

Jun 23rd, 9:00 AM - Jun 28th, 5:00 PM

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Citation

Korsmeyer, H., Grocott, L., Sumartojo, S., Doughty, M., and Mintrom, M. (2024) Transforming futures together: time travelling with the Tomorrow Party, in Gray, C., Ciliotta Chehade, E., Hekkert, P., Forlano, L., Ciuccarelli, P., Lloyd, P. (eds.), *DRS2024: Boston*, 23–28 June, Boston, USA. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2024.714>

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A co-design method for transforming futures together: time travel with the Tomorrow Party

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<https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2024.714>

Abstract: We need new methods for generating policy insights that ensure people's lived experiences are not flattened and fixed to a moment in time and that visions of possible futures are not curtailed by a 'crisis of imagination'. In response to this challenge, we have developed a creative, play-based method called the Tomorrow Party, which invites participants to travel forward in time and share co-created stories of the desirable futures they find themselves living in. As a future story-making process, the Tomorrow Party generates novel ways of sharing affective perspectives on possible futures so we can collectively anticipate what is at stake and work out what policy responses would contribute to the futures we want. We present the method as well as key findings and insights from a series of Tomorrow Parties commissioned by the Policy Lab at the Wellcome Trust.

Keywords: play; futures; lived experience; policymaking

1. Introduction

Recognition of the necessity of incorporating 'lived experience' into policymaking decisions—whether through co-design or other means—has steadily increased in the Australian public sector in recent decades. Often proposals will call for or mandate processes that 'capture the voices of people' who are to be most directly affected (e.g. Doyle et al., 2021). At the same time, there are calls for more imaginative thinking in policy development to address the 'crisis of imagination' preventing us from envisioning truly alternative futures to the present-day conditions, contributing to wide scale issues like climate change (e.g. Hajer & Versteeg, 2019).

Responding to this context, we have developed a creative, play-based method called the Tomorrow Party, which invites participants to travel forward in time and then share co-created stories of the desirable futures they find themselves living in. The Tomorrow Party is a



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future story-making process, which generates novel ways of sharing affective perspectives on possible futures as a form of collective anticipation to help guide policy responses.

2. Conceptual frameworks: Lived experience, futures, play moods

The Tomorrow Party method seeks to explore new means of engagement that extend the way we frame and work with lived experience in policymaking. Rather than seeking to ‘capture’ lived experiences, the Tomorrow Party is conceptually informed by feminist theories, affect theories, Indigenous ways of knowing, and play theories.

2.1 *Lived experience: relational, situated, multitudinous*

A recent significant work bridging design and feminism is *Critical fabulations: reworking the methods and margins of design* (Rosner, 2018). In this book, Rosner proposes an alternative set of tactics for contemporary design practice that is based on collaborative methods and seeks to disturb dominant paradigms. These tactics are based on ‘theoretical commitments of feminist technoscience’. With her feminist tactic of ‘alliances,’ which stem from a feminist critique of individualism, Rosner highlights that design activities, and certainly collaborative design activities, are not simply clusters of individuals, but that all these engagements are relational. She celebrates how collective experiences of crafting can help us notice shared values and the ways in which we are communicating expertise. This ‘relational self’ is also core to feminist phenomenology, which itself is a diverse branch of feminism, but consistently resists mind/body and body/world dualisms. This idea, combined with related and resonant concepts about affect in feminist scholar Sara Ahmed’s work (e.g. Ahmed, 2010), has implications for how we conceive of the purposes, outcomes, and implications of co-design events and the lived experiences of individual participants (Korsmeyer, 2022). A core idea in contemporary participatory and co-design practices is to bring diverse perspectives together. However, following this notion of a relational self, we also must ensure that our methods allow us to challenge the stability of a subjective perspective and identity.

The Tomorrow Party method, therefore, frames ‘lived experience’ as generative, relational, situated, embodied, and even multitudinous – no individual has just one, stable subjective perspective, but holds many ‘possible selves’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This conceptualization of the self is not new and extends beyond purely feminist theories, yet remains under-discussed in much participatory and co-design literature. In one exception, Lenskold, Olander and Halse (2015) look to the philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) – who also frame the multitudes within individuals through becoming ‘minor’ – as they intersect with a reflective co-design process they call ‘minor design activism’. Like the Tomorrow Party, ‘minor design activism’ has much in common with the aims of participatory design movements in Scandinavia originating in the 1970s, as well as Critical Design (e.g. Dunne & Raby, 2013) and Design Fiction (e.g. Bleecker et al., 2022), which are all sub-fields of design founded on the objective of exploring “alternative configurations of the actual” (Lenskold et al., 2015).

Of particular significance for futures methods used within the public sector, Lenskold, Olander and Halse's emphasis on the "tactical engagement that operates from *within* existing socio-political and material realities" (emphasis added) stands in contrast to the principle that design activism and speculative-critical design practices must originate from 'outside' these dominant systems. Like the Tomorrow Party, it does not position stakeholders or policymakers in opposition to alternative conceptions, but instead considers the function of this co-design process as a collective becoming, where everyone is invited to heighten their attunement to counter narratives and explore latent alternative possibilities within themselves and the possible future worlds we would like to co-create.

