A Modest Proposal
for the Design of a Methodology
for Planning the Programming
of a Science Fiction Convention

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There are many ways to plan the formal events of an SF convention. This paper is intended to codify one particular approach, designed to foster types of events that are somewhat divergent from the typical program events seen at most SF cons. It is suitable for small to medium sized conventions, and could be used as a tool to help larger conventions diversify their programming.

Types of Programming

A program event falls into one or more categories:

Presentation

A presentation is a speaker or performer addressing an audience. A speech, an artist's slide show, or a concert are presentations. A group of people can be a presentation if the communication is from the presenter to the audience. The Hugo Award Ceremony or a masquerade are also presentations.

Panel

Two or more people having a discussion in front of an audience is a panel. As with a presentation, a panel has panelists talking and an audience listening.

Question&Answer

Q&A allows an audience to participate. Program participants solicit questions from the audience, and the participants then answer them.

Discussion

The most interactive form is the discussion. Although there may be a moderator who acts as a traffic cop or topic leader, a discussion involves both questions and answers coming from audience members. There need not be panelists at all.

Multiple Forms

It is not at all uncommon for one program event to use one or more of the forms. A presenter might take questions, or a panel might become a discussion.

Program Subjects

Program events can usually be categorized in one or more ways. It's important to be able to balance various kinds of programming. You can't balance a program set if you can't measure how many of which kinds of programming are in the set, so it's important to identify what subjects a particular program item addresses.

Medium

This is the most well known and widely used axis. Art, Literature, Movies, Television, Comic Books, Games, and so on. Many of these can be broken down into subsets. Games has Role-Playing, Trading Card Games, Board Games, LARPs, and so on. A gaming convention would probably break out the subsets, but a small general convention probably wouldn't.

Genre

Another common axis is genre. Science Fiction, Fantasy, Mystery, Science, et al.

Scope

Program items with a very broad scope will be of interest to many convention members, while narrowly scoped items will be of interest to just a few. The reason to have narrow scope events is to feature items that are of intense interest to those few. Writing workshops, hand-beading master classes, or WSFS business meetings, for example. Also, narrow scope items will draw fewer people, and thus fit into smaller spaces that might otherwise go unused.

Weight

This is simply balancing the serious vs. the silly, "work" vs. play.

Professionalism

Hobbyist (fan), Amateur, Neophyte, Professional. The SFWA business meeting is at one end of an axis that has "Why We Like Buffy" at the other. "Your First Convention," "How to Throw a Party At A Convention," "How to Start and Run a Convention," "How to Bid for a WorldCon," and a SWOC meeting run along that same axis.

Activity/Function

Reading/Watching, Writing/Creating, Analysis/Criticism, Collecting, Convention/Event Management, and so on. The last two are often part of the FanAc (Fannish Activity) subject set.

Many conventions are programmed "by feel," or with only an unconscious awareness of some of the axes. The result can be a convention with lots of vaguely dissatisfied members, wondering why they couldn't find more stuff they wanted to attend.

Which axes you choose to use, and what categories and subcategories you select, will have a profound effect on the results.

Balancing Methodologies

Vertical, or "Track" style balancing

Many conventions, especially large ones, have traditionally set up "tracks;" a writing track, a costuming track, a media track, a gaming track, and so forth. This system is easy to set up and

administer. You can allocate a certain number of item time slots to a track, and appoint a deputy to come up with program events and the participants to staff them.

There are a couple of flaws inherent in this approach. One is that it invariably unbalances some of the axes. Some tracks are from one axis, and some from another. "Fandom" as a track may not have a corresponding "Pro-dom" track, so professional-interest program items have to sort of just appear in other tracks. "Writing" might have a lot of events of interest to professionals, but only authors, not artists or game designers. The Reader track and the Art track might both end up emphasizing fantasy over science fiction.

An attentive programing chair can and does usually try to correct gross imbalances, even if they aren't totally aware of the nature of the imbalance.

