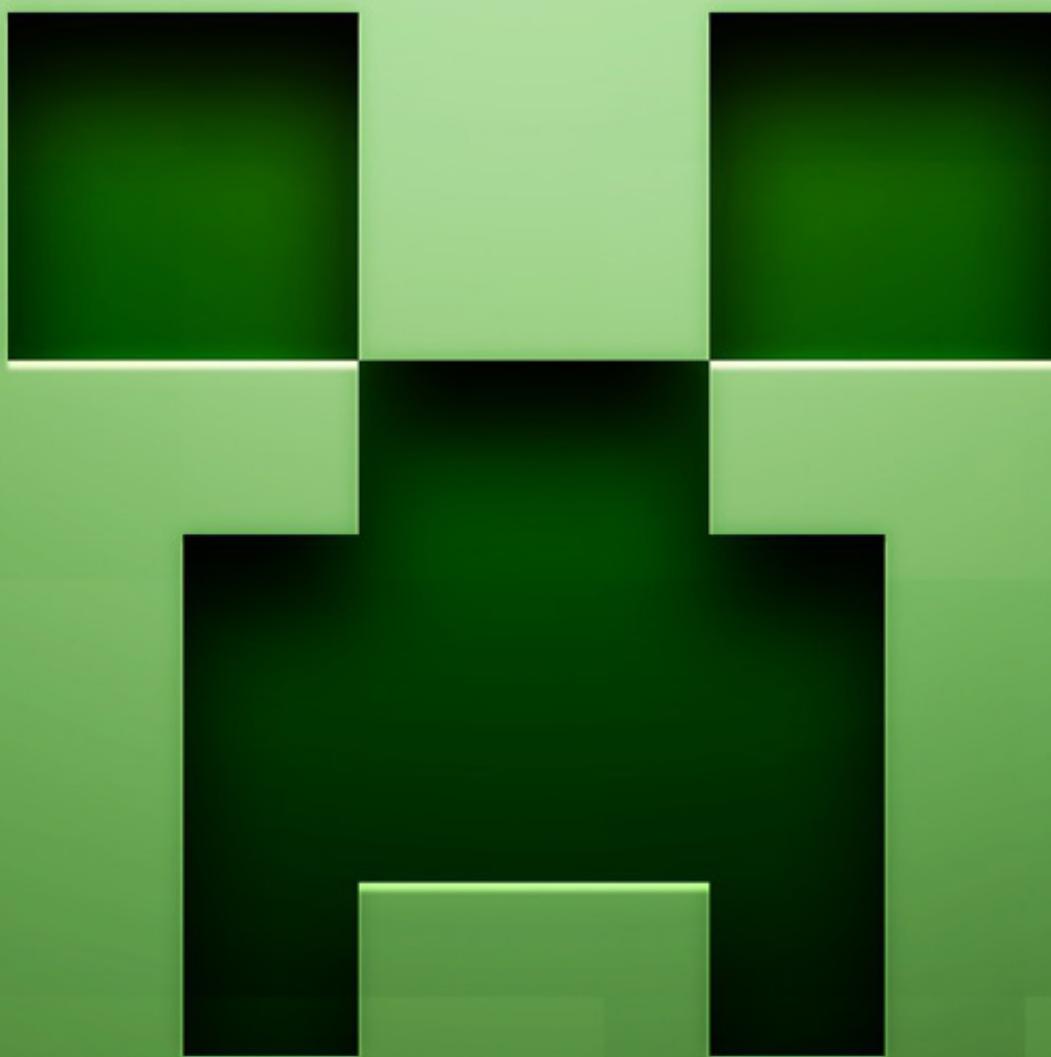


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Block by Block: 'Innocence' and 'Filiality' as spillover factors of participation

A short reflection about ICT participatory programmes by Lorenzo Balugani



Acknowledgements

This paper was written for the Master course in Building and Urban Design in Development of the Development Planning Unit at the University College of London.

Despite the simplicity of some of the reflections contained here, we decided to publish it in order to keep trace of our learning process, which is, and will always be, an unfinished work open to critiques and further ruminations.

Introduction

According to Jacques Rancière, 'politics' "does not exist because men, through the privilege of speech, place their interest in common. Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves on some account" (Rancière, 1999, pag. 27). Conversely, 'police' defines the run-of-the-mill activity to delineate the possible boundaries of life in its threefold nature of 'doing, speaking and being'. In this wake politics, rather than being just a counter-conduct, is always a creative process of subjectivation that confutes given identities, roles, meanings; in other words, the existing order of society itself. This distinction, in my opinion, is at the core of whatever discourse on participation.

