

Toolkit + Case study

festivals as sites of collective meaning-making

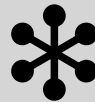
Through collective newspaper article making, we encourage participants to speculate together.

We asked:

How can festivals be collective sites of meaning-making?
How can festivals deal with the tensions between addressing social issues and the realities of producing festivals in a capitalist society?
How can our proposed experimental methods better provide the necessary affordances for translation and collective knowledge-making lacking in other forms of participatory governance?
How can a festival make policy?



2.5 hours



In person or Online



8-24 participants



Digital or Analog

Workshop

MUTEK FEST-FORWARD: IMAGINING FUTURE FESTIVALS

August 23, 2022 at MUTEK FORUM 2022

Co-designed and co-lead by Maurice Jones, Marek Blottière, and Meaghan Wester

Memo

Written by Meaghan Wester with Maurice Jones and Marek Blottière

November 15, 2022

Introduction		I
Fest-Forward: Imagining Future Festivals		
Assignment	<p>Each team is tasked to write a newspaper headline and paragraph outlining their speculative future festival and share it with the other teams.</p>	
Goal	<p>The goal of this workshop is to facilitate collective futuring and to jointly imagine the future of festivals. By grappling with paradoxes (or Wicked Questions) teams have common grounds from which they can speculate.</p>	
Wicked Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can future festivals address climate change while at the same time relying on flying in hundreds of people in fostering cultural exchange? 2. How can future festivals critically deal with emerging technologies while becoming increasingly dependent on and enmeshed in them? 3. How can future festivals deal with equity, diversity, and inclusivity while continuing to profit from existing structures of domination and exploitation? 	

In preparation	Fest-Forward: Imagining Future Festivals		2
Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pens ○ Article Templates ○ Whiteboard (optional) ○ Screen, sound, microphones (optional) 		
Day of the workshop	Set up the space:	Tables of 4, 6 or 8 participants (preferably even number)	
<p><i>This workshop can be adapted thematically. Follow the resource below ahead of the workshop to set up.</i></p>			
Weeks leading up to the workshop	Collect uncanny headlines as thematic inspiration and example of output	Auger, J. (2013). Speculative design: crafting the speculation. <i>Digital Creativity</i> , 24(1), 11-35.	
	Prepare up to three wicked questions as prompts.	See <u>Wicked Questions</u>	
	Print newspaper articles templates	See Appendix	
	Familiarize yourself with the I-2-Group Method of Liberating Structures	See <u>I-2-4-Group Method</u>	

Step 0	Fest-Forward: Imagining the future of festivals		3
20 minutes (optional)	<p>Introduction + icebreaker</p> <p>We used this time to practice the I-2-Group methodology as a way for participants to know what to expect in the following blocs.</p> <p>The icebreaker question was: « What is your fondest memory of the last festival you attended? »</p>		
	3 minute	We encourage participants to take the first minutes in silence and reflect on the prompt.	*We encourage this time break down to help participants to contribute equally. It ensures everyone gets to share their idea
	7 minute	After, participants can pair up to start discussing their fondest memory of the last festival they attended.	
	10 minute	For the remainder of this bloc, the whole team can share their answer in a group setting and get to know each other.	

Step 1	Fest-Forward: Imagining Future Festivals		3
20 minutes	During the first bloc, participants in each team need to decide which and how to address the prompt.		
	3 minute	We encourage participants to take the first minutes in silence and reflect on the prompt before starting the collaboration.	*We encourage this time break down to help participants to contribute equally. It ensures everyone gets to share their idea
	7 minute	After, participants can pair up to start discussing their initial impressions on the wicked questions.	
	10 minute	For the remainder of this bloc, the whole team can work together and create a consensus .	

Step 2	Fest-Forward: Imagining Future Festivals		4
20 minutes	During the second block, we invite participants to focus on answering the so called Journalistic Six (What? Who? When? How? Why?Where?). Use the templates! (See <i>appendix</i>)		
	3 minute	We encourage participants to take the first minutes in silence and reflect on their own answer first.	*We encourage this time break down to help participants to contribute equally. It ensures everyone gets to share their idea
	7 minute	After, participants can pair up to share their answers.	
	10 minute	For the remainder of this bloc, the whole team can work together and answer the questions.	