A much subtler flaw is in the restrictive nature of the results. The writing track might have "How to Scare Without Grossing Out," a topic that is fundamentally as appropriate to art or comics or gaming as it is to writing, but since it appeared in the writing track, it becomes a panel event staffed exclusively by writers that only addresses scaring with words. The media track has "Buffy & Spike; What's Up With That?" which could very easily be expanded to include other examples of unrequited love from other media, but isn't.

More than one convention concom has declared "We don't do tracks," blithly unaware that they'd dispensed with the labels while still engaging in pure vertical programming, with all the flaws inherent in it. As long as programming assigns an event to a single category, the result is a program where all the items fall into 'tracks,' even if assignments and allocations weren't made at the beginning.

Horizontal Programming

This white paper is intended to encourage the use of horizontal programming. As noted in the introduction, this is more suitable for smaller conventions, or used along with vertical programming at larger ones. It allows for a much more comprehensive balance of items, and encourages re-casting tired traditional 'tracked' program items into innovative new forms.

In a nutshell, each proposed program item receives checkmarks for each category it addresses. Items that have more checkmarks are 'better' than those with fewer. Also, the total number of checkmarks in each category for the program set are added up, to calculate the overall balance.

A discussion on "Collecting and Preserving your Art Collection" can increase its score by becoming "Collecting and Preserving your Collection," and including books, video tapes, and comics, as well as paintings and sculpture. The "Buffy and Spike" panel becomes "Unrequited Love," and there's an author and a comic writer along with a media critic on the panel.

If there are too many panels hitting "Fantasy" vs. "Science Fiction," then "Characteristics of Unicorns" would be replaced by "Is That a Photon Cannon In Your Pocket Or Are You Just Happy To See Me; Creating Plausible Future Weapons", a panel about designing, describing, and portraying phasers, planet killers, war machines, and whatnot.

This process of creating and redesigning program events into 'cross-track' multi-category experiences is the heart of horizontal programming. Ideas that aggressively smash out of category boxes and 'tracks' means a much more varied, more innovative, more interesting program. Not only are the topics a break from the norm, but the panels and audiences are mixtures of people that might normally never meet.

Horizontal Programming How-To

Step One: Axes and Categories

This is both simple, and important. Pick out the program subjects that you feel need to be balanced (the axes), and then pick out what categories in each axis you want to include. A general science fiction convention (an "omnicon") will probably use "Media" as an axis, and have "Books," "Movies&Television," "Art," "Costuming," "Filk/Music," "Games," and maybe "Anime" as the categories. A gaming con might use "Role Playing," "LARPing," "Board Games," "Trading Card Games," and "Other."

For the Genre axis, an omnicon might go with the classic "Science Fiction," "Fantasy," "Science," and "Other" (for horror, mainstream, and the like). A 'zine-con might include "APAs," "perzines," and "reviewzines" among their categories.

A costuming convention that decided to balance the Scope axis might go with just "Wide" and "Narrow," to make sure they don't have too many items like "Blowing and Sewing your own Moroccan Cobalt Beads" and not enough "1001 Uses for Ribbon," or vice versa. A large omnicon might feel that previous cons had had a real problem with this axis; maybe last year's events were either 10 people or 100, and nothing seemed to draw 30-50 people. So they might go with "General (more than 1/2 the attendees)," "Large (100-200)", "Medium (40-100)" and "Small (<40)." Yes, program directors are constantly being surprised at some panel being more or less popular than they expected. Nevertheless, if you at least try to guess, and balance your guesses, then the more-popular-than-expected and less-popular-than-expected might balance out. Using the Scope axis makes it less likely you'll be surprised.

Other axes are handled similarly. Keep in mind, very few cons will need to use every axis; that's a lot of work, and too many axes doesn't help; everything gets the same really high score, and you still won't know which ones to use.

Also, these aren't the only possible axes. A convention that draws mostly older fans, and wants to appeal to a younger crowd, might have an "Age" axis, and score panel topics on "Twentysomethings," "New Wave," and "Golden Age." A convention that appears to be turning into a "guys only" event might have a "Gender Appeal" axis, to try to balance items more likely to appeal to men or women. In both of these cases, a particular program item gets the highest score by getting both, or all three categories.

