"On a Scale of 1 -5, what Floor are You on?" Practising Methodologies of Fun and Play with Transformative Communities

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Introduction

This chapter examines how playfulness emerges at science fiction and gaming conventions. It argues that attendees and organisers use playful techniques to avoid boredom, provide emergent solutions and overcome difficult situations. This is possible because these people come from a position of experience which incorporates an awareness of playful activities and direct experience of games and gaming cultures. They not only know how to game situations when they become difficult or challenging, but see playfulness as an everyday activity. In doing so, organisers curate an event that feeds into a wider experiential narrative of experiences, and forms a wider paratext of experience. In addition, these events are facilitated by a shifting pool of volunteers who are attendees themselves. Their paratextual experience of these people ("conrunners"), of organisational practices, as well as their joint role as participants who want to enjoy the event, provides a background experience that allows them to playfully rework solutions. Švelch writes that paratexts can be seen as transcendent artefacts which move beyond previous textual/media focussed readings (Švelch 2017)[1]. The chapter case studies the Dublin 2019 Worldcon as a place in which several problems were diffused by playful behaviour, and discusses ways in which this can be theorised. These behaviours do not reach the formalised extent or lasting impact of Gamification, but instead rely on an ethos and appreciation of playfulness which often disperses without lasting consequence when the event concludes. These practices have further implications for organisational fun and play across a wider textual network.

An Autoethnographical Account of Worldcon Worlds

I am fascinated by communities and subcultures, especially how they evolve and change. The pathways these groups make through adversity are complex and often surprising. Observing how they make difficult situations into fun, or comedy, and how they experiment joyfully to make things better demonstrates an innately positive approach to overcoming difficulty. For me, this emphasises the fundamental good of people – the willingness to play, explore and have fun together. The belief that a learning process also involves mistakes. It's a vital part of what makes us creative, thinking beings, and it's also a way of lightening the load – of making things less hard for each other.

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[1] Švelch (2017). Paratexts to Non-Linear Media Texts: Paratextuality in Video Game Culture. Thesis submitted to Charles University, Prague. Available at
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319932075_Paratexts_to_Non-Linear_Media_Texts_Paratextuality_in_Video_Game_Culture

And like everyone, just like all these people, I love to goof around. Writing during the COVID Pandemic, locked in my house for 12 weeks, not able to get a delivery slot, relying on friends to let me know which supermarket has flour, and sometimes crying in frustration at the sheer lethality of governments around the world, this paper makes me smile as I remember someone giving me a ribbon about Martha Wells' *Murderbot*-series, or watching Tammy Coxen rush up to me with her "I hope I remember this in the morning"-idea about solving queueing. It gives me hope.

People often describe coming into the Worldcon community as "finding their tribe." Attendees comprise a wide variety of well-educated professions; lawyers, doctors, professors, Hugo award winners, Nobel prize nominees, international conflict negotiators, authors, train drivers and the odd "doctor trying to get a professoriate" count themselves amongst these ranks. The community often self-identifies as having a wide spread of neurodiverse members. The volunteer nature of the organisation means that crossover between organiser and event manager is highly interchangeable, with 1 in 6 members volunteering for convention organisation roles.[2] The community has Big Name Fans[3] who get angry on social media and incite hundreds of other fans to support them. Everyone thinks they could do a better job of the organisation of this chaotic group, and convention management is an active part of conversations, gossip and news. This is encouraged within the community. Websites like *File 770* (Glyer, 1990-present) bring daily news and debate to fans and "conrunners" around the world. Events like "The Fannish Inquisition" (which everyone expects) grill organisers about their future convention plans. What are they doing about diverse representation? Are there support systems for people who want visas to attend? How are they dealing with overcrowding at popular events? What is the policy on harassment, and "of course," how cannily have they negotiated with their surrounding hotels – what deals have been inveigled for the benefit of attendees?

Being an active volunteer, especially on a convention committee, means becoming a person of all trades. Conrunners often move over time between the organising teams within a convention – usually known as "divisions" – learning everything from which fire regulations come into play when they need to hang a canoe from a venue ceiling, understanding how a DISTRO box alternates in different countries, or learning how to be smart on a budget when feeding 650 fans whisky from only 6 bottles (hint: a 75cl bottle holds 75 x 10ml samples. Use disposable communion "shot glasses" and everyone feels like they got a taster. Also hide a bottle down your pants). As an example, in the ten years, I've been involved with conventions, I've worked for Programme (panels and discussions), Exhibits (parties by night, trade hall dealers and art shows by day), Facilitation (wrangling an incalcitrant Chair, running committee events and meetings), Social Media (Blog posts, answering questions, coercing people into writing things) and Facilities (hotel contracts and hanging that darned canoe). I'm now the Chair of the Glasgow 2024 Worldcon. I'm not sure how good an idea this was.

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[2] Kevin Roche, "Chair's Speech," Closing Ceremony, Worldcon 76 (California: San Jose, 2018).
[3] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Conrunners comprise a crucible of talent, enthusiasm, walking disasters and brilliant innovators. They are solution-based. At the not-for-profit conventions I attend, all conrunners are volunteers and perhaps more crucially, we are often friends. We're headstrong, opinionated, used to working in teams with "challenging people" (when often those "challenging people" are ourselves), and we've made lasting connections we might not otherwise have managed with the people around us that mean at the end of the day, we still want to hang out, drink beer, and shoot the breeze about the recent *Witcher* series.

Are we having fun yet?

