Smofcon 35 Report

by Ben Warmus

First off, let me apologize for the rudimentary nature of many of my comments. I am unable to write in any way and listen at the same time so I must work from memory rather than notes. If engaged in conversation, I'll be able to talk about each of these subjects much more extensively. Here is the list of programing I attended at smofcon and my rundown of each event.

Welcome to Smofcon

I went to the intro panel since this was my first smofcon and didn't know what to expect. Additionally, I had no interest in the other 2 panels at the time: "What We Can't Talk About and Why" a panel about giving constructive criticism to other cons and "Grenadine Users" a panel about a convention app and how to optimize your use of it.

At the intro panel I learned that smofcon is put on primarily by and for those running worldcons though they made sure to have more generalized programming all weekend geared towards all conventions. Other than Saturday night where the worldcon bids and future smofcon bids were discussed I had no trouble finding programming that would be useful for the cons I staff

Icebreaker: "Creative" Solutions to Problems...How Bad Could it Be? (and What Can You Do?)

The icebreaker description included, "a workshop where we'll devise taboo-breaking, pro-active solutions to all our problems. Are the corridors too crowded for Tech to move equipment through? Issue them chainsaws. People will get out of the way. Program too crowded? Schedule more things no one wants to attend. There are solutions to every problem, if we just stop being so timid!"

I was looking forward to meeting the other people attending the convention and getting some good conversation starters, but it ended up being more of a gameshow setup where the audience shouted ideas at the presenters with no real interaction. Still a

humorous event, but not what I was hoping for. In hindsight I would have been better served mingling in the hallways.

Training Program Participants

This panel mostly focused on moderators and what some of their best practices should be. Key takeaways:

- Moderating is a skill few have, but it can be taught
- A panel early on at the convention can cover the basics of how to be a panelist and/or moderator. This panel is likely to be lightly attended, but it still worthwhile. My own idea inspired by this would be to take attendance and give the info to programming for consideration on who to give panels to next year.
- Notes for moderators can be found at http://smofbabe.net/moderatortips.html
- Notes for panelists can be found at http://sffantasyauthors-tips.com/#panels These are directed at authors, but many can be useful for everyone.

Motivation and Recruiting

Motivation

- Ask people what they want to get out of staffing. Just being asked makes people feel better, but ideally you can help them achieve their goals or at least set them on the right path.
- If you are losing motivation yourself, it may help to ask someone to be a task master to you.
- Look at offloading some of your tasks to others. A common cause of lack of motivation is burnout from taking on too many things. If you are doing less it's also easier to take the breaks needed to recharge.

Recruiting

- If someone with a very specific set of skills leaves it can be almost impossible to find someone to do the same job. It's best to split the job up among a few people who may each have one of the skills needed.

- Collect contact info of people interested at con while they are still hyped about the event. Even if you don't do anything with it right away, it a set of people you can email later who may not see a facebook, twitter, or other social media announcement that you are looking for people.
- Make contact with local fandom groups such as school clubs or groups who frequent shops that support their fandom.

Program Tech

The focus of this panel was on the tech needs of smaller rooms: how large does a room need to be before it should have mics, if you can't afford projectors for every room do you move them to rooms that need them or force programming into specific rooms.

I was fascinated by some of the stories and learning about the changes in tech needs over the decades, but nothing mentioned was useful for me personally.

Passing the Torch: Knowledge, Experience, & Training

I'm afraid I left typing up this panel last and don't remember it very well. A part of this I think is due to much of the content being repeated from the recruiting section of the Motivation and Recruiting panel or having more to do with that so those notes ended up there.

Preventing Burnout

My main takeaway from this panel is that it's hard to tell if someone is starting to burn out unless you know them enough to notice a change in behavior. Fortunately, many of the things needed to get to know someone that well help prevent burnout such as social events where you don't talk about con or just talking to people about what they want to get out of staffing. Once burnout starts to set in the same things will help get people out of it.

Debrief

Basic feedback panel. Generally elbows deep in coiling cables when ours rolls around so I can't compare. I liked that they wrote down all feedback as it came in for everyone

to see so there was no confusion about what was said or heard. These notes were then typed up and shared to everyone. http://www.smofcon35.org/smofcon-35-debriefing-notes/

Miscellaneous Takeaways

- Print both sides of badges with the same thing. This will make checking badges much smoother.
- Potentially useful data set for artist alley located at kiriska.com. It's actually difficult to find it on the site though so a google search for "artist alley survey" is the best way to find it.
- Next year's event is in Santa Rosa, CA. For the conventions I staff, I don't think it's worth flying someone out for it, but if someone is in the area, it's worth paying for their ticket to go. There will be other panels, but they will be focusing on apps and other computer tools to help conventions. Not my cup of tea so I'll leave it to others to decide if that makes it more or less desirable.