Remember, axes are used both to maximize appeal, and to balance. Some axes easily allow for multiple scores. Genre, for instance, or Media. Others, like Scope or Weight (silly vs. Serious), really don't. Every item's going to get a score of "one" in that axis. What matters is how many points in each category the total program has.

Step Two: Brainstorming

Now we need as many interesting ideas for program items as we can get. There are plenty of good texts on the right way and wrong way to run a brainstorming session, so I won't go into that here.

The last stage of a brainstorming session should involve some informal way of clearing out the clearly silly or impractical ideas, leaving a list of "not bad" or better. This can be as simple as the person running the session just going around at the end, pulling items down, shouting "Silly!", and setting them aside. Hopefully, nobody's going to fight to keep "Martian Mud Wrestling," "Crop

Circle Workshop (bring your own tractor or UFO)", or "How to Make Ice Cream In Your Home Cryo-chamber."

Again, you're just clearing out the obviously silly ones that somebody shouted out as a joke. Any good brainstorming session should generate more than a few of these; they're great for causing other people to think of new, useful program items.

Step Three:Assign Check Marks

Now, each idea is compared to the criteria and receives check marks. This step should be done by one or two people, just sitting around a table totaling up scores. The point is to prepare a list of potential program items with the criteria score in place. There should also be enough information about the program item so people won't wonder what it's about when they read it in the next step.

> Title: Raising Harry Potter
>
> Description: What would it be like to be the parent of a magical kid? Would you be a Mr. Dursley, or a Darrin Stevens? Would a kid like that be more like Sabrina, Tia, or Ged?
>
> Scoring:
>
> | | | |
> |---|---|---|
> | Media: | Books, Movie/TV, (maybe) Comics: | 2 |
> | Genre: | Fantasy: | 1 |
> | Scope: | Medium Crowd: | 1 |

Weight:	Medium: 1
Form:	Discussion: 1
Total:	6

Step Four: Filter and Refine

At the next programming committee meeting, the list is presented. If there are at least twice as many ideas as there are available time slots, then a first pass should probably be made to whittle the list down. This is a very simple procedure that simply looks for a champion for each idea.

For each item on the list, the meeting leader simply asks "Is there anybody really excited about this item?" People are not allowed to say "I think it's a bad idea and should be dropped." It might be an idea with a narrow focus, and not of interest to that individual. But if nobody likes it, if nobody will say "yes, I'm willing to go on record as saying this idea interests me, and I'd probably go to that program item," then it's too boring, and should be dropped.

Once the list is a bit more managable, then we go through it again, discussing the merits of the remaining items. In particular, items with a low score need to be examined. If they're worth saving, can they be refined to include more categories, and thus become more applicable to the convention's criteria?

At the end of this meeting, many ideas will have been dropped, many altered or expanded, and probably some new panel ideas will have been added.

Step Five: Rough Draft Program Set

Now the programming director takes a first whack at a program. Count up the programming slots, and try to select a set of program events that fill the slots and balance the program on the

various axes. Because this is a rough draft, no attempt to actually schedule the panels into specific time slots should be made, even though items like "Opening Ceremonies," "The Masquerade," or "Movie at Local Theatre" probably have fixed times already associated with them.

Ideally, the pool of ideas is such that a completely balanced set of events can be collected. More likely, one or more categories will come up short, or can only be done by compromising some other aspect of programming. The programming director takes their best stab at it, and takes the results to the next step.

Keep in mind that "balancing" doesn't mean "make all categories equal." If a convention's space has six little rooms, two medium rooms, and one big ball room, then you should try for a size axis balance of 6:2:1, not even scores in "Small," "Medium," and "Big." A gaming convention that wants to become more generalized probably shouldn't balance everything evenly the first year, but keep "Gaming" two or three times the other categories in Media. These ratios would be decided back in

Step One, as part of the initial planning meeting for programming, but I waited until now to mention them since they make more sense once you've gotten to this stage.

