Con report- Farah Mendlesohn

I don’t usually write con reports, though I do like reading them, but I feel the need to say some things forcefully, one of which is going to lose me a friend.

In line with the convention code of conduct I will refrain from swearing.

First: the things I enjoyed.
As usual actual programme items were excellent. I have a few to catch up on (Queer writers of Colour, Breakfast with Aliette, Voice Actors, mapping the fantastic, and a few others) and I thought How to Train Your Spaceship, the BSFA talk on trial by combat, the Hay lecture on osteoarcheology, the writing panel with Geoff Ryman, Aliette de Bodard, & Liz Williams were all fascinating. I dipped into the Fan Fiction talk and really enjoyed it.

Second the people I want to cheer:
To all the people who worked behind the scenes on registration, programme and actually making the shitty tech work, I salute you. If I could give everyone of you beer/chocolate/vegan ice cream etc I would.

Third:
Oh well, here goes…..

This is not just a rant about the con itself but about how we got here.

For full disclosure, last March I had to pivot a year’s events to online only one week after we had set them up face to face, with a community that barely even did email; I headed up a conference team that spent the next 6 months looking anxiously to February 2021 and put plans in place that meant when we took the decision in December, we moved fast. A very small event yes, but one which took the decision to deliver across international time zones.

I have not believed we would have a face to face Eastercon for months. No one who was paying attention could have believed we stood more than a small chance of it. Emergency planning my arse.

In sections: note that tho I will mention Access at times, I am reserving it for my last point.

Programme platform as a participant:
I hated the broadcast platform:

- Hard to get into and prone to failure
- Forcing people to sit very still so their face was in the desired circle
- Minor for bad form: the number one seat was the moderator so if they used the 5 square option the moderator was the most significant face on screen. We’ve long held the moderator should be shy and retiring.—in the last feedback session to which I am listening as I write, this is being described as ‘fully customizable’. Forcing people into a set of templates is not fully customizable!!! – Keoth also showed us what the panellist saw as if it was a benefit: it was hugely distracting and if you looked at your fellow panellists in it, you were looking down. NB: I had to switch off the feedback session. It absolutely demonstrated what I say below; this was an excited tech team never really considering user experience.
- Not being able to see participants or know how many participants we had (I gather this was not true for readings). It was speaking into a void.
- Not being able to chat to others on a dedicated room channel: I have got used to the chatter. I gather you could do some of that on Sli.do but none of the events I attended until Sunday had working Sli.Do and we were told it was for questions, not chat. It stripped the online experience back to watching lectures on youtube. It made for a very lonely convention.
Gather Town

- I am a retired university lecturer. I have twenty years experience of excited tech people telling me about how virtual learning platforms will transform the learning (never teaching) experience, only to discover that they've basically created electronic library shelves that take forever to populate, and group chat areas that no one uses.
- Gather Town was a convention experience that required huge amounts of time to set up and in which many of the carefully created spaces were empty. I never went to the bars and others may tell me they were full, but the dealer room and art show hardly ever had more than a handful of people in them. It replicated the VLE experience perfectly.
- On which note: Design, design, design! Now I am prone to say I have no eye for design, and if we are talking about making things look pretty it’s true. But I have done rather a lot of work in the past on how people use space and in particular work on street use and supermarket design. And you know what you don’t do? You don’t create a design with a bloody long and close to empty corridor for people to walk or even “walk” down!—a much better design for this convention would have been a space station hub in which every major “room” was at the end of a spoke and you could enter the Dealers or Art Show or Games or bar through doors on each of the corridors. It’s virtual space for pete’s sakes! You can have multiple frigging entrances into the same space! And did not a single person take a look at the portal room and think: “what are the places people are most likely to want to go to from the portal room” and make sure they were the ones closest to the landing point?
- Signage: [bangs head on desk]. In the programme we have a list of room numbers, and room names, but in Gather Town (at least at the start) we only had numbers. Being a fan used to rooms being named, I’d assumed the names would be on the signs. Ok, maybe just me but I had to redo my extracted programme (oh and in the programme they use initials for the names they aren’t using anyway). Then there were the assumptions: I’m not a gamer, so I didn’t realise I had to walk through round circular spots through a wall. No one maybe thought “perhaps we should turn this into an arrow?” Or, you know, label the effing Green Room?—it finally happened two days into the convention by which point it was also clear that actually, the Green room was irrelevant and that the instruction to go to Green Room before a panel was totally wrong.
- Talking to people: you could really only do it in small groups because otherwise sound went wonky; I did have one or two ‘encounters’ but mostly I found it alienating and harder to chat to people I didn’t know. Joining a group casually felt awfully intrusive—others will feel differently.
- Size of names: er… I thought we’d already decided that name badges had to be large enough to read, not 2pt font in the corner of a screen no matter how much larger you made the screen.
- I never saw more than 180 people in Gather Town. I’d like to see the individual hit rates. Personally I went into most items from the programme. And you know why? Because no one thought to factor in the time it took to navigate the virtual space from one room to another into the schedule. So anyone trying to go from one item to the other via Gather Town would inevitably have been late!