2.2 Futures: co-creative, personal, non-linear

Unlike conventional lived experience approaches which aim to solidify, conventional futures approaches are centred on envisioning change. Complementing quantitative and rationalistic futures approaches, there are now many approaches that are creative and participatory, including experiential futures (e.g. Candy, 2018; Candy & Kornet, 2019). However, even creative and participatory futures methods often remain detached from deep engagement with personal lived experiences, which is crucial for transformation (Grocott, 2022; Korsmeyer et al. 2022). These methods often deliberately put aside the real-world relations and situations of the past and present to enable exploration of alternatives.

Instead, as a futures approach, the Tomorrow Party is influenced by Indigenous world-views of time as recursive and systems as interdependent. Specifically, the Tomorrow Party introduces the Māori whakatauki (proverb), "ka mua, ka muri," which translates "to walk backwards into the future." Countering linear conceptions of time, this proverb distils the principle that the past/present/future co-exist. This notion of folding time is designed into the prompts of the Tomorrow Party (discussed in Section 3.1). The interest in exploring the first-person future resists fixing people's experience to the past and recognises that "time is not abstract, it is not empty, it does not exist separately from relationships..." (Bawaka Country et al., 2017). In asking guests to consider what it means to walk backwards into the future, we unsettle modernity narratives where the future is a blank canvas of possibility. We ask people to look for where the future is already residing in the present (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). In doing so, we respect that the work of reimagining futures asks of us to listen to kin and ancestors through the liberatory practice of learning from the futures envisaged and honouring the past injustices cannot be swept aside (Smith, 2012).

2.3 Play moods: imaginative, affective, challenging

Another important concept for the design underlying the Tomorrow Party is 'play moods.' Karoff describes play mood as: "the state of being where you are distinctly open to new meaning production and where the possibilities exist for that to happen. It is not something that comes from within the players or from the outside, but instead it

is happening through our engagement with the doings of play and in our relations towards the people we are with” (Karoff, 2013, p. 8).

Play moods imbue encounters, actions, times, and places and differ from psychological understandings of play, which aim to describe an inner state of mind. Instead, play moods are dynamically constituted in people’s experiential worlds and arise in situations collectively understood as playful. Conceptual understandings of both play moods and atmospheres means the approach of designing for play necessarily contends with places comprised of people, material, and space. For the Tomorrow Party, playful atmospheres are potentially transformative because they are co-constituted encounters where ‘unexpected practices can happen’ (Skovbjerg & Sumartojo, 2023).

Because atmospheres are affective and bodily—though never determinate—they are an important consideration when designing for the transformative and reflective potential of the Tomorrow Party, inviting feelings of dissonance or resonance to emerge in playful encounters. Sumartojo and Pink (2019) note that the atmospheres of a place are not static and do not precede the people who perceive or participate in them. Like play moods, they are activated by the presence and actions of people.

As Sumartojo (2016) argues, atmospheres are also constituted in relation to the past, because our memories of previous experiences shape how we arrive and are an important part of how we always experience the world. Memory is foundational to worlding, even if these memories are challenged or reframed by new contexts. This playful, creative, expression of lived experiences and personal memories (including speculative personal memories from the future) were core to the possible worlds being imagined at the Tomorrow Party.

In the Tomorrow Party, this collective cultivation of play moods is important for exploring new possible futures and for generating novel perspectives. The aim is to explore not what is most likely to happen, but what might happen, or the ‘perhaps futures’. However, exploring a different possibility can be difficult. To encourage participants to challenge their own perspectives and default assumptions, the Tomorrow Party makes use of playful prompts or ‘wild cards’ (described in Section 3.1). The playful atmosphere of the Tomorrow Party encourages co-creating futures that are situated and generative, yet grounded in personal and affective, plural, lived experiences.

3. The Tomorrow Party Method

3.1 Overview of the method

The Tomorrow Party method was developed iteratively and designed to be adapted to suit unique contexts and different themes. Over the course of the research, 12 parties were hosted in various locations around the world, with 479 guests comprising policy makers, community leads, public servants and other change-agents and researchers (see Figure 1).

479 PARTY GUESTS TIME TRAVELLED	COUNTLESS TOMORROW STORIES, CUPS OF TEA, PINTS OF BEER, SCONES, LAMINGTONS & CANAPES	12 TOMORROW PARTIES HOSTED
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GUESTS

Policy makers
Social Innovators
Change-agents
Government Delegates
Co-designers
Public Servants
Educators
Community Leads
Researchers
Youth

THEMES

Community-led Bushfire Resilience
Health and Climate Action
Neurodivergence and the Education System
Creativity and Policymaking
Indigenous-led Social Innovation
Lived Experience and Policymaking
Transformative Partnerships
Responsible Research
Transformative Change and Play Research
Doctoral Education and Social Impact

LOCATIONS

Sydney, Australia
Melbourne, Australia
Online, Australia
Brisbane, Australia
London, England
Auckland, Aotearoa NZ
Dunedin, Aotearoa NZ
Kolding, Denmark
Prato, Italy
Dubai, UAE

Figure 1 Summary of Tomorrow Party events, contexts, and iterations.