Indeed, if on one hand 'participation' may be used as a deliberative device of governance based on consensus building, on the other the increasing diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies in participatory processes suggests the possibility of a positive shifts in political terms.

In any case, technology alone does not appear as sufficient to foster more equal and participatory society, as comes out from the distinction that, namely, Sennett operated between 'closed' and 'open systems' (Sennett, 2018).

This brief contribute is organized in three main sections. The first one aims to provide some background information about Block by Block, a joint ICT participatory programme created by Mojang, Microsoft and UNHABITAT that uses the videogame Minecraft to foster youth engagement in urban design worldwide. The section includes as well some basic information about Minecraft itself and the community that has grown up around it.

The section that follows proposes some critical reflections about the reason why youth engagement in ICT programmes should be fostered.

By concluding I will collect some personal reflections on how digital participation may be useful for promoting transversal emancipation processes.

The Block by Block approach

From the very first moment in which Minecraft was released in 2010s, it soared an incredible popularity worldwide by superseding video-ludic icons such as Tetris, and so eventually becoming the best selling video game ever in 2020, with more than 176 million copies sold worldwide (Persson, 2019). Naturally, this outpouring success has not passed unnoticed by practitioners and scholars as well, who, on the contrary, immediately glimpsed in this 'digital lego' a powerful lever for promoting innovative participatory urban design approaches.

Before introducing then one of the most interesting participatory programmes that leans on this software, such as Block by Block, we have to better understand what Minecraft actually is and the reasons beneath its incredible success.

Minecraft is a sandbox computer game that provides the players the opportunity to creatively model buildings, landscapes, cities or even entire worlds in a digital environment where only few rules are given. The 'Creative Mode' in particular allows to build custom structures within a 3D grid universe by placing or destroying block units of different materials (grass blocks, concrete blocks, even jelly ones) in a very simple and fast way.

At the same time users can play the videogame both offline and online, by joining or opening specific servers with other players worldwide and building together in real time.

Furthermore, the computer

graphic of the game has been intentionally designed in a retrò fashion, in contrast with the general trend of contemporary videogames that increasingly aim to blur the line between virtual and real worlds.

This, on one hand, has basically allowed Mojang, the video-game company, to distribute a video-ludic product with "minimum hardware requirements which makes it easy to play and set up, and it provides multiplayer possibility" (Rexhepi et al., 2018, pag. 117). On the other hand, **the abstract and geometrical appearance of Minecraft universes are helpful in participatory design contexts since they foster critical thinking and bypass the bad habit to open design discussion on hyper realistic images.**

The general interface is quite intuitive as well since it contains only few, clear navigation controls and so that does not require high levels of digital literacy to be understood. In this wake, the modelling environment itself is designed to convey abstract thoughts by taking distance from the traditional interface of professional softwares: "Minecraft gives examples of a creation toolset that led users to create structures that would be outside the normal thought space of traditional digital creative software such as Rhinoceros 3D. These softwares take emergent digital design techniques and structure them in an interactive educational environment that becomes accessible to anyone" (Holth, 2017, pag. 32, corsive by the author).

Furthermore, different versions of the game provide the possibility

to play both on PC and mobile devices, which significantly increases the possibility of using it for urban design purposes on field. [fig.1]

At the same time Mojang, rather than breaking aesthetic rules only, went even forward with Minecraft. In 2018 indeed, a blog post on the official website announced that different parts of the game's code were been released open-source: "Libraries are little parts of the game engine, we're making some of the self-contained libraries that Minecraft uses open source. Anyone can pick them up and use them in their own game." (Stone, 2018).

This suffices to introduce another crucial point on Minecraft communities.

Starting from the very beginning, Minecraft has always counted on the existence of a increasing number of e-communities gathering players from all around the world.

Far from being just 'fan clubs' these digital environments convene users that constantly exchange tips and plugings among each other, resulting in the creation of a number of parallel open-source tools, 'mods' and softwares that interact with the main videogame in very different ways. In this regard we could mention BlockBench, WorldPainter and McEdit, just to name a few indie softwares that have been developed by Minecraft players since 2012.

In a similar fashion, the analysis of the uploaded Minecraft related contents on Youtube informs us on the outstanding dimension of these communities: "Until June, Youtube videos about Minecraft were viewed more

than 30.8 billion times. And beware, because of these views, 'only' 183 million came from the official channel of Mojang" (Parlangeli, 2014, translated by the author).