Communications before and after the Convention

And before I start: I would not usually refer to the convention before this one. Vanessa was very insistent in 2020 that the 2021 conventions were not connected (and this was why guests were not rolled over). But in the bid session she kept saying “we” and referring to both teams as if they were one and deserved a chance, so that I now have no hesitation in making reference to 2020 of which I was a small cog (dealer room). In 2020 communication was poor, social media was non-existent and everything had to be cleared by the chair, but far too often was dismissed as a distraction, not important enough, could wait for later…. Sound familiar?

The communications have been awful. I cannot remember the last time I heard so little from a convention, and it was certainly before we all went electronic.
• We didn’t hear about the platform until around a month ago, and what we were shown was a game. Until last week, there was no real sense of what the “site” would look like or how we would interact with it (no Keith, telling us we can watch it on TV is not helpful, not least because many of us no longer have TVs). Instructional FAQs went up on the website late.

• The last time programme was released so late was 2004 in Blackpool and people who weren’t there are probably sick of hearing about it. Not only was it late this year, but what appeared did not correlate with what I was asked to do: I can’t speak for anyone else, and again, I’m not bashing the people picking up this mess, but it’s rather important to tell people if you drop items or move them.

• People were told requirements to provide stuff way too late. Do not tell me there was no time do x; all you are telling me is that your project management is shit. If, for example, you can’t afford a piece of software until quite late, you can work hard on prepping material to make it as easy to upload when the software is available as possible. I have spent ages creating spreadsheets whose sole purpose was to make rapid data entry easy when we could access a programme.

Now the second and third points are merely the result of a shambolic convention, but I have some very very harsh words about the communication issue, and here I have to out myself as a controlling manager. One of the things you learn as a middle manager is that if you have to present something that cannot be changed, you limit the space for argument.

I believe that Confusion released information late and poorly in part because they wanted to prevent argument. I also believe that this is why Discord was more or less shut down, so that people could not get together to discuss issues. It is also why the Bid session was originally set up to prevent people speaking from the floor in clear violation of precedent (there was an argument that you would have to let people in and it might be disruptive, but as a zoom admin can simply put someone on mute or kick them out, it’s nonsense).

This is something employers do to union bust. When I was at Middlesex for example, the smoking room (which many of non smokers went to because that’s where the interesting conversation was) was shut down the day after a very fractious all staff meeting. Any university employee who has been in the field since the 80s will point to the loss of both spaces and times where and when university staff can meet. I do not believe that the decisions this committee made were “just” about inability to monitor for code of conduct because they didn’t have enough volunteers (not least because they did, they just didn’t ask us or - worse- reply when we volunteered). You don’t actually need live-monitor Discord, you just need a report process: it’s a text chat that can be photographed, and checked.