Figure 2 Scenes from a Tomorrow Party held in Melbourne, Australia.

While adaptable to serve different purposes, the Tomorrow Party is fundamentally a hosted event with 3 basic acts which centre the ‘party’ feeling into every design and facilitation decision, including invitations, catering, printed collateral, and facilitation.

- Act I: Arrival
 - Starts with greeting guests and an opening period of small talk.
 - Mingling of ideas based on people’s experiences at the table.
 - Focus on sharing how the future is already residing in the present.

- Chatting about how the ways things might already be working in the present can be carried forth into a more desirable future.
- Act II: Time Travel
 - Once people have spent time noticing how the future is residing in the present, we invite them to travel forward 5 years in time. This trip to an adjacent possible future is key: not so far as to feel hard to locate oneself and not so soon that change doesn't feel possible. To help inhabit this future, partygoers are given a specific place to travel to together — the same conference, an awards night, a reunion, community gathering, etc.
 - Staying in the near future (by speaking in the first person, present tense), pairs then co-create details of what the future around them is like. Suggested prompts are scattered around the room to encourage partygoers to help each other give texture and detail to the futures they are all imagining. Importantly, partygoers are also encouraged to playfully introduce 'wild cards' into their fellow attendees futures to help unsettle personal assumptions.
 - *Co-creation and wild cards*: The use of 'wild cards' give rise to challenging, yet playful moments of disruption, and here the performative part of play is at the core. The focus is about accepting an unexpected suggestion from a fellow partygoer and re-imagining one's own agency within the future worlds that are being co-created and explored together. For both partygoers, this requires having the courage to interpret and find inspiration in the suggestions.
- Act III: Toasts and Refreshments
 - Staying in the near future, partygoers are invited to make toasts celebrating or highlighting the most important aspects of the worlds that have been created.

4. Findings & Discussion

4.1 Contributions and challenges of the Tomorrow Party

After hosting a pilot series of Tomorrow Parties (see Figure 1), there seem to be several contributions that the play-based Tomorrow Party method brings to participatory policy-making engagements.

- Time travel makes it easier to embed lived experience, emotion, and feeling into imagining speculative futures

"From like, a futures perspective, too, I think, you know, we always talk a lot about the fact that it's incredibly hard for anyone to project themselves into, even into a desired

future. To say wake up and say, "oh, you know, I'd love to see this happen. This is important to me that your good future just looks like this". And I yeah, I feel like the putting yourself in the first person being a celebratory move. And then speaking about the success, just actually embodying that feeling of a successful future achieved is incredibly, just, that was that was easier and much more surprising." (Tomorrow Party attendee)

- Doing this as conversation with others helps people re-frame or reorient their stance toward problems they are encountering now as well as what they are worrying about in the future

"But it's about living with that, that difference and that multiplicity. And letting that be part of this new way of being so not expecting some kind of cohesion, or some kind of conclusion has been reached, or some better, just that it is about living with the tensions. And the tensions will be different from what they are now." (Tomorrow Party attendee)

- Playfulness of the attendees is key to the success of the method

"I liked the improv side of it with the wildcard. Because you just have to make something up on the spot" (Tomorrow Party attendee)

"It's less about people's professional backgrounds and more about their playfulness." (Tomorrow Party attendee)

However, this method also has several limitations and areas for improvement. Most significantly, in our pilot study, the Tomorrow Parties were all designed to be one-off events, not embedded within community-building processes or longer-term engagements.

"Great process for some folks, but not all. Many people with lived experiences of trauma may not be equipped to imagine futures in this way. Likewise, method is contingent upon capacity of participants to speak in groups, hear well in crowded rooms..." (Tomorrow Party attendee)

This negotiation of real-world power dynamics and possible trauma of personal life experiences means that it is essential for party hosts to grapple with the real complexity of play moods. For designers, this means that a skilled practice of designing for play is not limited to designing for special settings or artefacts intended primarily for play, such as playgrounds or games, but rather recognizing that a play mood can be cultivated in any setting (Skovbjerg & Sumartojo, 2023), but also expecting that it will be experienced differently by different people. Group engagements are dynamic and lively—people bring their own personal histories and affective experiences to the encounter (Korsmeyer, 2022). Therefore, designers and convenors of the Tomorrow Party must be mindful that, to be truly transformative in intent, the party must hold space to express, co-create, and collectively explore a full range of positive and negative affects and futures.

Through engaging with the Tomorrow Party, we hope to enable a reframing of lived experience in policymaking processes: where *all* participants, including stakeholders,

convenors, and community members, reflect on their own dynamic perspectives and explore alternatives together.

Acknowledgements: We acknowledge the support of the Wellcome Trust Policy Lab and thank the party attendees for helping us develop this work.

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