5 - 10 minute break

Step 3	Fest-Forward: Imagining Future Festivals		5
30- 40 minutes	<p>In the last bloc, each team’s goal is to craft the speculative article. Use the templates, the white board, or a digital whiteboard as well as any analog or digital assets you’d like!</p>		
	3 minute	We encourage participants to take the first minutes in silence and reflect on their own vision first.	*We encourage this time break down to help participants to contribute equally. It ensures everyone gets to share their idea
	7 minute	After, participants can pair up to share their vision.	
	20-30 minute	For the remainder of this bloc, the whole team can work together and craft a common vision and the article.	

Step 4	Fest-Forward: Imagining Future Festivals		6
30 - 45 minutes	<p>Use this time to have the teams share their articles in a group discussion. Below are questions we used to guide the conversation.</p>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is the future festival you have crafted as a group? - What was your process? 		

Case Study

FEST-FORWARD: IMAGINING FUTURE FESTIVALS

Speculative Design, Collective Futuring, Festivals
as sites of meaning-making

How can festivals be collective sites of meaning-making? How can festivals deal with the tensions between addressing social issues and the realities of producing festivals in a capitalist society? How can our proposed experimental methods better provide the necessary affordances for translation and collective knowledge-making lacking in other forms of participatory governance? How can a festival make policy?

During MUTEK Forum 8th edition in Montreal, our team convened members of the public, policy makers, industry professionals, and artists to speculate on the transforming role of the festival as a sociopolitical actor. Here we want to share our approach that takes as points of departure the Digital Democracy Workshop Kit on speculative design and liberating structures.

Foreword

As part of Maurice Jones' PhD project and the conceptualization of curatorial practice as research-creation, this workshop marks the beginning of collaborative work between Marek Blottière, Meaghan Wester and Maurice Jones. This MITACS research project called *Festival as Methodology*, a collaboration between MUTEK and Concordia University, reflects on the transformation of the festival from a place that showcases artistic works and/or conversations to a place of joint meaning making.

The workshop was framed as follows : after two years of interrupted cultural activities, a long-awaited return to "normal" rightfully excites artists, organizers, and audiences alike. This excitement, however, threatens to mask the existential questions that the ongoing pandemic has been raising for the cultural sector and society at large: the fragility of human co-existence in times of rapid technological advancements, climate catastrophe, and global health crises.

COVID-19 has shown that the adaptability of festivals working in the digital creative realm makes them uniquely positioned to address these questions. This is not achieved through a false sense of "solutionism" but through shifting perceptions and generating new understandings. This session invites artists, curators, industry professionals, and the wider public to jointly imagine the changing role of the festival beyond a platform for artistic practice towards a vehicle for critical investigations of the existential questions of our time.

Speculative design: Designing a speculative Workshop

The workshop's design draws on two main inspirations: [The Digital Democracy Workshop Kit](#) originally designed by Chiara Ullstein and Michel Hohendanner of TU Munich with a focus on speculating about the future of digital public spaces, as well as taking inspiration in liberating structures.

Our aim was to structure time and discussion in a way that would facilitate collective speculation, democratic engagement and collective creation. A key aspect of this workshop was to capture and record what already often takes place in the context of festivals: rich exchanges of deep meaning-making.

For the 2.5 hour long workshop, we organised time in five main blocs with dedicated introspective time alone, in pairs, and in larger groups (as outlined in the toolkit above). First, a 20 minute introduction and icebreaker: then, a bloc during which teams start outlining the future festival they envision through the prompts; third, a bloc during which teams are asked to start outlining how this speculative vision will be expressed as a news article; fourth, teams use this time to make the article; and lastly, all teams come together and share their scenarios.

We organised the space in three tables of 7 participants. We mixed different approach to crafting speculative scenarios. Notably Auger's (2013) proposition to use the uncanny as a way to "elicit audience engagement and contemplation" (p.14) prompted us to present the topic at hand through provoking newspaper headlines. Our aim was to trigger participants' imagination from the beginning of the workshop. We also worked from the Liberating structures template of 'wicked questions' which asks participants to hold two contradictory ideas in tension to answer a paradoxical question. Again, we thought this was a good way to foster rich and grounded speculation. We presented three paradoxes to the groups and asked them to choose one to center their conversation. As a group their goal was to craft a newspaper article from the future, which outlines how a speculative festival employs certain tools or activities to address specific social issues. We derived the paradoxes from a media scan of uncanny and futuristic headlines.