The chair was notable by her absence throughout the convention, other than Everything is Wonderful Statements each day in the newsletter.

**Access**

Access is where I move from bad tempered to incandescent, and where I have a huge and personal stake in the whole shit show. I feel deeply betrayed.

I have worked with Vanessa on access off and on for years. I absolutely accept that Vanessa has been deeply committed to access at other conventions. Vanessa and I have clashed frequently over definitions of disability, access, ‘priorities’ and crucially, who has expertise. As she has more experience than I do, I have often deferred to her decisions. I have always regarded her as a friend, and as fundamentally on the same side. I don’t think that’s true any more.

I am very much part of the “nothing about us, without us” camp. I believe firmly that you listen to access users and try as far as possible to meet needs, not labels.
I also believe that you start building in access right at the beginning; for example I didn’t realise we would be uploading our bid slides to the fan room, so I hastily added a voice over. I now have on my notes: make a check list for access requirements for all public documents for 2024.

In working with Vanessa I more than once hit moments where my ‘expertise’ as someone with hearing loss who depends on lip reading (I am not Deaf, and my hearing loss is most definitely a loss or impairment, please don’t tell me otherwise) was disregarded. At Ytterbium I was reprimanded for suggesting that maybe people in scooters should not have right of way in an area mostly used by pedestrians including small children (they are fast in a small space, I was almost run over as I stepped into the Park Inn’s over narrow corridor). I was also a bit surprised when Ytterbium’s decision to pay for scooters (the only access equipment we traditionally ask con attendees to pay for themselves) was dismissed as somehow molly coddling (for the record it cost us less than £2000).

But mostly we got on fine and I never ever expected that 2021 would utterly disregard Access, just because we didn’t need to worry about ramps.

• Access was listed as ‘special needs’ in the registration form. Ok, just wording but it was a bit off.
• From the moment the first video was released we were in trouble: no captions, transcript to follow later, but for a video where a transcript was useless because it was telling you what to look at on screen. But ok, it’s just the first video. But despite immediate complaints, every video to follow was released in the same condition.
• No one was willing to even consider that the gamification of the convention was in itself an access issue, from what hardware you needed to use to access it (I know plenty of people who only own mobile devices); sensory issues—I had a panic attack on day one; the failure to tell left handers how to move on a keyboard—trivial maybe but...; the extra hand movements needed to move around the convention space with no other way to do it; the lack of time to “move” from one item to another, I am not saying these are reasons to not use Gather Town, but any attempt to discuss them was just waved/waived away.

I am not going to pretend here. I felt utterly betrayed. My sneaking feeling at other conventions that ‘only wheelchair users really mattered’, a feeling for which I’d berated myself, was utterly confirmed. Hearing, sight, neurodivergence, hand or co-ordination issues... None of these things apparently mattered, yet all of them could have been addressed with good design, a careful choice of discussion platforms, and over and above all with conversation.

I didn’t go to the Feedback meetings because for much of the convention I was too angry. What would I have asked after all; “will the convention chair make a full and unqualified apology for the utter disregard of issues of accessibility in the planning and delivery of this convention?”

In future I will not vote for any bid that does not have a clear statement on access and inclusion. I will not go to a convention that does not support access and inclusion (I began declining conferences for this reason some time ago).

I hope that someone will come forward to bid for 2023 who takes this seriously, and understands that access affects all of us. It’s not a ’special need’, it’s part and parcel of hosting a convention that is for all of us.

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An addendum: I am not watching the final business meeting because I value my blood vessels, but I gather Vanessa has made it clear that she did not intend to publish accounts because ‘no one has for years’. Both Follycon and Ytterbiumcon published within months. Dysprosium didn’t but Ytterbium has taken responsibility for them. Unfortunately both I and the Treasurer were very sick last year. I will hereby commit to delivering them by Easter 2022.