

Artists and Scientists Redesign the Future in Arizona State University's Emerge Event

Singular questions about what it means to be human in the face of emerging technologies were recently explored during a large-scale, interdisciplinary ASU event called **Emerge**. CNS-ASU played a primary role in supporting, planning and implementing the three-day event.

In an unparalleled campus-wide collaboration, *Emerge* brought together artists, bio scientists, social scientists, engineers, story tellers, designers and students to “redesign the future” by thinking critically about it. Leaders from industry, prominent authors and futurists



The workshop activities, known collectively as “design fictions,” build upon CNS-ASU methodological research on Mediated Futures, in that the workshops served as opportunities to investigate the effectiveness of exploring the future through diverse media. For example, in one workshop, participants created mock-ups of future products and made a short video in a local convenience store. Another workshop had its members develop a performance around the symbol of collapse, acting out an invented mythology as a means to prompt thinking about alternative futures. Another used science fiction as a learning tool to rehearse and critique plausible new technologies and products, another focused on game design, while still another used game play, and so on.

The design fictions used in every workshop strove to prompt ethical reflection, asking not just “Can we?” but “Should we?” CNS-ASU believes such a discussion requires hands-on construction and creative interventions. As such, the workshops were important examples of future-oriented discussions that move away from the purely logical, discursive and technical to consider the material, affective and creative aspects of the futures possible from contemporary scientific research. CNS-ASU researchers have argued that this move is a vital next step in public and stakeholder engagement with science policy. A team of CNS ethnographers observed each of the nine workshops to record the material culture involved, the meanings that participants constructed around it, and the dynamics of group participation. The resultant dataset is in the process of being analyzed.

joined ASU participants for an intense exploration of emerging technologies and the implications of those breakthroughs.

At the heart of *Emerge* were nine simultaneously-run workshops designed as social science experiments in futures thinking. Each workshop used a different foresight methodology to inspire its interdisciplinary participants to create games, products, monuments, images and stories that revealed the *texture* and *feel* of emerging futures.



After the workshops, *Emerge* continued with a digital culture festival featuring performances and installations around the ASU Tempe campus. This finale, **Immerge**, was an interactive multi-media performance, which engaged visitors to create a new myth of renewal for the digital age. Members of the public interacted with installations, architectural projections and fantastical creatures, all within a multi-layered sonic environment generated by live musicians and digital technology.



Cynthia Selin, Assistant Professor
School of Sustainability and The Center for Nanotechnology
in Society at Arizona State University