

## **Thinking About Program** (with footnotes)

- Priscilla Olson

OK... I can make allusions to planting a garden (um, “compost” and all) – or giant jigsaw puzzles (which example, alas, tends to leave out the “artistic/organic” part of the process.) How about cellular protein synthesis: there are such great analogies implicit in replication and transcription, and what about those polypeptides (panel items?) produced at the ribosomes (program heads?) No.....let me try to do this straight.

This essay is not really meant to discuss *how* to put together a program for a science fiction convention. It is a look at some of my thoughts on the subject of programming

(Note, however, that practice *is* informed by policy – what one does and how one does it are direct consequences of what one’s philosophy is on the subject. Because of this, there will almost certainly be some how-tos embedded in the text.)

These ideas apply to both Worldcon programs<sup>1</sup> and to those of smaller conventions. It will attempt to explore my thoughts on some basic issues someone programming a convention should consider – and, if at all possible, implement.

*Who is the program for?*

The program is for your convention community. It is not for the program head. It is not for the chair of the convention, or for any specific guest(s) of the convention. It is not for the convention that someone thinks you should have or for the one someone wants to have in the future. Program heads who refuse to understand this concept, should not be doing the job.

Can one incorporate items into the convention that serve the other causes listed above? Of course! (In fact, it would be ridiculous not to do so. The program must not devolve into a stagnant reflection of the past!) But because the program is conversation between members of the convention (see below), the program head is responsible for putting together a program that is first and foremost for the people who will be *there* and who have certain expectations of that particular convention – and that program should be balanced<sup>2</sup> accordingly.

*What is the program for?*

Teresa Nielsen Hayden once described the program as orchestrating<sup>3</sup> "the conversation of the convention" and that's a great short summary. The main job<sup>4</sup> of the program head is to

put together a schedule of interesting topics staffed with interesting people who'll talk about them in ways that extend the conversation to the convention. The conversation (two-way or multi-way interactions) takes place between and among the members of the convention community<sup>5</sup> – all of them at one time or another if the job is done well. A really great program is one whose ideas are still being discussed days later by people who didn't even attend the original program item!

So what makes a good conversation? In a nutshell: lively, knowledgeable, articulate people talking to each other, interactively<sup>6</sup>, about some interesting subject.<sup>7</sup>

So, the program is basically produced by joining together ideas and people to best deliver these ideas – but it's really about more than that. After all, it's pretty easy to generate ideas (even good new ideas)<sup>8</sup>, and not even that hard to get pretty good people to present them. The trick lies in combining them right, and scheduling them properly. The program head<sup>9</sup> might best be thought of us as of an editor, striving for an interesting balance of ideas and people that will let him turn his visions into realities. Knowing the field and the potential program participants helps: imagination and creativity are important – but obsessive attention to details is *essential*. (Lots of people don't understand that part.) To produce a really *good* program, *the devil is in the details*.<sup>10</sup>

*What is the responsibility of the program head?*

First, do no harm. Do nothing to enrage or embarrass program participants, members of the convention, the committee, etc.<sup>11</sup>

Do your best. Try not to get lazy: do not take the easy way out. Think. Stay alert. Seize opportunities. Use people. Use technology.<sup>12</sup>

Communicate. (Be polite about it, too.) Answer every piece of paperwork/queries in a reasonably timely and affable manner. (Even if it kills you – but don't assume that anyone has actually read anything sent to him/her.)

Realize life isn't fair. (And you don't have to be fair either).<sup>13</sup>

Balance. Burnish. Balance again.<sup>14</sup>

Try to have fun. If you're not having fun, that *will* be reflected in the program, and in you, too. It's often a big, hellish, and frequently fraught job.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes those of us involved forget it's only a con, and that real life is more important.

*Why do we do this?*

For the sake of the trust. <sup>16</sup>

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>I think it's important to note that for a Worldcon, program is more a giant "area" than a division: it concentrates, basically, on one (admittedly large) project, and I think that makes it differ from the other standard Worldcon divisions. Additionally, in many ways, programming for a Worldcon is *easier* than programming for a smaller convention. For the former, one has nearly unlimited resources: space, people, time, etc. Generally, too, a Worldcon is meant to be strongly inclusive; practically anything goes. A smaller convention is lapidary work; it's all about precision, and is frequently harder to do.

<sup>2</sup>When you get right down to it, programming is really about *balance*. That word will show up again and again in this discussion. Serious? Fannish? How much of one topic? How much fringe? How much specific? How much abstract? Etc.

While I can describe how I can sometimes achieve this balance by staring at a giant piece of foam core covered with scraps of paper and going into a Zen-like trance (allowing me to see the convention holistically) and then applying feng-shui principles to it, that would sound like the claptrap it probably is. Sorta works for me, though. Find your own way, grasshopper....

<sup>3</sup>And like a conductor, the program head isn't actually making the music (though some insist on a very, um, hands-on performance of the job), but balancing all parts of the orchestra so the performance is better than the orchestra could have done by itself.

<sup>4</sup>Please note that I am making some distinctions between "job" and "responsibility" here. While the former is merely a description of what someone does, the latter has, I believe, personal and moral connections and implications, some of which will be dealt with in the following section. Just want to make that clear.

<sup>5</sup>For example, because I strongly believe a convention should be a community, I'm opposed to closed-door writing workshops at most of the conventions in which I'm involved. I believe such workshops foster inwardly-directed behavior (navel-gazing, if you will) that isolates and often selects for people who do not truly become part of the convention community as a whole.

<sup>6</sup>I hate, hate, *hate* "panels" where individuals are essentially encouraged to give their

oration/agenda on a topic, seriatim. (And then the audience starts. Gack.) *Hate*.

<sup>7</sup>Though it is a truth universally acknowledged that the right people can make *anything* interesting.

<sup>8</sup>Yeah, ideas are easy – doing them right is hard. I am strongly against sending program participants checklists of ideas. I am aware that this is a bit of a “religious” issue, but since over a third of my *good* ideas for each convention comes directly from said program participants (the remaining 2/3 split between coming from myself or swiped from other convention), I’d be foolish to try to do a program so robotically.

<sup>9</sup>I think a strong “buck-stops-here” decision maker at the center of the programming process is vital, whose word should not be overruled even by the chair. This feeling has strengthened as I’ve gained more experience in convention programming. One result of this, for example, is that I used to be much more comfortable with “road-show” panels (put together by outside groups): I am now far less inclined to schedule them than I have been in the past.

<sup>10</sup>There are too many things to even *start* to go on about here: just think how many pages could be written about counter-programming the convention’s Guests, for example.

<sup>11</sup>OK, there *are* a lot of fairly subtle ways of taking revenge on the assholes who have made your life miserable during the course of your position as program head. Just make sure it looks nice on the outside.

<sup>12</sup>And/or get someone on your staff who can and will!

<sup>13</sup>Just to clarify one possible spin-off of this: I think treating fans on the program differently from pros on the program is abhorrent. Program participants are there because of what they can contribute to the conversation of the convention community – and the convention should be encouraging conversation, *not* idolatry.

<sup>14</sup>See #2 above.

<sup>15</sup>It’s still is my favorite job on a convention. That sez something, huh?

<sup>16</sup>With a fond nod to the Musgrave Ritual...