Step Six: Committee Refinement

Now the programming committee gets one last whack at the program. If one or more categories are deficient, then new ideas or changes to existing panels should be made to boost representation. "Stand by" program items should be discussed as well; ideas that aren't making the final cut, but might get swapped in if necessary. Staffing of the panels is also a topic here; who's going to be the panelists or presenters, and who would be good moderators for the discussions?

If the axes were well chosen, and brainstorming went well, then the program director will have so many good items to choose from that creating a strong program isn't hard. All those other good ideas just get saved until next year. When certain program items turn out to be too hard to staff, there are some alternate items almost as good ready to drop in.

This is also where those category scores become so handy, because this is the stage, usually getting down to the last minute, where panicked reprogramming can take what was a well-balanced program and throw it completely out of whack. It's really easy to find a substitute item that fits a similar niche as the one getting cut, and easy to total up scores to keep a close eye on potential imbalances.

Step Seven: Finalizing the Programming

Now it's down to the programming director. They have to assign the program items to time slots and stock them with participants. The conflicts between participant schedules, simultaneous program items, and suitability for an item at a particular time of day, means that the program director may have to replace some of the items with stand-by ones, in order to make the program set work in a practical sense. They may have to throw the balance off a bit, too.

Any thoughts that the larger programming committee had about when a program item ought to be scheduled, or who ought to be on it, should have been voiced during steps 4 or 6. Getting the final schedule is not something that should be done by committee; there are too many factors to consider.

It will generally be much more important to try to preserve balance on the Topic axis than in the Weight or Scope axes. Members are much more likely to notice and grouse about insufficient

Fantasy programming than insufficient fluffy programming, as long as none of them get seriously out of balance. Which axes are more important to keep balanced is another question that was hopefully answered back during Step One, so the program director isn't 'winging it.' A clear set of

guidelines means that programming can now finish up their work without having anybody looking over their shoulder, but nobody will be surprised by the results.

A Case Study: Foolscap

To illustrate the system, we'll look at Foolscap. There has not yet been a specific year where programming used the system as described here, since it is at Foolscap that most of these ideas have been developed, and we've been experimenting with variations. So for this purpose, this is going to be sort of an amalgam of things that happened during programming for Foolscaps I through III.

Step One: Axes and Categories

Everything depends on identifying which axes and categories are laid out initially. Foolscap was founded while the principles of horizontal programming were being developed, and has as a charter to be a conference for speculative fiction as realized in literature, comics, and art. It also looks to be a place suitable for professionals and neo-fans, and to foster increased awareness and understanding between different fannish groups. Finally, it's intended as a place where people engage in discussion and conversation, and exercise their brains.

So, for the Media axis, program items can score under "Lit," "Comics," and "Art." Program items won't get points for being movie or television related, although they're not forbidden from including such topics. For Genre, the categories are "Science Fiction," and "Fantasy." Although "Horror" would also qualify under the charter, Foolscap chose not to add that as a category.

Because Foolscap is a small convention, there are usually only about twenty or so available programming slots, and the rooms have been mostly the same size. "Scope" hasn't been included in the evaluation criteria, although it should have been.

Again, because of the small size of the convention, the Professionalism axis is represented by "Pro" and "Fan," without making fine distinctions.

Because of the emphasis at Foolscap of member interaction and participation, "Form" is also an axis, with "Discussion" and "Panel/Presentation." Q&A is rarely used alone, so it's implicit in Panel/Presentation.

Finally, a special "GoH" axis is added. If an item is specifically relevant to one of the Guests of Honor, it's going to get an extra point.

Weighting

Generally, the goal is to end up with a more or less equal score in each category of an axis. There are a couple of axes for Foolscap where this isn't the case.

First, "Fan" needs to be much stronger than "Pro." Most of the attendees are interested in specfic as a hobby, not a profession. We'll set a 3:1 ratio on this axis.

Second, Foolscap has three rooms available for programming, and wants to emphasize the discussions over the panels, so a 2:1 ratio is desirable there.

Cheating for Balance

We didn't include the Activity axis, and there's no provision for "Science" in the genre axis. Subdividing the categories too finely means getting only one or two checks in some categories, and it's hard to balance "one" and "zero." A panel that addresses convention running would not score on the Genre axis at all, for example.

