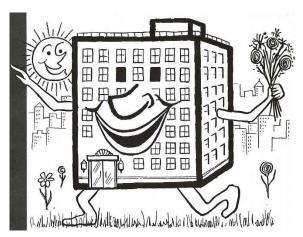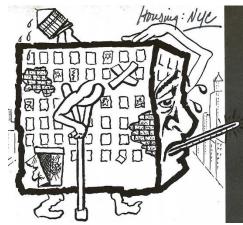# GAME DEVELOPER SOUGHT!

Image credit: NYC Dept. of Housing Preservation and Development, *Home Sick? Try House Sense*, 1985.

We are inviting game designers and developers to submit proposals for a resource management educational game about the challenges of owning and managing a rental building in New York City.

Submit your application by June 17, 2016

1. **BACKGROUND**

Citizens Housing & Planning Council (CHPC) is a non-profit research and education organization focusing on housing policy in New York City. We serve as a resource to government officials and others responsible for making decisions about housing policy –helping them understand the practical effects of their policy decisions. We work closely with architects, real estate developers, property managers, urban planners, and others in the housing industry to understand what is happening in the field and advance practical public policies that will support and improve the housing stock of New York City.

CHPC is always striving to communicate its research in new, fun, and creative ways. We have organized museum exhibitions, commissioned theater plays, and created youtube videos to disseminate our work. In May 2015 we launched our first online educational simulation, *Inside the Rent*, which shows how construction costs affect the rents charged in new construction buildings. The simulation highlights some of the key drivers of construction costs and the policy tools available to government to help bring costs down in order to moderate rents (read more about *Inside the Rent* in Section 6).

CHPC is seeking a game design and development team to build a *new game* focusing on the policy aspects of long-term ownership and management of a rental building.

2. **THE NEW GAME**

a. *Overview:*

CHPC is seeking a team to design and develop a new resource management game to serve as an educational tool about the difficulties of owning and managing an existing rental building, particularly for small "mom and pop" owners (as opposed to large real estate companies). Managing housing in New York City is often viewed as an easy source of cash, but the reality is far more complex. CHPC wants to showcase this complexity in a fun, playful and educational way.

The main takeaway for the player should be that keeping a building in good financial and physical condition is extremely difficult and requires time, attention, expertise and budgeting skills, without which it is easy for a building to quickly fall into disrepair.

The game *is not* about making the most money as a building owner, but rather about managing the building effectively to keep it from deteriorating. **The player will win the game if he can maintain or improve the physical and financial condition of a building over a simulated period of time** (to be determined, but likely 15-30 years).

b. *Game structure:*

The game should be about resource management. Throughout the game a number of events will occur in the building that will affect its financial and/or physical condition. These will constitute the decision points in the game and are listed in more detail below.

The player can choose to respond to these events by making decisions that will modify the financial and/or physical condition of the building. These will constitute the inputs in the game and are listed in more detail below. It may be useful to think of these as a toolbox available to the player.

CHPC will develop numeric scores to track the physical and the financial condition of the building, which will determine winning or losing the game. Applicants are encouraged to think of creative ways of representing these numeric scores in the game.

Applicants should anticipate substantial interplay between decision points and inputs (how this interplay works will be determined by CHPC). For example, a player's input could have opposite outcomes depending on the specific circumstances of the game:

- If an event (decision point) results in the physical condition of the building deteriorating, the player may choose to increase rents (input) in order to fix the physical problem. While this can work, it can also backfire if rents are increased beyond a reasonable amount and it causes tenants to move out.

It is also possible that the likelihood of an event can change depending on the player's previous choices. For example:

- The likelihood that tenants will move out (event) increases if the building's physical condition falls below a certain score.

The interplay and the tradeoffs between these decisions are precisely what the game should be designed to convey. This is the complexity of managing a building that we want to show.

CHPC will conduct all the research to determine the various decision points and inputs, as well as the values associated with them and the scoring for the physical and the financial condition of the building. CHPC will provide this in Excel format.

c. *The narrative of the game:*

In proposing a narrative, it is important to keep the focus of the game *on the building* –not on its owner. Why? Because what is good for the owner may not necessarily be in the best interest of the building. For example, selling the building at a high price may benefit the owner but has the potential to saddle the building with high debt, which can result in deferred maintenance and deteriorating physical conditions in the building.

We struggled with something similar when we created *Inside the Rent*: we tried to shy away from playing the role of a real estate developer, so we created the role of an urban planner instead. The idea was that the urban planner was dictating the policy choices affecting the building, but this point was lost on most players (it was only explained in the introductory screen). We do not want this to happen again. **It is crucial that in the new game the player understands that he is not in the role of the owner.**

One possible idea is for the player to be a building manager who continues to take care of the building even if ownership changes. Or perhaps the player can be in the role of the building itself, which comes to life to address its own needs. **We look forward to your creative ideas and proposals.**

One possible way to think about the building is as a [Tamagotchi](#) –a helpless creature that needs someone to take care of it. Just as the Tamagotchi needs to be kept happy and well fed, the building needs to be maintained properly and occupied with tenants who are current on their rent. Every event requires a response, and the wrong response can precipitate new events which are more difficult to resolve.