These data hence proves that Minecraft has definitely become a familiar universe to a considerable number of people worldwide, of which children represent just a part.

Due to the incredible success of this computer game, UNHABITAT launched in 2012 (only few years after the creation of Minecraft) a joint programme in collaboration with Mojang and Microsoft, 'Block by Block', which had the main purpose to test the video-game as an ICT tool for the fostering of innovative participatory urban design processes.

The pilot programmes of 'Block by Block' have been tested in

2012, respectively in Nairobi and Mumbai, and they had been designed with the scope of engaging a diverse spectrum of "people who don't typically have a voice in public projects - from women and kids to elders, disabled residents, and refugees" (Block by Block, no date) [fig.2]. To achieve this "Block by Block gives neighborhood residents the training, the tools, and the platform to participate and contribute their ideas, in a collaborative process that helps all participants expand their view" (ibidem).

Despite, finally, a common grounded acknowledgment that this specific approach aims to empower different marginalized categories, more reflections are needed on the meaning of youth participation.

In this regard, indeed, we cannot notice how youth, and

in particular the ones living in the so-called Global South countries, are at the very center of these experimentations. Then, the general question I pose here is: "Why youth engagement?".



Figure 1: Comparison between real and virtual urban environments in Minecraft. Image provided by the author, 2021.



Figure 2: A team of women works to design the Beit Lahia community garden with the help of Minecraft. Credit: UN-Habitat, 2017

Why youth engagement?

Youth engagement in urban design may be considered controversial in ethical terms under different aspects respectively by scholars, practitioners, institutions or by civil society as well.

In this regard, possible opinions bearing this position should not only be considered before arguing the uncountable advantages of a systemic youth involvement in participatory decision making processes, but they could equally arise a number of strong counter arguments on which many, including myself, may justly agree under certain circumstances.

Additionally, the distrust of policies and programmes fostering children participation in urban debates, rather than

being just a possible scenario in theory, actually risks to disgorge into concrete ethical or political discussions in practice in many field contexts.

Indeed, if on one hand youth undoubtedly makes up what Ranci re would call a 'part that has no part' in almost every planning context by representing a neglected 'class' consigned in the backdrop of debates about public spaces; **participatory frameworks can be hostile places for children on the other, and force the latter to meddle with processes in which underlying political tensions, conflicts and complex interests are at stake.**

At the same time, in the opinion of an increasing number of practitioners, youth engagement is actually perceived both as a necessity, an ethical duty and a solution

for promoting innovative and more inclusive approaches in the field of participatory design. This becomes all the more evident if we look at processes that lean on Information and Communication Technologies platforms.

According to the wording of Westerberg and von Heland, namely: "youth are at the center of the ICT revolution, both as drivers and consumers of technological innovation.

They are almost twice as networked as the global population as a whole, with the ICT age gap more pronounced in least developed countries where young people are up to three times more likely to be online than the general population" (Westerberg and von Heland, 2015, pag.1).

Drawing on these assumptions, - and by equally

considering the global distribution of young population [fig.3], the growth paces of urbanization and demography - youth engagement proves to be more than an ethical commitment and to address practical urgencies in the so-called Global South countries: “the situation of underrepresentation of youth in decision-making processes today can be viewed as a real threat to the future of sustainable societies where the youth majority must accept to live by the rules of the minority” (Rexhepi et al., 2018, pag. 116).

Finally, we would be well-advised not to forget the potential role that ICT programmes could play in educational terms; indeed: “research shows that ICT use by youth can have a direct impact on increasing civic engagement, giving them new avenues through which to become informed, shape opinions, get organized, collaborate and take action” (Westerberg and von Heland, 2015, pag.1).

In other words, ICT participatory programmes such as ‘Block by Block’ could provide unprecedented hotbeds for the forging of critical thinking and the social empowerment of children, which so that could start to be finally counted as young citizens rather than only ‘so cute’ kids at play. Notwithstanding some critics could arise here on two points, at least.

First, that not all the countries face the same growth patterns in the increase of young population, thus not everywhere kids engagement can be legitimized to the point of a ‘pragmatical necessity’.

Second, that the act of ‘educating’ itself may be both a

wishful intention and a possible trapdoor: it is not actually possible to ‘farm’ citizens. Rather than being a product of education only, citizenship is always a personal choice and, more specifically, the political stance of existing in the city, which is never learned but always taken.