1. How can future festivals address climate change while at the same time relying on flying in hundreds of people in fostering cultural exchange?
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Workshop Outputs

During this workshop, participants co-produced:

- 3 maps speculative articles
- 3 imagined future festivals
- 1 soundscape of the discussions in the room

During the workshop, we collected:

- Ethnographic fieldnotes
- A 360 soundscape

Findings: Fieldnotes and Feedback

Each team self-organised and decided how to tackle the task of answering the paradoxes in making the future article. Four areas of findings emerged from both our fieldnotes and the participants feedback: co-producing an output, team dynamics, methodology, subject matter.

On co-producing outputs

We witnessed a discrepancy between different participants expectations. On the one hand, workshops during MUTEK Forum are typically built around knowledge transfer which created a specific set of expectations for some attendees. This contrasted with our workshop structure which was centred on co-constructing and collective futuring. As a result, some approached the workshop task through a problem solving lens whereas others focused their energy on democratic decision-making. Some participants raised the concern that coming up with a "concrete output" induced pressure, while for others producing such output in written form presented a challenge. For future iterations we will consider other formats for outputs as a way to make the experience more accessible (especially in multilingual teams) and add playfulness, which may have lacked in the seriousness of writing a newspaper article. Moreover, participants raised the frustration that comes with working through vast and complex topics such as the paradoxes we prompted them with. Moving between macro or "think big" conversation and translating these into concrete and practical steps was challenging for most participants.

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On team dynamics

A key finding was the way all three teams appropriated the method, prompts and template differently.

- Group A: The way participants engaged with each other can be described as democratic, consensus-based, and self-organized. As a reaction to the proposed time management, participants abandoned the I-2-Group methodology, when they went into the second phase of group work. Their output was centred around one key proposition (the campfire toolkit) with propositions that sprung from it.
- Group B: This team followed the structure rigorously (even as they could hear the other teams abandoned the I-2-Group method). They also used all the tools available namely the whiteboard and templates. Their discussions were animated and energetic. The output they proposed was rhizomatic, complex with an emphasis on emergent and horizontal organization.
- Group C: This team didn't follow any of the instructions. From the instruction to choose one prompt, to the I-2-Group time management schedule, to the templates; this team can be described as having gone rogue. We have discussed how professional backgrounds may have contributed to this group dynamics: most of them are used to being in position of leadership and the proposed method required them to let go and trust the method. This team's interactions are characterized by strong characters, misunderstanding, and stress. Their output was algorithmically generated; they used an AI to write the article. In light of their failure to democratically organize, turning to technology to flatten disagreements was fascinating.

On a higher level, the interdisciplinarity and cross-cultural group was very appreciated and was inspirational to participants. One raised, "I found the exchange experience very rich in terms that we all came from different roles round cultures — from festival managers to music and art curators and curious people —, and the different tasks exposed each of us to speculate from different roles". Another participant highlighted how the heterogeneity of the team made for rich engagement: "It was great to be able to learn from other people's perspectives; many seemed willing to dive into their past experiences to either encourage or refine proposed ideas."

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On methodology

We received mixed feedback on the highly structured methodology. One participant said: “The prompts were intriguing. The detailed schedule during the workshop was a bit hard to follow. The team spent a lot of the time trying to adapt to the torrent of instructions.” Which we also observed in all teams (especially team C). Nevertheless, other participants appreciated the proposition. They wrote: “I found the format to be effective; I enjoyed the multiple ‘nesting’ conversations that were reintegrated into the larger understanding of the group, which made it easier to find affinities and complementary aspects of different festivals in a fairly fast-paced conversation.”

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More generally, participants seemed to agree that the process itself was more interesting than the resulting articles. One wrote in their feedback to us: “I found the format of the workshop was engaging and efficient, and that it probed productive discussions and group dynamics. I’ve found the process of writing the article and collectively designing the project more interesting than the resulting paper in itself.” Additionally, few of them highlighted how, in the context of the Forum which is a professional setting, they greatly welcomed this experience as a networking opportunity. “To be honest, I’m not sure if I took away concrete ideas for future festivals (maybe others did though!) The exercise was more of a networking opportunity for me - where I got to meet like-minded people for future collaboration opportunities.”

