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The Future City Game

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Introduction

The British Council with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLEES) and Urbis¹ began developing the Future City Game during 2006. The starting point for partners was the need to develop a process which stimulated creative thinking whilst also generating new ideas for city development.

For CLES specifically, interest in the Game stemmed from a belief that traditional disciplines and policy-making surrounding corporate planning, regeneration, land-use planning and economic development could sometimes become bogged down with everyday constraints and bureaucracy. In contrast to this traditional approach, the Game offers a structured but enjoyable means of generating future thinking and new ideas.

Since 2006, the Game has undergone a rigorous period of piloting through which the development team visited a number of cities, including Oslo, Bogota, Manchester and Glasgow. To date the Game has been played and has assisted in the development of creative ideas in over 150 locations across Russia and Northern Europe.

This Local Work outlines the way in which the Game is played, including what makes its approach innovative, and highlights practical outputs from around the world. CLES' experience of acting as 'games-master' in Blackburn with Darwen is highlighted as a case study, demonstrating how the Game can be used to inform local economic and community development. Finally we present our current work with the Game, including work in the South West of England undertaken as part of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010.

The Future City Game

The Future City Game is a team-based process designed to create new thinking and actions to improve the quality of life in cities. It is a mechanism designed to stimulate original ideas about ways to tackle future global and local challenges in cities or neighbourhoods. It works both with and on

¹ The former Manchester exhibition centre focusing on city life

the skills and competencies of professionals and communities working in cities and involves players moving through a ten-step gaming process over a period of one or two days.

Whilst developed as a Game, the underpinning concept of the process is 'serious play'. This process has been validated by the Homes and Communities Agency Academy² which has recently approved the Game under their place-making recognition scheme. The competitive gaming element of the Game is crucial and reflected in its structure. 'Players' are divided into up to five teams who compete to produce a winning idea. The competition means that a dynamic is created which sharpens both players' minds and their intent to contribute as much of their experience and knowledge possible to developing the best (and winning) idea.

Teams are comprised of public, community, voluntary and private sector representatives. Players are brought together in this manner, in order to pool their experience and skills. Although these areas of experience are different, they are all equally valuable within the context of the team situation. Indeed, institutional, professional and individual barriers are quickly broken down as the Game is played and players move through the ten steps. The Game is led by a games-master, who takes responsibility for ensuring that momentum is sustained and players are thoroughly engaged in each stage.

The Future City Game is a registered Trade Mark owned by the British Council and CLES is the UK license holder. CLES is committed to using the Game as part of sustainable community planning, corporate visioning and corporate policy within local authorities and local strategic partnerships in the UK. The Game can be used to assist with ongoing strategic visioning and the development of signature ideas, both of which can contribute towards increasing the resilience of place. Delivering the Game within this context is key for CLES, and within this landscape CLES is currently working with a number of local authorities on playing the Game in this manner.

Key Features

At the outset of each Game, teams are briefed to bear in mind seven criteria as they play and develop their ideas. Ideas should be: fun, innovative and futuristic, meet local challenges, meet global challenges, sustainable, relevant to the community and importantly, be both feasible and achievable.

The criteria are deliberately designed to be contradictory and difficult to reconcile, which creates and forces imaginative thinking to develop ideas which straddle social, economic, cultural and environmental problems on both a global and local scale.

There are nine key features to the Future City Game:

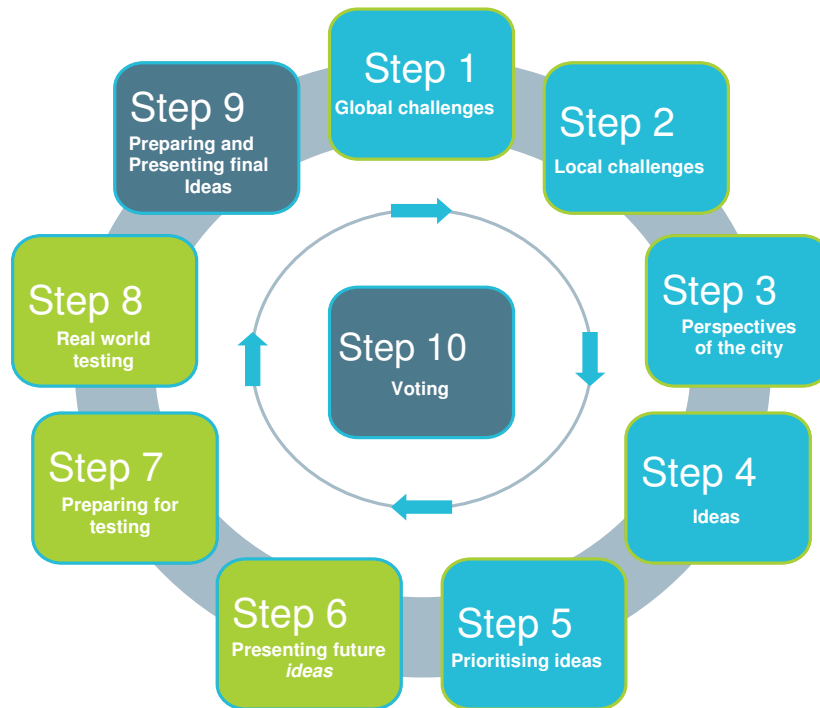
1. played over one or two days;
2. three distinct phases and ten steps to the Game (see the following section);
3. led by an impartial games-master;
4. involving up to 30 players in up to five teams;
5. the Game generates up to 50 ideas, with up to five fully thought through ideas;
6. the ideas can be a project, behaviour, action or policy;
7. teams compete on the basis of formulating a single winning idea;
8. teams comprise a mix of public, private, community and voluntary sector representatives;
9. the group work helps to stimulate creative thinking.

