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Christy Nishita & Tyran Terada

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## FROM THE FIELD



### Media Review

# Building Virtual Age-Friendly Communities in Minecraft

Christy Nishita and Tyran Terada

Center on Aging, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA

#### ABSTRACT

A key theme of Age-Friendly Honolulu's initiative is intergenerational exchange. The initiative believes that youth need to be aware of aging issues, demographic change, and think critically about the potential impact on their lives. The goal of the Age-Friendly Honolulu Youth Engagement Initiative is to teach youth about the role of the built environment and community features in promoting active aging and engagement among older adults. This article describes a new program in the field that teaches youth and older adults to assess the built environment and then use design thinking and Minecraft (a popular video game in which players use 3-D blocks to create virtual lands) to develop and envision ideas to improve the livability of their neighborhood.

#### KEYWORDS

Age-friendly communities;  
community building;  
intergenerational  
programming

## Introduction

Communities across the country and globe are engaged in initiatives to become more “age-friendly”. Broadly, the goal is to change programs, policies, and the built environment in order to make communities livable for persons of all ages and abilities. Among our oldest citizens, these cities can promote active aging and maximize community engagement. Honolulu began its age-friendly city planning in 2013, with the support of Honolulu's Mayor and AARP Hawaii. Such an initiative is crucial for our state, given that Hawaii is aging more rapidly than the rest of the United States, and leads the nation in healthy life expectancy. After a year-long planning period which included public input, an Action Plan was completed in 2015. Since then, an implementation committee and workgroups was formed, comprised of members from city departments, nonprofits, academia, and private sector to take steps to improve housing, transportation, outdoor spaces, employment and volunteer opportunities, and community programs and health services for its kupuna (Hawaiian for older adult).

A key theme of Age-Friendly Honolulu (AFH) is intergenerational exchange. It is a priority for this city initiative for several reasons. First, youth need to be aware of aging issues, demographic change, and think critically about the potential impact on their lives and for citizens as



a whole. Second, raising awareness is important in reducing ageism or negative perceptions of aging. Third, youth need to be empowered to take action and invested in creating a better future for themselves. Age-friendly city efforts not only benefit current cohorts of elders, but strive to make programmatic and policy changes that improve the quality of life for future cohorts as well.

## **Description of project**

The goal of AFH's Youth Engagement Initiative is to teach youth about the role of the built environment and community features in promoting active aging and engagement among older adults. This article describes one workshop within this initiative – its intergenerational Minecraft (a popular video game in which players use 3-D blocks to create virtual lands) workshop. The learning objectives for this workshop are to: (1) increase awareness about aging issues and the barriers in the built environment that may present difficulties for frail older adults; (2) build empathy and understanding through intergenerational interaction; and (3) use design thinking and Minecraft to explore age-friendly design solutions.

The workshop proceeded in three phases:

## ***Assessing the community through an intergenerational walk audit***

First, AFH hosted a workshop at the World Youth Congress in Honolulu on June 2017. The Congress was sponsored by Peace Child International and brought together nearly 300 local and international youth leaders to gather and identify actions to support achievement of the United Nations 2015 Sustainability Goals. To begin the workshop, youth delegates were given an introduction and background on aging issues, demographic change, and the need for age-friendly cities. Then, youth delegates were taken to Honolulu's Chinatown, an older neighborhood located close to downtown Honolulu. This area was selected because it was slated for Complete Streets development, so it represented an opportunity for youth delegates to be part of timely policy and urban development discussions.

Youth delegates, ranging in age from 14 to 20, were paired with older adult volunteers from a local senior center and assisted living facility. These older adult volunteers were selected because they either lived in Chinatown, currently live in Chinatown, or have distinct childhood memories of Chinatown. This criterion was used so that students could benefit from their perspective, and the older adult volunteers could share memories and discuss how Chinatown has changed.

Each team of 3–4 youth and older adults utilized a walk audit form to examine one of three themes: (1) safety and accessibility (the streets and intersections are safe and accessible for persons of all ages and abilities, and using aids such as including wheelchairs, walkers, and strollers), (2) getting active (outdoor spaces that encourages exercise and other physical activity), and (3) a gathering place

(places that encourage older and younger generations to interact, relax and enjoy each other). These themes provided a lens from which to view and analyze the neighborhood. The walk audit form included a checklist to note whether each barrier or feature was present/absent as well as a map and blank spaces for students to note observations and draw arrows to the place on the map. Each team spent 30 min walking, taking pictures, and completing the audit form in approximately at 3–4 city block area of Chinatown. The form was adapted and simplified from AARP's Walk Audit Toolkit (AARP, 2016).



### ***Developing ideas and minecraft***

In phase two, youth headed back to the classroom with the older adult volunteers for a debriefing and discussion about what was observed. Staying in the same teams, older adult volunteers were able to share memories with youth of Chinatown and how it has changed over time. Through discussion and a design thinking process, facilitated by the workshop coordinator, each team came up with an age-friendly idea to improve the livability of the Chinatown neighborhood.