As Freire would probably say on that, the boundaries of ‘revolution’ and politics (in the meaning of Rancière) are always blurred into the ones of education, only when ‘education’ is intended as a creative process of learning and emancipation (Freire, 2005).

In this regard I do not confute then neither the educational role played by ICT participatory programmes, nor the role of education itself in fostering the ‘change’: I just want to warn about the fact that youth engagement does not only serve to assure that “new generations will join the ranks of adulthood well prepared” as Larson stated (Rexhepi et al., 2018, pag. 115); on the contrary, it has to be clearly framed as a critical space for the transversal subjectivation of the ‘oppressed’ as a whole. In addition, someone could romantically notice that children’s creativity is unrivalled: youth, in a way, can think outside of the grown-up attitudes to prejudices, fears and plea bargains.

Personally, I am convinced that scholars interested in ICT participation have already done enough in listing the educational values of ICT programmes, as well their overarching ethical reasons or the ‘necessity’ they proved to represent in ‘developing’ countries.

All too often the latter argument

in particular has been overused in the literature; and if we acknowledge that the majority of Block by Block workshops in recent years have been organized in the so-called Global South countries, we easily understand how the theoretical innovative drive of these approaches could possibly fade out.

Furthermore, a number of serenades have been played about children’s creativity as well. I find no deception in this, just a pinch of romanticism.

This said, other points have to be presented to clearly glimpse the sheer-scale of youth engagement and ICT programmes, and this necessarily passes by a reflection on the ‘child’ itself.

It is my opinion that rather than ‘creativity’ only, children hide more outstanding superpowers, among which the main ones are definitely ‘innocence’ and ‘filiality’.

Starting from innocence: children are blameless by nature. Despite the plenty of crimes that are constantly perpetrated against minors worldwide, it should be naïve to ignore that, in the public opinion, children are generically considered ‘untouchable’.

Not by chance, crimes against minors are some of the most punished among convicts themselves in many countries. It can be cynical, but I glimpse an incredible opportunity here as well. In this regard indeed, the empowered linkage between children’s innocence and their creativity is precisely that mixture that paves the way for those subjectivities that ‘political powers’ find as the more difficult ones to be clawed and confined

within their dollhouses.

This does not entail, in any case, that children have to be intentionally used as battering hams for the struggles of others. On the contrary, it provokes that their systemic and honest engagement, which always has to be ethically weighted, may unintentionally unveil underlying narratives and powers that no one had the capability to pillory with success before.

By speaking then beneath the rare armour of impunity, children could actually open new spaces for the pursuing of more tough campaigns.

Then, *on the ashes of the digital 'playground', veritable battlefields could be imagined.*

Spillover

During these pandemic times we gradually started to get acquainted with a number of new terminologies which most of us ignored before.

One of these terms is certainly 'spillover' which, scientifically speaking, refers to the cross-

species leap of pathogens from a reservoir population to novel host ones.

Despite here the clearly unfortunate parallelism brought by the rhetoric in literal terms, I invite the reader to consider the goodness of the analogy according to a twofold reflection.

First that, in policial terms, the bounds between 'social classes' and 'animal species' could appear as more nuanced than expected.

Indeed, both of these categories are meant to associate the individual with a certain level of discursive capacities and, consequently with a voice that could be intended once as 'speech-like' and the other as 'noise-like' instead. Both Rancière in Disagreement and Aristotle in the Politics have longly drawn on this.

Second, that *the concept of 'cross-species leap' allows us to introduce a very important criteria with which we could possibly start to assess ICT participatory processes, in addition to the rungs already identified by the Arnstein's Ladder* (Arnstein,

1969, pag. 26). In this wake, I would say that *the 'goodness' of ICT participatory methodologies may be equally rated in relation to their capacity to enable spontaneous and cross-cutting subjectivations between diverse social stakeholders.*

In more direct relation with the discussion I proposed previously, youth appear then as key actors to enhance transversal 'infective' processes of emancipation. It is here than children's 'filiality' appears as a second key factor in ICT youth engagement which possibly may extend the reach of participatory programmes to a broader plethora of citizens, starting from the relatives, which had not the opportunity to join previous public debates in institutional contexts.