On the subject matter:

Overall, we are confident that our proposed method’s enabled participants to collectively speculate on the future of festivals. First, through what the different groups presented, we were able to observe where the speculation prompts led them. This participants feedback captures one of the teams' vision well:

“So my take away would be that future festivals will need to be collaborative, non-competitive and networked, to work together to make sure their voices are heard in a future that will most likely still be dominated by bigger players’ capitalist interests.”

Additionally, the post-workshop feedback are especially telling on this. One participant wrote:

“Attending the workshop reignited my passion for festival planning and broadened my perspective on initiatives that me and my company can take to make events more inclusive and accessible.”

In our collective discussion following the teams’ presentations, the question of the place of the Art in festival was raised. Two poles emerged in light of collectively speculating on the future of festivals through our wicked questions. On the one hand, participants decried the need to recentre art and music in spite of all the broader social, technological and environmental considerations. This participant’s feedback captures this well: “I felt in the end that the idea of art content was not touched upon, but there were some valuable ideas about reaching out to local and international communities and bringing their voice into the programming.” On the other hand, a festival maker raised how for the most part, art is already engaging with these issues and it is festivals’ responsibility to create the necessary infrastructure to host and facilitate these broader societal shifts.

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Limits

As a first try, we learned a lot on how to improve future workshops. After discussing with the participants, we identified three main points for improvement.

1. Some participants voiced a lacking clarity of the methodology and how it would unfold during the workshop. This could be remedied by revisiting ways of explaining the methodology including supporting materials, such as printed handouts.
2. Another limit we encountered was how potentially limiting the article was as a common output. In this context, teams were multilingual and multicultural. Many of them wished they spent less time « stressing about making the article ». To remedy this we would like to explore other types of common outputs that would mobilise participants’ artistic practices and could help alleviate the language barrier. Possibilities to explore include mind mapping, description of anti-festivals, other sensory formats such as podcasts, visualizations or performance.
3. The "so what?" was missing. People were missing a concrete step of translating their speculation into concrete actions. The workshop was unfortunately too short for this. One participant wrote, “It was interesting to hear thoughts on the future of festivals by

different people. However, as a professional festival maker, I have already experienced many thought processes of that kind - which made me wish for a slightly more result-driven, practically concrete, detailed discussion and creative process". We are reflecting on how could this live within a series of activities that tied together, create a trajectory towards a certain goal X. This goal X is what we imagine the "so what?" participants were craving as they moved through the speculation. Another participants even came up with suggestions in how to address this issue within the current architecture of MUTEK: "I think the format could have been longer with a bit more readings/videos/ concepts introduced at the beginning to give our teams a better foundation to conceptualize/speculate. [...] I think more structured facilitation or even a pre-req panel attendance would make the exercise more fruitful. Additionally (as we've briefly discussed), MUTEK should have more panels that can supplement this type of imagination (maybe something you can propose for next year)." We are reflecting on how could this live within a series of activities that tied together, create a trajectory towards a certain goal X. This goal X is what we imagine the "so what?" participants were craving as they moved through the speculation (see [Liberating Structures 15% solutions](#)).

Next Steps

Following this workshop, each participant was asked to provide feedback and reflections on how the workshop influenced their outlook on the themes discussed as well as general feedback on their experience. We will be publishing the soundscape accompanied with a visual representation as a way to archive and document this encounter of meaning-making. Further, we will reflect on the limits and potentials to adjust future workshop design.

We are hoping to test and improve this methodology with other research processes.

We are planning to use this workshop as the first of an iterative series of workshops that explore collective meaning-making, participatory governance, and the role of changing and future festivals in this space.

References and Ressources

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THE DAILY NEWS

HEADLINE

ILLUSTRATION

ANSWER 5WS

WHAT
WHO
WHEN
WHERE
WHY

SUBTITLE

FIRST PARAGRAPH

ARTICLE WRITING TEMPLATE

TOPIC/ PROVOCATION	
KEYWORDS (FROM THE BAG OR YOUR OWN)	
HEADLINE	
SUBTITLE	
FIRST PARAGRAPH	
ANSWER 5WS WHAT WHO WHEN WHERE WHY	