

Home » Leisure

How games can help craft better policy

Fields of View gamifies matters of public policy for professionals and the general public. Their latest project is a game based on the Indian Constitution

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Shrabonti Bagchi

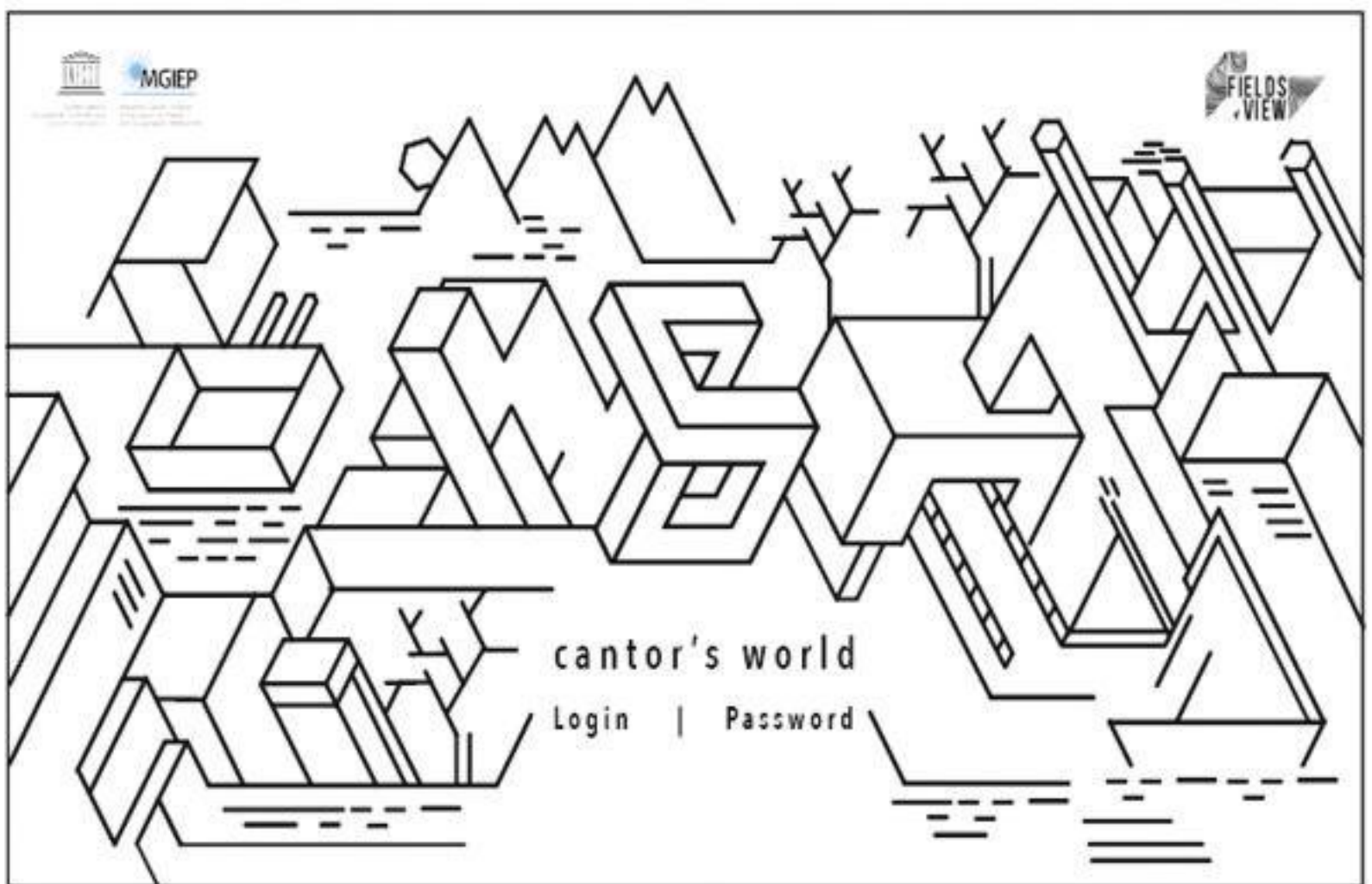


The Fields Of View team with their games. Photo: Jithendra M./Mint

"I have never seen economists having fun!" Anantha K. Duraiappah, director of Unesco-MGIEP (Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development), was heard exclaiming during a recent conference. The academics in question were a group of environmental economists at an Indian Society for Ecological Economics conference in Thrissur, Kerala, and they were playing a game called *Cantor's World*, in which each player assumes the role of the supreme leader of a country and gets to decide the fate of his or her nation.

Well, it's not quite as simple as that (this is not *Settlers Of Catan!*). Players have to take decisions on long-term goals like education and industrialization based on data such as GDP, produced capital, human capital, and natural resources while adhering to the UN's sustainable development goals. The game is probably the most accessible and enjoyable way of seeing how long-term policy decisions change and impact the future of countries.

That's what Fields Of View does. The Bengaluru-based non-profit creates games, simulations and learning tools for the better understanding of policy and its impact. Essentially, their work is to make sure economists like the ones at the Thrissur conference actually have some fun while thrashing out crucial issues of public policy.



A screen grab from 'Cantor's World'.

Can policymaking be made more relevant to the lives of people affected by it? Can policymaking be more responsive to a dynamic social-economic-environmental context? Can we reduce the time taken for a policy to go from the drawing board to implementation? These were some of the questions the founders of Fields Of View, Sruthi Krishnan and Bharath M. Palavalli, set out to answer. "There are no binaries in policymaking. There are an infinite set of possibilities," says Palavalli, who was named an Ashoka fellow in May for his work at the intersection of technology, social sciences and design.

Earlier this year, Fields Of View organized a session of one of its earliest games, *City Game*, for a group of 300 female college students in Mangaluru. *City Game* is a multiplayer offline game designed to explore urban infrastructure and help groups and individual understand the dynamics of urban governance. In it participants take turns to build their city and witness its evolution visually in real time. “The simple directive was, ‘build the city you want to live in.’ Then, during the course of the game, we isolated one group and ‘sent’ them to a new city, where they essentially became immigrants. During the post-game chats, so many issues of immigrant dynamics came out, and there were really interesting conversations on empathy,” says Krishnan.

One of their most popular board or table-top games is *Rubbish*, which is modelled on the waste ecosystem in an Indian city and built using real data from Bengaluru. Players assume the role of the manager of a dry waste collection centre and try to maximize their earnings while recycling as much of the waste as possible. The units of waste are represented by different-coloured blocks of wood, and the collective aim of the group is to prevent a landfill from overflowing. But, Krishnan says, sometimes players get so absorbed in gameplay that they forget about this aim. “On one occasion, when the game was being played by a group from a non-profit working in the solid waste management (SWM) space, the players actually asked if they could create another landfill! It was only during the debriefing session that these dichotomies came out. Games help people understand the imperatives of various stakeholders—from households to managers of SWM centres to the government,” says Krishnan.

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