So, we're going to add "Fannish Activity" and "Science&Future" to "SF" and "Fantasy," fusing the Genre and Activity axes into a Topic axis. This axis is what will really drive the "flavor" of programming at Foolscap.

Step Two: Brainstorming

This is what came out of the Foolscap I brainstorming session:

- The most frequently-seen screwups art directors see
- What does a storyboard artist do for a film?
- Whose line is it, anyway? (game show)
- What are SF cover artists going to do when PBs are extinct?
- Why is all SF written from a white male point-of-view?
- Utopias, what makes one and why do authors write them?
- Writing outside the cultural box.
- Transsexual / Transgender SF
- Why are most successful SF novels power fantasies?
- The print market, a scam?
- Hard SF in comic books
- What is SF becoming?
- SF in new media
- The high culture to low culture continuum: from The Tempest to My Mother the Car
- Creating Worlds
- Creating Societies
- Are there stories that should not be told?
- Can there be too much SF?
- Has pop culture SF helped or hurt the SF community?
- How do you sell computer art?
- Art Nouveau influences on SF art

- SF art and fashion
- SF comic book artists who should be famous
- Comic book adaptations of SF
- Is there such a thing as British gloom in SF?
- Herding Cats: building bridges between fandoms
- Pricing your work for artists
- SF art courses: are they any good?
- Duct tape and cattle prods: socializing new fans
- Gen-y fandom
- Geezers and Whippersnappers: what you think they ought to respect more
- Great works: do we need them?
- SF Tribes: creating a medium of exchange between fan groups
- Why Y2K is a myth
- Strange flight
- Strange experiments you can do at home
- On beyond violet: how an altered visual perception would change your world
- Acceptably offensive: what can you get away with for the sake of a story?
- Authors you wish wouldn't write the same story over and over
- Get on with it: the Robert Forward panel
- What makes a McCaffrey: the charismatic concept in SF
- What sucks... and why
- Going over the edge: at what point is being a fan bad?
- What's my fannish line?
- Talk to somebody you think you have nothing in common with
- Build your own perfect religion
- Build your own parasite
- What sort of SF is being written?
- Good ideas gone bad in SF
- The distinctive style of the 30s and 40s SF short stories
- The death of the short story
- "The Cold Equation": SF or fascism?
- When is it okay to lie to make a story work?
- How important is the name on a story?
- Midlist: why aren't publishers supporting anything but blockbusters?
- The History of SF
- The 5 or 10 essential SF novels
- Reengineering the Internet
- Truth or Fiction: SF devices

- The road to Hal is paved with good inventions
- What are the stupid tricks aliens could make humans do?
- How do we think aliens would communicate?
- Great games: where are they now?
- Sick games
- Is TOO science fiction: works that say they aren't when they are
- Authors that have repudiated the field
- The effects of SF on society
- Whitley Streiber and proctology: Fetishes in authors' works
- Creating great bad panels
- Reengineering your identity

Step Three: Assigning Checkmarks

We'll just look at a few of the topics from the brainstorming list.

How do we think aliens would communicate?

Media	Lit	✓
	Comics	
	Art	
Genre	SF	✓
	Fantasy	
	Fanac	
	Sci/Future	✓
Scope	Pro	
	Fan (x3)	✓
Form	Discuss. (x2)	✓
	Panel	✓
GoH		
	Total	6

Great Works: do we need them?

Media	Lit	✓
	Comics	✓
	Art	✓
Genre	SF	✓
	Fantasy	✓
	Fanac	
	Sci/Future	
Scope	Pro	
	Fan (x3)	✓
Form	Discuss. (x2)	✓
	Panel 1	✓
GoH		
	Total	8

Utopias, what makes one and why do authors write them?

