

Alternative Protocols: Addenda to the Community Action Workbook

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ABSTRACT

The 1964 Economic Opportunities Act laid the groundwork for community engagement in cities throughout the United States, calling for “*maximum feasible participation*” [1]. Despite the fact that these programs led to the increased participation of chronically under-represented residents in local governments, they have long been classified as abject failures [2]. As a result, participatory protocols in cities across the United States have since been designed with a focus on capital expenditure, rather than on their capacity to build political power within communities [3].

This project asks what community engagement in the United States might have been had the federal government maintained a commitment to maximum participation. It examines this question through the form of a series of Alternative Protocols.

To develop Alternative Protocols, extensive worldbuilding is required. This work presents the act of building a world, and the participatory barriers it introduces, as a new method of design engagement. In doing so, I hope that this process might also demonstrate the possibilities that are enabled and limited through the “*mundane and practical modes of co-design interactions*” [4].

Author Keywords

Alternative Histories; Community Action Programs; Community Engagement; Protocols; Worldbuilding

Alternative Histories

What if the 1968 general election in the United

States, an election characterized by assassination and widespread demonstration, ultimately ended in the surprise nomination of Minnesota Senator Eugene J. McCarthy to the Office of the President?

What if, following the immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, the Administration and Congress swiftly reallocated funds from the war chest back towards former-president Johnson’s Great Society programs? Most notably, the Community Action and Model Cities Programs might have received increases in funding in recognition of their modest gains in the “software” of governance – increasing civic participation and propelling black residents into delegatory seats of power [2]. The programs, which dispensed grants for anti-poverty projects, required the “*maximum feasible participation*” of those who stood to gain from such projects. This led to the establishment, across the country, of Neighborhood Councils comprised of residents wielding various levels of coercive influence and discretion over the administration of programs and the use of federal funding. Many of these Councils acted as springboards for participating residents to enter into broader electoral politics, and the increased funding could have led to the continued development of more sophisticated methods for coalescing neighborhood organizations into Councils, building capacity within communities [5].



Figure 1. Scenes from an alternative history of the Community Action Programs, featuring Oakland, CA residents.

Artifacts

This counterfactual history is recorded in the form of a wiki, where it can be updated, edited, and tested. By recording these alternative histories in this way, they started to take shape as an alternative world; an ecosystem of stories that began to generate new stories [6]. The building of this world, and its ongoing cataloguing, supports the design of a series of speculative participatory methods, added as supplements to the 1965 Community Action Program Workbook, originally released by the now-defunct federal Office of Economic Opportunity [7].

Together, the wiki and workbook outline alternative histories, open these histories to participatory engagement, and focus them into Alternative Protocols that demonstrate what could-have-been.

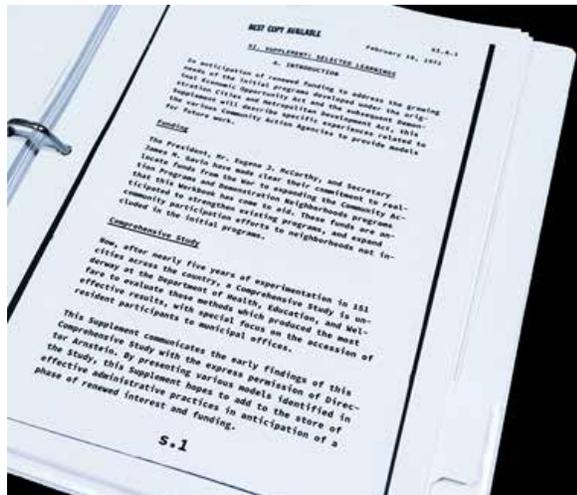


Figure 2. Alternative Protocols added to the Community Action Workbook.

REFLECTION

There are two aspects to this project work that might contribute to participatory design practice and research.

The first was the surprising amount of worldbuilding required to begin prototyping even modest speculative protocols. The process of building a world was found to be highly generative in developing new modes of engagement. But it is not without fault. Worldbuilding is often a top-down practice; a singular worldbuilder designing a singular world. J.R.R. Tolkien sums it up best, referring to this process as “*a secret vice*” [8]. As such, it became important to explore ways of opening up this mode of research to participation. By compiling the worldbuilding efforts as a wiki, a platform which

is known to be open to collaboration, editing, and piecemeal contribution, I strove to communicate, through affect, that these histories are in a constant state of being written and unwritten. However, the experiences participants have in encountering this information was found to be of importance, as well. Simply setting up a platform was not enough to invite participation. Much of the project work became dedicated to experimenting with designed experiences that might invite participatory worldbuilding.



Figure 3. A link to communityaction.wiki, where alternative histories of the Community Action Programs are catalogued and opened-up to participation.

Then there are the Alternative Protocols themselves. While they might be interpreted simply as speculative artifacts, they are designed with an eye for their potential to possess a “*double ontology*” [9]. Not simply speculative, Alternative Protocols could feasibly be deployed in actual, present contexts. They are designed so that, if enacted under current conditions, they may present opportunities for the modern participatory designer to gently “*trick*” civic systems into distributing coercive power more meaningfully [10]. In so doing, they might serve as a bridge between present worlds and collectively imagined alternatives.

I hope this work contributes to ongoing conversations about how participatory design might collectively imagine worlds and bring them into being.

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