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Studying *Emerge*: Findings from an event ethnography

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ABSTRACT

The *Emerge* event, held in Tempe, AZ in March 2012, brought together a range of scientists, artists, futurists, engineers and students in order to experiment with innovative methods for thinking about the future. These methodological techniques were tested through nine workshops, each of which made use of a different format; *Emerge* as a whole, then, offered an opportunity to study a diverse set of future-oriented engagement practices. We conducted an event ethnography, in which a team of 11 researchers collaboratively developed accounts of the practices at play within *Emerge* and its workshops. In this article we discuss findings from this ethnography, using our data both to describe the techniques used within *Emerge* and to analyse key patterns which occurred around those techniques. As we close we reflect on the implications of these findings for practice, suggesting ways in which our results can help hone the tools and techniques of future studies.

1. Introduction

How can we think about – and make decisions regarding – the future? Answers to this question are never innocent: as Sardar (2010a) has argued, even naming the process by which we study and imagine futures brings with it a host of often invisible assumptions. Asking how we can *deliberate* futures is even more problematic. Processes of deliberation involve multiple perspectives and voices joined together in "debate and discussion" (Chambers, 2003, 309). As Selin (2011) and a number of other scholars have pointed out, deliberating the future (and, specifically, potential technological futures) is in the best of circumstances difficult: technological trajectories incorporate a host of profound uncertainties, impact diverse and at times incommensurable epistemic cultures, and frequently lack coherent and focused 'problems' or issues around which debate can occur (Sardar, 2010b; cf Marres, 2007). Attention is increasingly turning, then, to innovative methods by which diverse perspectives can be brought together so as to interrogate the directions that technology is taking and explore the futures they may embody and enable. Guston and Sarewitz (2002) have proposed 'Real Time Technology Assessment' as a

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means of enhancing reflexivity in the innovation system. Macnaghten, Kearnes, and Wynne (2005) have similarly argued for the funding and implementation of widespread 'upstream public engagement', in which conventional forms of risk assessment would be "integrated with wider social and political questions about purposes, alternative scientific trajectories, ownership, control, and responsibility" (p.282). From the foresight community, Candy (2010) has developed the notion of 'experiential scenarios' to highlight how simulating lived experiences with future prospects can enliven traditional foresight exercises.

It is these kinds of discussions which lie behind the 2012 *Emerge* event. This three day workshop, held at (and organised by) Arizona State University's Tempe (Arizona, USA) campus in March 2012, brought together a range of scientists, artists, futurists, engineers and students in order to experiment with innovative methods for thinking about the future. It was, its website explains, a:

> campus – wide event uniting artists, engineers, bio scientists, social scientists, story – tellers and designers to build, draw, write and rethink the future of the human species and the environments that we share ... *Emerge* aims to present some of the futures being created in ASU labs and use these as the fuel for reflecting on what kind of future do we want to make? (ASU, 2012)

As a whole, then, *Emerge* sought to take cutting-edge contemporary science and technology as a starting point, and to use this as a trigger for deliberating futures (see Selin, in this issue). It was self-consciously experimental and multi-disciplinary. While there were relatively few 'public' participants, it deliberately drew together scholars and practitioners from across the sciences, engineering disciplines, arts, and humanities. *Emerge* can thus be understood as an effort to put into practice recent prescriptive literature around the necessity of future-oriented debate in technical and scientific development and the importance of diverse perspectives within deliberative processes. The event involved both larger plenaries (of 100–300 people), smaller, focused workshop strands (each with approximately 20 participants) and an evening of performance art (with upwards of 1000 people). It began with a plenary which showcased key areas of ASU-based scientific and technological research; was followed by a day and half of workshop time; and ended with a one day public event which involved both keynote talks from invited speakers and feedback from the workshops. It is the workshops – of which there were nine, each utilising a different format – that are the focus of our attention in this article. In its emphasis, through the nine workshops, on experimenting with new methods for deliberating the future, *Emerge* offered an opportunity to study a set of diverse future-oriented engagement practices. Our interest is in describing and analysing these practices, using the different workshop formats and methods to draw out common themes and contrasts.

We are, as we do this, particularly interested in the *non-discursive aspects* of these different futuring methods (in the sense in which discourse is 'language in use', rather than any more Foucauldian notion of constitutive practices; Cameron, 2001). We will be attentive to features such as material layouts and flows, the role of emotions, and the ways in which objects are used by different actors. There are two key reasons for this attention. The first is that *Emerge* itself was overtly focused on the hands-on, creative and material: its workshops sought to create "provocative and evocative stories, games, performances and objects from which a vision of our future emerges" (ASU, 2012). Several of the workshop leaders used terms such as 'design fiction' or 'diagetic prototypes' (see Bleecker, 2009; Kirby, 2010) which explicitly focus on the materiality of potential futures, and the workshops themselves were positioned as exploring not just abstracted trends but questions such as the kinds of products that the next five years might bring, what everyday life in an Arizona without a functioning energy infrastructure might feel like, or what objects might emerge in an archaeology of the future. Our analysis therefore explores what this focus on 'making' looked like in practice. Second, the *Emerge* emphasis on the materiality of futures is itself part of a broader trend towards future-oriented deliberation that goes 'beyond discourse' (Davies, Selin, Gano, & Pereira, 2012). Building on criticisms of deliberation which note the oppressive effects of sole reliance on 'reasoned argument' (Sanders, 1997; Young, 2001), scholars in a number of domains have suggested that there is a need to incorporate other forms of interaction, such as gossip, storytelling, artistic interventions or drama into engagement processes (Dryzek, 2000; Sandercock, 1998). *Emerge* therefore offers an opportunity to study some of these new methodological techniques in use.

In the rest of this paper we report the results of an event ethnography, in which a team of 11 researchers collaboratively developed descriptive accounts of the nine *Emerge* workshops. We start by discussing this methodology, before briefly describing the methods and progression of each of the nine workshops. This then provides a backdrop that enables us to pull out some key themes that emerged as we reflected on the role of the non-discursive within *Emerge* workshops. We close by discussing the implications of these findings for practice.

2. Studying *Emerge*: running an event ethnography

This study presented a significant challenge for empirical research. *Emerge* was a large, multi-sited event, which would be difficult for a single researcher to thoroughly engage with, and yet we were interested in understanding commonalities that might emerge across the event with regard to non-discursive features such as emotion, spaces, and objects. We therefore designed a methodology based on the notion of *collaborative event ethnography* (Brosius & Campbell, 2010). Taking an ethnographic approach was important as we wanted to develop a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of *Emerge*, focused on understanding what happened within different workshop activities and – as far as would be possible – what that meant to