Media	Lit	✓
	Comics	
	Art	
Genre	SF	✓
	Fantasy	
	Fanac	
	Sci/Future	
Scope	Pro	✓
	Fan (x3)	
Form	Discuss. (x2)	
	Panel	✓
GoH		
	Total	4

Going over the edge: at what point is being a fan bad?		
Media	Lit	
	Comics	
	Art	
Genre	SF	
	Fantasy	
	Fanac	✓
	Sci/Future	
Scope	Pro	
	Fan (x3)	✓
Form	Discuss. (x2)	✓
	Panel	
GoH		
	Total	3

The road to Hal is paved with good inventions		
Media	Lit	
	Comics	
	Art	
Genre	SF	✓
	Fantasy	
	Fanac	
	Sci/Future	✓
Scope	Pro	
	Fan (x3)	✓
Form	Discuss. (x2)	✓
	Panel	
GoH		
	Total	4

[Something about panels vs. discussions was mysteriously obliterated in the PDF file. I'll try to reconstruct it in a later draft.] . . . you can just let the audience talk amongst themselves. Which way a particular item goes depends on what guests are available, and how likely a particular membership is to turn a panel into a discussion anyway, among other things.

Step Four: Filter and Refine

As we worked on this step, it became obvious that we were still woefully short of good comic programming, so we harassed some of the concom via our internal mailing list to come up with some more ideas. At Foolscap III, we discovered that most of the ideas people really loved were heavily Science Fiction, so we worked to get more good Fantasy ideas onto the board, in part by adding more items that were specifically Fantasy-focused, and in part by revising some of our existing ideas to more clearly include fantasy as well as SF as potential discussion material.

We got some great program ideas from that second look. One panel changed from "Alternate Power: Wind and Wave" into "Oceans in SF & Fantasy," which was still mostly a literature panel, but specifically included one of that year's GoHs, Robin Hobb, who has written a series with ships as main characters.

Steps Five, Six, and Seven: Rough Draft, Refine, Finalize

This should be pretty straightforward, so I'll cover three steps at once.

The Rough Draft presented at Foolscap I actually was in a grid but only had half of the slots filled. The rest were still on a clipboard, waiting to fall into place. Because it was a very small program (19 program slots), the final program was worked out in committee, instead of being handled by the program director alone. Not recommended for larger programs, though.

Many of the changes were just re-arranging the items in the schedule, but some program topic changes occurred as well. In particular, the program items added between the rough draft and the final one were all either fandom, comics, science, or art panels. The final program included the following items: On Beyond Violet, The Culture Continuum, Writing Outside the Cultural Box, GoH presentations, Blood Child, Too Much White Male in SF?, Sensawunder, Who Said That!, Creating Worlds, Speaking To Aliens, Hard SF in Comics, Segrelles, Herding Cats; Different Fandoms, My Fandom is Better Than Your Fandom, How Computer Art is Changing Fandom, Are There Stories That Should Not Be Told?, Ten Essential SF Novels, SF Fine Art, How Can You Tell?, and What Effect has SF Had on Society?

Weaknesses

Horizontal programming is by no means perfect, and because it's less common, there's less experience available to avoid some potential problem spots.

Using check marks is easy, but can lead to program items that do nothing well. A collecting panel that is covering preservation of many different items is less likely to discuss the effects of UV on oils vs. watercolors, for example. The Scope axis can be used to offset this, if there's a "Narrow Scope" category but not a "Wide Scope" one. Items that are picking up only a few check marks because they're very specific would make it up partly by earning a check mark in "Narrow Scope."

Another possible workaround is to award "half-checks" for something that's going to have some comics and some art, but not full doses of either. This could be expanded to actual numerical values. Items could be scored in each category on a scale of one to three, or one to ten. While this would allow more precise balancing, it's also a lot of extra work.

It's still possible to get in a rut. If the criteria are the same year to year, then the same kinds of programming would be high-scorers, and a programdirector could end up using the same old ideas over and over. Changing the relative importance of some of the categories because of a special theme or specific guest of honor can help avoid that problem.

A system this defined and rigorous can also result in blind spots. Special interest groups might be a category that's 'not on the list.' A program item of interest to them would tend to score low, since

it doesn't hit any other categories and would thus be rejected. "Something for every category" and "something for everyone" aren't necessarily the same.