² www.recognition.homesandcommunities.co.uk

The Ten Steps of the Game

There are three stages of the Game (which are inclusive of ten steps). The three stages are visioning, testing and presenting. Figure 1 (page 3) provides a visual representation of the ten key stages which players move through, before a winning idea is voted on.

Figure 1 – the ten steps of the Future City Game



In brief, the ten stages are:

Step 1: Global Challenges - teams are firstly asked by the games-master to identify a number of challenges they feel are globally relevant or issues which are currently prevalent in the world. These can fall into the themes of social, economic, cultural and environmental (or may straddle more than one of these themes).

Step 2: Local Challenges - teams then identify social, economic, cultural and environmental challenges relevant to the geographic area in which the Game is being played. Areas can include a local authority administrative area, city, neighbourhood or site scale. Linkages and connections between global and local challenges are then considered by the teams.

Step 3: Perspectives of the City - the current balance between the social, economic, cultural and environmental make-up of the area in which the Game is being played is then considered by each team. The purpose of this is to develop thinking around whether the present status of the area is sustainable in the long-term or whether a different balance between the four factors is required in order for the area to truly flourish.

For example, if the economy of an area was felt to be particularly strong, but environmentally poor (with few green spaces or emphasis on this sector) a team may want to spend more time developing ideas which have environmental concerns at their heart.

Step 4: Developing ideas - teams then develop ten ideas based on the global and local challenges they have identified and the 'split' between the four key themes. They are reminded of the criteria for the development of ideas (fun, innovative, sustainable etc) and asked to identify one advantage and disadvantage of each idea.

Step 5: Prioritising ideas - the ten ideas are narrowed down to the two strongest contenders using a voting system internal to each team, using the criteria as guidance for ranking the ideas for their strength and suitability in addressing local challenges.

Step 6: Presenting future ideas - teams then present their two strongest ideas to the other teams and take questions. This has the dual purpose of helping to build ideas and expose potential weaknesses. Following this stage, the teams then select what they feel is their strongest idea to take forward for testing.

Step 7: Preparing for testing - teams consider which elements of their idea they wish to test, how they are going to test it, which groups or individuals they feel are crucial to consult with and how they are going to present their idea to these audiences.

Step 8: Real world testing – this can include a variety of methods including: visiting members of the community or community groups in the area in which the game is being played, speaking with expert advisors with knowledge of the local area and/or with wider social, economic or environmental expertise (this can be undertaken either face-to-face or via telephone with experts who have been pre-arranged in advance).

Step 9: Preparing and presenting final ideas - the penultimate stage builds on the previous testing stage, each team presents their chosen idea and puts forward the strongest case possible to support why their idea should be voted the winner.

Step 10: Voting - each player then votes privately for what they feel is the strongest idea (players cannot vote for their own team's idea) and the idea with the highest number of votes wins!

Real world examples

The Game has now been played and used to generate creative ideas in over 100 countries including Russia, Northern Europe and the UK. The following is a small sample of winning ideas recently generated and implemented:

- **Aarhus, Denmark** - the creation of a car free city centre with a new environmentally friendly tram system;
- **Moscow, Russia** – 'more nature, less architecture, Eco-strips', based on the green strips concept, a complex space which joins together different types of infrastructure to raise the ecological profile of the area;
- **Badoros, Hungary** - creation of a new multi-functional marketplace to reintroduce local shops into an area dominated by large supermarkets;
- **Lodz, Poland** - turning the main city street into a green ecological promenade.

For further examples, please see <http://www.creativecities.britishcouncil.org>.

One of the advantages of the international element of the Game is that a supportive network of players, games-masters and host cities has developed and is now in place; experience from which new players of the Game can benefit.

Closer to home, CLES has recently played the Game with Blackburn with Darwen's Local Strategic Partnership in order to support the development of the area's Vision 2030 process, as outlined in the case study below.

Case Study 1 – Blackburn with Darwen Strategic Partnership

During early 2009, Blackburn with Darwen Strategic Partnership agreed to develop a vision for 2030 as the high-level strategy to lead the development of future plans. The partnership was aware that it was often working on short-term plans, which focussed on either setting or monitoring performance targets; a process which was stifling creative and visionary thinking. The partnership decided therefore, that alongside consultation with residents from the Borough's five neighbourhood areas, the top-level partnership should be committed to innovative thinking and the taking of risks.