Indeed, despite this has been undoubtedly considered in some terms by 'Block by Block' practitioners: "the youth participants with their high ICT literacy can become a facilitator for the senior citizens in a way that they can help them by including their opinions during the joint

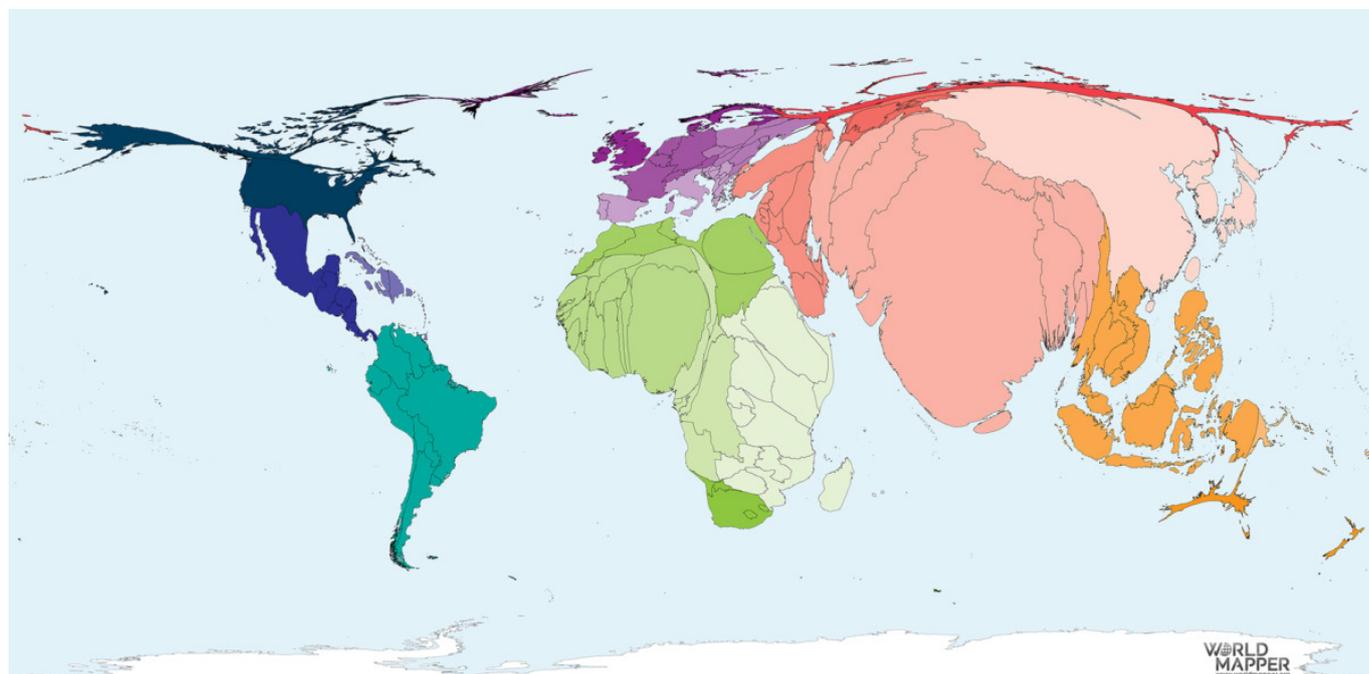


Figure 3: WorldMapper.com (2017). Distribution of all children between age 5-14 living in the world in 2015. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial - ShareAlike 4.0 International License

design effort” (Rexhepi et al., 2018, pag. 118); I generally find a profound reflection on this point as lacking in the related literature. How, then, can we theoretically bear this position? Both Rancière and Deleuze contributes may be useful for this purpose.

Thereby, if on one hand a deleuzian analysis of Foucault’s work clearly outlined how subjectivation is a relational process that has nothing to do with the trivial reintroduction of the ‘subject’ (Deleuze, 2020, pp. 160-161); on the other, the ‘part of those who have no part’ defines in Rancière a multitude that cannot be identified with a particular social group.

Hence, any process of political subjectivation, which participatory programmes should foster, is a process that transcend given identities.

On the wake of these ruminations then, we can easily state that participatory processes should not be assessed for their grip they may have on specific communities, rather in relation with their capacity to be appropriated and to bear processes of trans-subjectivation.

This trans-subjectivation rather than simply glossing over the artificial social homogeneities introduced by political powers, should be better defined, following here Guattari, as a ‘procedural heterogeneity’ (Deleuze, 2020, pag. 141).

It is my opinion that ICT programmes, as the ones described, may have a significant potential only if we conceive them in this fashion, and that the arguments legitimizing youth engagement should be more frequently oriented towards this direction.

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