

Will synthetic biology face same fate as GMOs?

On a cold weekend last month, more than two thousand undergraduate scientists took over two levels of Boston's Hynes Convention Center. Some wore full-body banana costumes, many wore coordinated team sweatshirts, and all appeared sleep-deprived.

The occasion was the 2014 iGEM Giant Jamboree, a global contest to design and build novel forms of life. (GEM stands for "genetically engineered machine.") At the core of the Jamboree was a discipline called synthetic biology. Whereas developers of genetically modified organisms—herbicide-resistant soybeans, carotene-enriched rice, faster-growing salmon—tweak a plant or an animal's DNA with genes borrowed from elsewhere in nature, synthetic biologists assemble new gene sequences from scratch.

At this year's Jamboree, more than two hundred teams, from universities as far afield as Bandung, Indonesia, and Manaus, Brazil, competed alongside repeat winners such as Heidelberg University and Imperial College London.

As the four-day contest wore on, the students' pitches began blending together into a diffuse sense that synthetic biology would save the world, eradicating Alzheimer's, cockroaches, and the fatberg—a particularly obstinate form of sewer blockage—while improving people's health and generating an endless supply of zero-emission biofuels.

One concern that subtly made its throughout many of the Jamboree presentation sessions: What will the public make of this new technology? As voters in Colorado and Oregon considered ballot initiatives to require labelling of GMO foods, the hundred and fifteen iGEM judges seemed acutely aware of synthetic biology's potential image problem.

Read full, original article: [Synthetic Life After G.M.O.s](#)