The Partnership adopted an ambitious programme of research, engagement and consultation in May 2009, involving residents, neighbourhoods, business and partners in the development of Vision 2030. The Partnership was clear that this process should involve innovative methods and approaches to encourage thinking about how both communities and businesses saw Blackburn with Darwen in 20 years time.

In light of this context, and following an extensive period of research in December 2009, the Future City Game was played by members of the Local Strategic Partnership over 2 days, with CLES playing the games-master role.

Players were provided with an economic, social, cultural and environmental current context briefing pertaining to Blackburn with Darwen and advised of future statistical projections to 2030. Players benefitted from a rigorous step eight (real world testing) during which they were able to test their ideas with a range of experts³ and representatives from panels of schoolchildren, businesses, neighbourhood boards, residents and the Blackburn with Darwen Interfaith Forum.

The use of new media techniques added an additional dimension to the playing of the Game, with tweeting, blogging and local and national news coverage brought into play. A series of podcasts were also created⁴ and the top four ideas were presented on Blackburn with Darwen's 2030 Vision web-site⁵.

The winning idea was 'Electra', which focused on the potential widespread availability of electric cars vehicles across the borough in the future, taking advantage of new long range plug in electric vehicle technology. Electra was included as an exemplar project in Vision 2030, which was launched at a conference in February 2010. Vision 2030 will lead the development of the sustainable communities strategy and the next Local Area Agreement for Blackburn.

³ Experts included Toby Blume, Chief Executive, Urban Forum, Brenton Caffin, Chief Executive, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, Alan Harding, Professor of Urban and Regional Governance and Director of IPEG, University of Salford and Alex Jones, formerly Associate Director of The Work Foundation and now CEO of the Centre for Cities.

⁴ <http://www.ftlimageworks.net/britishcouncil1w.html>

⁵ http://vision2030.bwd.public-i.tv/viewfinder_core/

The European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010: Playing the Game in South West England

CLES was awarded a grant by the Department of Work and Pensions to host Future City Games in the South West of England as part of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010 (EY2010)⁶. The Game was used as a forum for discussing area-based challenges in relation to working age poverty, for example examining issues of worklessness, youth unemployment and welfare dependency. Case study 2 below outlines the focus and outcomes of the Game in Bristol.

Case Study 2 – Bristol City Council

The Future City Game took place in Bristol on 9th and 10th November 2010. The focus of the Game was upon creating new ideas to tackle worklessness in the City. Working in partnership with Bristol City Council the Game included players from the council's Economic Development Team, Job Centre Plus, employment brokers in the private and voluntary and community sectors, and importantly people from across Bristol with real life experience of being workless.

Prior to undertaking the Game, CLES also held a series of focus groups with residents from across the City to discuss barriers to employment. Working with employment agencies we held focus groups with lone parents, young people, over 50s, people with disabilities, and people from black and minority ethnic communities. The message from these groups was that there was a significant willingness to re-engage with the labour market but a series of place based and institutional barriers facing them in doing so. These barriers included childcare, transport connectivity and perceptions amongst employers.

The findings of the focus groups were used in step 2 of the Game around identifying local challenges. With a specific focus upon one theme, steps 1 to 3 of the Game were played as normal with the ideas step (step 4) honing in on creating the best idea to tackle worklessness in Bristol. On the second day we were joined by a series of experts⁷ to debate and improve the ideas.

The 'winning' idea was for the development of Compass Village North, an eco-village built by unemployed people; serviced by unemployed people; and resided in by unemployed people and their families. The village would be home to some 2000 people with sustainability achieved through the growth of local food and the development of new enterprise. The village would be built on land previously allocated for physical development and would include full consultation with the wider community.

The Future City Game in Bristol was inherently linked to responding to current issues and policy developments, particularly the Work Programme. The Future City Game was also played with the Cornwall Strategic Partnership on 8th December 2010 with a focus upon big society and tackling poverty in the locality's rural communities.

⁶ Further information about UK EY2010 can be found at: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/european-year-2010/>

⁷ Experts in Bristol were: Dave Simmonds, Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion; June Burrough, Pierian Centre; David Draycott, West of England Partnership; Sue Keogh, Jobcentre Plus; and Kevin Tinsley, Government Office for the South West

Final Thoughts

Given the challenges facing local government as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review, local authorities will increasingly be looking for new, innovative and cost effective ways of delivering change in their communities. The Future City Game is a key mechanism for bringing together both stakeholders and residents to discuss the future of place.

Neil McInroy, Chief Executive of CLES, is both a qualified games-master and a games-master trainer, having trained games-masters in six different countries including Poland, Russia and Denmark. Sarah Longlands and Matthew Jackson at CLES are also trained games-masters. For further information about the Future City Game and how it can be used in your area contact Sarah on 0161 236 7036 or sarahlonglands@cles.org.uk

Local Work is one of a series of regular policy reports produced by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). CLES is the leading membership organisation in the UK dedicated to economic development, regeneration and local governance. CLES undertakes a range of activities including independent research, events and training, publications and consultancy. CLES also manages the monthly New Start digital magazine, through its new CLES online service, which provides comprehensive analysis and commentary on current policy and good practice.

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