A similar analogy is that of [a plant which oscillates between wilting and blooming](#). The plant will wilt if you do not water it –or if you water it too much. It needs sun, but not too much sun. To keep it alive requires a delicate balance and making the right decision at every turn. Perhaps the images on the cover can provide some inspiration for how the building can suffer if it is mismanaged –or shine when it is in good hands!

d. Decision points in the game:

Several events will occur throughout the game that will affect the physical and the financial condition of the building. These will recreate real-life events that can occur when managing a building and will constitute the decision points that the player will need to react to.

CHPC may request that some of these events be randomized so that their frequency is not the same for every player. CHPC will determine which events should be randomized, and their frequency, working with the selected game developer.

A tentative list of such events includes:

- Increased vacancy due to tenants moving out
- Increased legal fees due to eviction
- Limited rent increases due to rent control
- Property tax increases
- Water/sewer rate increases
- Bedbug infestation and extermination costs
- Boiler breakdown
- Leaky roof
- Sale of the building
- Fines for housing code or administrative violations
- Others events to be determined

e. Player inputs:

At every decision point the player will have to respond to these events in order to maintain or improve the physical and the financial condition of the building. The player will have a series of choices, including:

- Adjusting rents upward or downward
- Adjusting the budget for repairs
- Adjusting the budget for cash reserves
- Refinancing the mortgage on the building
- Other items to be determined

f. Difficulty and duration:

We have not determined whether we will have different levels of difficulty in the game, **but we ask applicants to consider how levels of difficulty may be used to increase learning about housing management.**

We have also not determined the ideal duration of the game. Keeping in mind out target audience (below) we see a benefit to playing in one seating, as well as to having a game that can be played over time. **We ask applicants to propose a duration for the game and to explore the possibility of having short-term and long-term versions.**

3. **THE TARGET AUDIENCE**

The target audience for the game are people who make decisions, or influence the discourse, about housing policy but who are not themselves experts. CHPC, building owners or the City's housing department should be able to use the game to teach this audience some basic facts about managing rental housing. Here are some hypothetical examples of how the game might be used:

- The Rent Guidelines Board (a government body which sets the rent increases permitted in over 1 million apartments in New York City), is considering a rent freeze this year. The representative of a group advocating for small landlords uses the game to engage members of the RGB and show them that if rents do not keep up with rising expenses buildings can easily fall into disrepair and affect the safety and well-being of residents.

- A journalist is writing a story about landlords who do not take good care of their buildings. With the help of the game, the journalist understands that high property taxes and water rates can leave little money available for ordinary maintenance and repairs. As a result the article brings attention to policy areas where the government can directly intervene to reduce expenses and assist small building owners in taking care of their buildings.

- A member of the New York City Council wants to propose a new law to increase fines for building owners who fail to register their boilers with the City. The Housing Department does not think this is necessary and uses the game to show the Council member the heavy

administrative burden of requirements like these, and how this will result in fines for "mom and pop" owners who are less likely to comply than large real estate companies.

The general public, however, should also be able to play the game.

4. COLLECTING DATA

Applicants should propose ways that we can collect and use data from the game. We did not do this for *Inside the Rent* but it would have been useful to know the target rents that players set for each neighborhood, as well as how many people fail and succeed at the game, including how many succeed because they choose to use subsidies.

Some ideas for how we might collect data include making other people's scores visible, and requiring players to estimate costs before they start playing in order to view the discrepancies with actual costs.

We also need to be able to track the number of times the game has been played and the number of individual players.

5. PLATFORM

In order to reach the largest audience possible, CHPC envisions the game living online on its own website and optimized for mobile devices. However, we are open to suggestions for mobile apps or other platforms if we can be persuaded that they will increase our audience.

Applicants should propose ways to alter the back-end assumptions of the game so that it can be updated with new figures. CHPC may need to periodically update some of the underlying figures of the game to reflect changing costs.

6. THE PRECEDENT OF *INSIDE THE RENT*

Playing *Inside the Rent* will help applicants understand the sort of content we want to deliver. We encourage you to play at www.insidetherent.nyc and to read the assumptions behind the simulation at http://chpcny.org/2015/06/inside-the-rent-methodology-and-assumptions/.

Inside the Rent has been an unprecedented success for CHPC. It has received over 41,000 page views since we launched it in May 2015 and it was featured on its own iPad terminal at the Museum of the City of New York's exhibition *Affordable New York: A Housing Legacy*, which ran for 5 months and had over 61,700 visitors.

Inside the Rent has also received positive reviews in numerous media outlets, including *The New York Times* and *DNA info*, and has been replicated in cities such as Washington, DC and Austin. It has also been used by industry advocates to help educate elected officials, and as a learning tool for Columbia Business School students.

Inside the Rent was CHPC's first foray into the world of web-based education tools. The structure, flow and graphics of the simulation were developed internally and executed by an outside web developer. **We want *you* to make our new game even better!**

7. APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS

Applicants are encouraged to contact us with questions and clarifications prior to submitting any initial proposals.

Please submit **a short, initial proposal by June 17** with the following:

- Your initial ideas for the game's narrative and structure.
- What you and your team can bring to the project.
- Examples of prior work in resource management games.
- Mock images or wireframes are also welcome.
- A rough estimate or range of the anticipated budget needed to complete the game by the end of the year (CHPC's maximum budget for the project is $60,000).

After reviewing your initial proposals we will invite finalists to submit a more detailed proposal and discuss next steps.

Please direct all questions and application materials to:

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