

Prehearsals / Pre-enactments

Prehearsals or pre-enactments are direct experiences where future scenarios, alternative pasts or presents can be explored in an immersive situation. They are meant as prototype experiences or rehearsals for situations that haven't happened (yet). A pre-enactment is an up-close-and-personal, embodied form of futuring, as it reveals habitual behaviours, surprising intuitions and unconscious collective patterns, which are likely to be overlooked or ignored in predominantly cerebral futuring methods. Prehearsals build on LARPS (live action role playing games), improvisation, experience design, (insight) meditation and disaster drills and could be used in a range of group sizes (from individuals to whole countries). As described below, prehearsals were first developed at FoAM in Brussels in 2008, but there have been similar approaches used in the Manoa School and other futures establishments (see Stuart Candy's [The Futures of Everyday Life](#)).

At FoAM, designing a pre-enactment begins with creating a range of scenarios, each of which we translate into a short backstory. We usually include one or more images to capture their atmospheres. From the back-stories we design a prehearsal script that includes instructions, questions, rules and guidelines for the participants, as well as describing the physical setting. Sometimes we include props or prototypes of technologies and media that can encourage deeper immersion. If the duration and setting of a prehearsal are long and complex, a preparatory phase with the participants is conducted online and in a briefing beforehand. However, a short pre-enactment (e.g. half an hour to an hour) can be improvised on the spot during a futuring workshop with minimal setup as well.

Once a prehearsal starts, the most important rule is 'don't break the universe', i.e. the participants are encouraged to stay in their role, and to keep all comments and reflections for a debrief session. The stronger the immersion, the more valuable the experience. It is important to note that in contrast to a LARP, participants play themselves rather than take on the role of a (fictional) character. They observe what happens when they place themselves in an unfamiliar (and sometimes uncomfortable) scenario. The purpose is to observe and train situated introspection and adaptation skills, as well as scrutinise assumptions and behaviours. The facilitator can function either as an 'external game master' or (if the group is small enough) participate in the pre-enactment in character.

After a pre-enactment, a debrief and reflection phase is needed, in order to decompress and to translate the insights into applied learning. A group session and/or individual interviews can be conducted and the findings shared with the whole group. If a series of scenarios is being prehearsed, a reflective session at the end should collect findings from all prehearsals and transform the learning into practical applications in the present.

Creating a pre-enactment can take weeks or months, but can be as short as a few hours or a day. Regardless of the complexity, each prehearsal follows similar steps (those in italics are optional):

1. (Create Scenarios)
2. (Visualise scenarios)
3. Design a prehearsal question
4. Create a backstory (for the prehearsal and for each individual participant)
5. Decide on the date, duration and place for the prehearsal
6. Create the framework (the atmosphere, physical aspects, inhabitants, events)
7. Assemble a production and support crew
8. Write a short framing 'script' which includes the purpose, backstory, instructions and rules
9. Create the setting (props, media, prototypes, interior and exterior design...)
10. Brief the participants by email and in person
11. Hold the prehearsal, operating as coordinator or game master
12. Invite participants to write up individual reflections
13. Decompress and share stories
14. Hold a collective debriefing and evaluation session
15. (Define practical implementations and indicators)
16. (Invite individuals and the group to write pledges of what 'will be')
17. Celebrate!

Process

Step 1: Create scenarios The prehearsal design usually starts with scenario building. You can use one of the scenario building methods in the Fieldguide (e.g. the [GBN Approach](#)) to create one or more scenarios that provide an alternative to the current situation. They can be possible futures or alternative pasts or presents, as long as they are described as dynamic worlds based on existing circumstances. A very speculative far future scenario might not provide most interesting results, while everyday or mundane near-future scenarios can offer valuable insights.

You can also opt for using more informal story-creation techniques, or even omit step 1 and 2 and start directly with step 3 by designing a prehearsal question.

Step 2: Visualise scenarios Invite participants to select and collect images to visualise the scenarios. You can use a single image, a moodboard, or a collage. One image can get the atmosphere across, while a moodboard or collage is a visual story, where the relationships between different elements of your scenario can be visualised. We found [Pinterest](#) a good tool to co-create moodboards for groups who aren't in the same physical space.

Step 3: Prehearsal question Identify the focal issue or central question of the prehearsal. Formulate what you want to examine in the prehearsal as a question.

If you have followed the first step, the question might be the same as the question you used as a starting point for scenario building, with a few more details from the scenario itself. For example, if the scenario question was 'How will we draw in the future?' your prehearsal question might be, 'How will we draw in a future where wood is expensive and computers are wearable?' (where expensive wood and wearable computers are key features in the scenario).

Step 4: Backstory Create a short backstory. The backstory describes the history of the macro and micro environments that underlie the situation you'd like to pre-enact. It contextualises the specific prehearsal instance and functions as a scaffolding for its design.

A backstory can be an element of the scenario you developed in step 1, or you can develop it in response to the prehearsal question. Whichever situation you choose, it should be familiar enough to the participants (e.g. a party, a conference, a Monday morning at work, a farmers' market...), yet it should include elements from the alternative world you want to pre-enact.

