively in their quest to make Pleasanton the Happiest City in the World.

The creative design process for this game integrated both elements from other popular strategy games and concepts from sustainability science. The multiple capital types represented in the game’s three exchangeable resource types of People Power, Expertise, and Materials & Monies are inspired by the Genuine Wealth model (Anielski, 2007). Additionally, with its nested public sphere meters, the game offers a powerful visual representation of the sustainability science view on urban civilization, with all other aspects (happiness, economic, and social) being contained in the environmental biosphere.

The Jubilee project is intended to provoke conversation about urban sustainability and happiness while providing entertaining, exciting gameplay. Cities are vibrant and greatly diverse spaces with many needs and assets, and the 92 solutions the game deploys during play are meant to be critically discussed and reviewed by players. The game is a meditation on the concept of a “happy city” and one’s role in creating it, and the learning-bonding experience of the players extends its impact well beyond the game session. As such, it offers a valuable, novel engagement approach to stimulating conversation around urban sustainability issues.