Minecraft was used as a tool to envision and visualize age-friendly changes to Honolulu's Chinatown. Minecraft is an internationally popular game in which players use 3-D blocks to create virtual lands and is a popular teaching tool in the classroom (Edutopia, 2016). In preparation for the workshop, a local secondary school teacher in Honolulu, Hawaii who teaches game design, coding, and Minecraft, created a virtual replica of Honolulu's Chinatown in Minecraft. During the workshop, teams were given a tutorial on using Minecraft from the teacher and were introduced to the virtual replica of Honolulu's Chinatown. In the virtual world, the teams identified the area of Chinatown that they were targeting, and used Minecraft to rebuild it and become more-age-friendly. This phase of the workshop project lasted two and a half hours. In that time, teams built virtual age-friendly features in Chinatown including a community garden and a community gathering area with ample benches and shade.



An evaluation survey was administered to youth and older participants following the walk audit and Minecraft activity. The survey assessed satisfaction with project activities, understanding and comprehension of age-friendly city concepts, benefits from intergenerational contact, and areas of improvement. Survey responses ( $n = 9$ , 33% of workshop participants) indicate that both older and younger participants understood the purpose of the activity, the term age-friendly and key components of age-friendliness. Participants were highly satisfied with working in small, intergenerational groups in order to design the age-friendly community. The majority of old and young respondents indicated that they felt comfortable sharing ideas and empowered by the activities. Participants also indicated that they needed more time for the debriefing and design phase of the

workshop in order to think through their age-friendly ideas and complete the Minecraft activity.

### ***Sharing the virtual minecraft world in the community***

The third phase was to disseminate and share the age-friendly, Minecraft world with other youth to expand the visibility and reach of AFH's youth engagement initiative. An opportunity was identified, an annual Children and Youth Day at the Hawaii State Capitol grounds that attracts thousands of attendees annually.

AFH's booth at this event featured the age-friendly Chinatown Minecraft world. Before watching the virtual reality video, a quick introduction was given to the youth describing why an age-friendly city is important. While wearing the goggles, the youth could turn their heads and look around the age-friendly Chinatown world. After the video, youth were asked about their impressions and feedback through a short survey. Surveys were collected from 89 visitors to the booth, whose age ranged from 7 to 17 years old. Findings indicated that:

- 78% either agreed or strongly agreed that they understand what the term age-friendly means
- 81% either agreed or strongly agreed that they understand what an age-friendly city looks like (after the virtual reality experience)
- 75% either agreed or strongly agreed that they understand how an age-friendly city can benefit older adults like their grandparents
- 83% either agreed or strongly agreed that they want to live in an age-friendly city

### **Lessons learned**

There were several lessons learned from this workshop. First, success required strong collaborative partners. The AFH initiative utilized expertise from within its implementation committee members, including the City and County of Honolulu's Complete Streets Administrator, who was on hand to facilitate discussion of walk audit findings. In addition, AFH identified and engaged schools, a senior center, and an assisted living facility as part of this project and all partners were enthusiastic and valued the importance of intergenerational programs. The other key partner was the Minecraft teacher who understood the educational value of the project and used his expertise to recreate the Chinatown area within Minecraft.

Second, adequate preparation was a key to preparing youth and older adults for the project. At the beginning of the workshop, youth listened to a presentation about the aging of our population and the need for an age-friendly city, which provided them with background and context needed to

analyze and assess community features. This step was critical in order for youth to understand and appreciate the real-world relevance of the activity. However, more time needed to be spent on the discussion of environmental barriers and the impact of unsafe and inaccessible areas on older adults. Also as part of the preparation, older adult participants were carefully selected based on their ability to physically and cognitively participate in the activity. But more importantly, older adults had either grown up in Chinatown or had memories of frequenting the area during their childhood. This step allowed older adults to be seen as an asset with valuable perspective and memories to contribute during discussions about the walk audit and inform age-friendly ideas.

Third, the ability to connect the walkability audit and Minecraft activity was critical. It was very valuable for participants to walk around and analyze a neighborhood alongside an older adult who provided his/her perspective. Minecraft was a valuable tool to be creative and visualize ideas and to apply a familiar and popular game in new ways. However, more time was needed in the design-thinking phase. In addition, providing examples of solutions from other cities are useful, but a balance is needed, so as to encourage participants to think outside the box and come up with their own ideas.

## Next steps

The AFH initiative will continue its efforts to hold similar workshops in different parts of the city and with different groups of older adults and students. The initiative will improve its workshop components based on lessons learned, continue to collect data, and analyze potential outcomes for participants as well as for the community. AFH will strive to ensure that these intergenerational workshops raise awareness, empathy, and facilitate community input on age-friendly changes to the built environment. An age-friendly community needs to be inclusive of persons of all ages and abilities and at the oldest ages, individuals need to have ample opportunities to be engaged and valued. This intergenerational Minecraft workshop embraces the benefits of intergenerational relationships for both older adults and young persons, and demonstrates that these connections are even more beneficial when their combined efforts support the improvement of their community.

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