You can co-create a skeleton of the story with the group, then one person can write it out, with others suggesting comments and edits. Include one or more images in the backstory.

It might help to use a diary/guided journaling technique to develop the backstory for each individual. Questions can include: How did you get to where you are in this world from where you are today? What would have to happen in your life and in the world to find yourself in this scenario? What aspects of your character would come to the fore? What knowledge, skills or talents could be more useful than others? The individual backstories help the participants develop their roles and characters for the prehearsal.

Step 5: Time and Space Define date, duration and place for the prehearsal.

Based on your prehearsal question and backstory, discuss how long you would need to prehearse to find satisfying answers. Sometimes an hour is enough, other times no less than a day or a week would be adequate. Assist participants in defining the duration. If the duration is short and doesn't require a complex setting, the preparation time can be a day or two. For longer and more complex prehearsals, leave at least two weeks

between this step and the event to allow participants to prepare. It is recommended to plan a briefing at least one day beforehand and a debrief one day afterwards. Agree on date(s) for the prehearsal. Specify the exact day and hour when the prehearsal will start and end.

Discuss and decide where the prehearsal will take place. Agree whether the prehearsal should be private or public. If it is public it will necessarily involve people who are not prehearsing. Think about how this will effect the scenario and the participants.

Step 6: Create the framework Translate your prehearsal question and backstory into the framework of the prehearsal. Discuss and design the following:

- What is the look and feel of this world? Design the atmosphere (interior/exterior design that brings out the 'flavour' of the backstory), and create a moodboard to describe it.
- What can you find in this world? Design the physical aspects as the infrastructure, objects, materials, tools, food, clothing...). Make a list of things that need to be made and/or alluded to.
- Who are the inhabitants? Include the participants, roles, non-player characters... Think about who to involve, how many people, possibly specify appropriate roles (e.g. jobs, tasks, groups, political parties...), and decide whether there are any inhabitants who won't be physically present but leave their traces in the space. Make a list of inhabitants, roles and any other character-related aspects of the prehearsal.
- What's happening? Describe the events and activities that might be happening at the prehearsal, e.g. what will people do, are there unexpected events, joint rituals, etc. Make a list of requirements the activities and events might need (materials, people, other resources).

Step 7: Production Crew Define the support roles in-game and behind the scenes, such as a 'game master', professional actors/improvisers to keep the storyline/universe alive, a real-time documentation crew, tech-support behind the scenes. Make a crew list and find people to fill them. Together with them make a tech-rider, a running sheet and emergency protocol.

For shorter and simpler prehearsals the production crew might be the facilitator(s) themselves, with assistance of the participants.

Step 8: Framing In a few clear sentences, describe:

- the backstory in a nutshell (i.e. a description of the prehearsal situation)
- what you want to prehearse (i.e. your central question)

- what are the roles and essential activities people can perform
- what are the basic rules of conduct in the prehearsal

Send this framing to the participants and add something like the following instructions:

'During the prehearsal please remain yourself, but try out a specific role/attitude that you think you might assume in this scenario. Please stay "in character" for the duration of the prehearsal: pay attention to how you act, live and work in a situation you're prehearsing. Be aware of your thoughts, words and actions. Note what aspects of being in this scenario work for you and which ones don't. Watch how you react to different people, tools, events and how they react to you. Please don't pretend you are fictional character. Instead think carefully about who you are and how you can best engage in the given scenario. This might accentuate a different part of your personality to what you're used to. Observe the changes and interact accordingly.'

Step 9: The setting Decide on the minimum number of props (such as tools, furniture, costumes) that could be used to give a sense of being immersed in the backstory. Design and create the props: repurpose existing materials, borrow stuff and mock-up prototypes – there's no need to make big investments (unless your scenario demands it and you have the budget). Use a minimum amount of materials and effort for maximum effect.

Depending on the needs of your scenario and the time available, make small [experience prototypes](#). For example, if it is crucial to have a new technology developed for your world to work, think about how you could sketch or prototype or just allude to the way this technology could be used, what it would look like, etc. Find the simplest possible way to prototype or visualise this technology and its use. There are quite a few techniques you could use in this step to help – from design thinking, rapid prototyping, HCI, user-centred design, or improv theatre... See [design techniques](#) including [physical narrative](#)))))

Prepare the space if possible a day in advance. Arrange the props, furniture and anything else you think people might need for the situation to feel realistic. Leave 'breadcrumbs' for people to follow into the story, such as seemingly forgotten pieces of paper, letters, messages or graffiti that can remind people of key features of the backstory. If you can try prehearsing with a few people to see how the setting works and if any changes are needed.

Step 10: Briefing Describe in simple instructions what the participants should do before, during and after the prehearsal. This should include anything that people might need to bring. Stress that it is crucial that during the prehearsal people remain themselves, but adapted to different circumstances (rather than playing a fictional role). Send a 'how to prepare' email a few days before the prehearsal.

For long prehearsals hold a preparatory briefing at least one day in advance; for short ones this can be done just before the prehearsal starts. During the briefing, go through

everything you think the participants need to know – the purpose of the prehearsal, the backstory, the rules and guidelines, what is expected of them, what to do in emergencies, etc. It can be useful to conduct short [improv exercises](#) in order for the participants to get comfortable with imagining, improvising and reflecting ad hoc. Allow plenty of time for discussion and be prepared to make last-minute changes. Agree what will happen after the pre-enactment is finished. Remind the participants that there will be a formal debrief session one or more days after the pre-enactment is over. At the end of the briefing say that the next time you'll see each other it will be in another world and another time. Possibly conduct a small ritual or celebration to begin easing the group into the prehearsal atmosphere.

Step 11: Prehearsal If there are people who perform the support roles but do not prehearse, make sure that they arrive at least an hour beforehand and are appropriately briefed to avoid 'breaking the universe'. Let the support team assume their roles and positions before the pre-enactors arrive.

Once the participants arrive, they should immediately enter into the pre-enacted world, there should be no out-of-character conversations. Whatever they encounter should be consistent with the backstory. It is useful to have a role of a in-world host, who can welcome and guide the pre-enactors, easing them into the somewhat uncomfortable role of playing themselves in a strange situation.

Your (facilitator's) role is to pay attention to the overall state of the prehearsal, pre-enactors' emotional states, engagement and motivation, responding to the need for additional scenario elements or guiding questions, as well as mediating disputes, clarifying confusions, swiftly reacting to things going off the rails, etc. You might also be in charge of 'non-player-characters' that can make the story more believable. In some cases you might need to document the prehearsal, which you can do yourself or delegate to a dedicated documentation person/team.

If the backstory has a role for a futurist or facilitator, you can keep your role as in the rest of the process, but this time from within the prehearsal. In this case prepare yourself in the same way you have instructed the participants. If your role is to be an impartial 'game master', you stand with one leg in the prehearsal and with the other in your process facilitator's and mediator's shoes. Pay attention not to break the universe yourself.

In large and long prehearsals it is helpful to involve experienced improvisers and/or LARPer's, to help keep the story alive and the universe whole.

At the end of the prehearsal, have a clear 'end' signal, if possible as part of the story.

Step 12: Individual Reflection Write your individual reflection.

After the prehearsal instruct the participants to 'take some time to be alone – go for a walk, meditate, have a nap or a drink – do something to let go of your prehearsal character. Before speaking to other participants jot down a few personal reflections:

- what are your initial thoughts and reactions?

- do you have any answers to the core question?
- what worked and what didn't work for you in the prehearsal?
- do you have any reflections/additions on the backstory you rehearsed?
- etc.'

Step 13: Decompress Invite the participants to celebrate and share their stories. Sometime after they have a chance to decompress and write their individual reflections, welcome the participants to an informal setting for a drink and a chat. Make a toast, or simply cheer to the prehearsal and everyone involved.

Step 14: Collective debriefing A day or two after the prehearsal hold a collective debriefing session, where the participants can share their experiences and reflect on the scenario. You can use the questions from Step 12, or an evaluation framework like [adaptive action](#). Make sure to allow everyone to be heard. You can use a hosting technique such as the [listening circle](#). End with a discussion on how you could integrate the prehearsal findings into your current situation.

Write clear minutes and share them with everyone.

Step 15: Signals and steps Define practical implementations and scenario indicators.

If you were rehearsing multiple scenarios that began with the same core question, a final debrief is needed to integrate insights from all prehearsals. In this session, discuss what the implications are for the current situation and the plans for the future. Note specifically if there are steps that could be put into practice in real life.

Agree on any indicators (patterns, weak signals, trends...) that you should be watching for that show you're heading towards one or another situation.

Instruct the participants to keep the learning alive: 'When you go back to your daily life, periodically remind yourself of the key question and the various forces acting on your situation. Watch for early indicators of possible futures and adjust your actions accordingly. Remember what you felt like during the prehearsal – what you did as an individual and as a collective, and what impact that had on the simulated situation. If all goes well, this should happen intuitively – just see what emerges and use it to help you make decisions in complex and unpredictable situations.'

Step 16: Pledge Create pledge sheets for the individuals and group(s), and invite the participants to complete sentences like 'I will...' and 'We will...'. The pledge sheets move the conversation from 'what could be' to 'what will be' and create a sense of ownership and responsibility.

Discuss with the group how they will follow up on the pledges, what will happen if they don't get fulfilled, and how they will be translated and co-ordinated in collective actions.

Step 17: Celebrate An intense participatory process such as a prehearsal is best closed with a celebration or a ritual: good food, drinks, informal conversation, music, dancing, meditation, walks in the forest or on the beach, whatever the group needs. This step is meant to encapsulate the energy generated in the process and acknowledge the participants' individual and collective contributions. For you it's time to let go of your facilitator's hat, kick off your shoes and enjoy the company!

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- A longer text with FoAM's thinking behind prehearsals can be found in [Prehears-ing the Future](#)
 - Stuart Candy's [The Futures of Everyday Life](#)
 - Improv games: <http://improvcyclopedia.org/>