In the ludic century, we cannot have a passive relationship with the system we inhabit.[4]

In their chapter "The Problem with Fun,"[5] Sharp and Thomas wrangle with understanding fun. Critics have hitherto found fun so problematic that they will ignore it, assume it is present, or simply leave it to the reader to decide what fun might be. Fun is difficult to define, something we are told (often forcibly) that we are experiencing in order to convince us that yes, we are having fun now. Whilst play might be fun, fun is not always playful – the two are separate entities both forming part of the text. This is a key element when observing communities who may be experiencing situations that are not inherently fun-filled, but may have playfully created elements that mean their experiences are, in fact, great fun to take part in. Fun is happening, whether they intended it or not. Similarly, people may not be having any fun at all, but may play or make up games to alleviate this tension. Sharp and Thomas take us down a number of fun routes whilst exploring this, but ultimately conclude that Bernie De Koven might just be right: "maybe … freedom itself is fun. Maybe fun itself is freedom."[6] Games, they conclude, need to be "just enough – just enough to allow players a place to play, and a place to have fun." It is this "just enoughness" that takes place within convention running.

This chapter also treats the convention itself as a text – one that is reformed, played with and explored by its participants in the process of being created, and during the time it takes place. In this respect, it uses the idea that a text is transcendent and that the convention itself is a text that can be studied (Švelch 2017). In order to break the rules of the convention, or overcome problems that are created by social action, cultural difference or temporal locality, the participants of the convention playfully refigure the world around them. Many times, this involves the creation of small game-like spaces – minigames in the larger sphere of the grand game that is the convention itself.

[4] Eric Zimmermann, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century," in Steffen Walz and Sebastian Deterding, *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 21.
[5] John Sharp and David Thomas, "The Problem with Fun," in *Fun, Taste and Games: An Aesthetics of the Idle, Unproductive, and Otherwise Playful* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 27–43.
[6] Bernard De Koven, *A Playful Path* (Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2014), 220.

At conventions, attendees are at the event for the express intention of having fun – the convention is often considered a holiday, and they attend not only to take part in science fiction and fantasy-related events and to see experts discuss something they are passionate about, but also to meet friends. This is reflected in many other activities that take place during each event – for example tours, parties, meet-ups and socialising in the fan bar. When coupled with their own objectives and textual engagement, this fun element becomes embedded within the wider experience of convention-going, and thus wider (para)textual interaction. A comparable, although more serious counterpoint to the science fiction convention is an academic conference. Peers might meet after considerable time apart, enjoy the stimulating environment of the conference space, and socialise in the conference bar. They are also there to show off, argue, meet new people (to show off and argue with) and demonstrate their own abilities. Each event is a spectacle, with all of these things taking place at the same time in a messy network of overlapping experiences. Whilst these groups may not have turned up to play, fun is baked into their expectations of each event and thus each event is potentially consumed through this lens.

Attendees at science fiction conventions are playful. Whilst they may or may not be fans of video games or board games – which may be elements of individual events but do not always take centre stage – science fiction and fantasy are inherently experimental genres, and there is a strong thematic overlap. Miguel Sicart argues that:

> Play is the force that drives these cultural expressions together and makes them matter … we need play precisely because we need occasional freedom and distance from our conventional understanding of the moral fabric of society. Play is important because we need to see values and practice them and challenge them so they become more than mindless habits.[7]

The reflective, interpretive nature of play is similar to the experimental precepts of science fiction and fantasy. These narratives are invested in worlds where difference is a core element of a story's novum.[8] Changing a core aspect of the knowable world and working it into a narrative in order to explore and appreciate how this affects humans, culture and society is a core element of Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) writing. As I have argued elsewhere, gamers are hardwired to play and play games as part of their daily lives – and game-like or playful activities are embedded into contemporary cultural capital and production, often creating meaning as a result.[9]

However, despite this space of playful exploration and gathering together to enjoy a shared passion, attendees and organisers may not actually have any fun at all. They may be volunteers working too hard to see any of the events, celebrities or papers, or being shouted at when mistakes happen. They may attend events, meet celebrities or discuss papers that are

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[7] Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 5.

[8] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

[9] Esther MacCallum-Stewart, "The Gaming of Players: Jamming Azad," in Nick Hubble, Esther MacCallum-Stewart, and Joseph Norman, *The Science Fiction of Iain M Banks. SF Storyworlds: Critical Studies in Science Fiction*, (Canterbury: Glyphi Press, 2018), 121–142.

boring or boorish, and criticise them in turn (or just leave, bored and irritated). They may even be one of those celebrities who gives a popular paper or performs in a stunning event that brings huge pleasure to others, but find that this takes up all of their time and leaves them too exhausted to do anything else. Or, most likely, they are involved with a combination of these things that leave them alternately tired, full of enjoyment and possibly slightly hungover.

Literature Review – Transforming Play

> To boldly go, there and back again … where no Worldcon has gone before.[10]

I use this chapter to apply the ideas of fun and playfulness to the behaviour of convention organisers ("conrunners") as they try to troubleshoot, accommodate or simply endure the inevitable occurrence of problematic, boring or challenging events at conventions. In order to do this, they create small games or game-like spaces where transformative action can take place. I work through the idea that the convention can be just as playful as the game, and that it forms a paratext of wider experience. Throughout this work, I have focussed on the idea that these people may not necessarily be playing, nor may they be having fun. However, they are engaging with fundamental tenets of these principles in order to overcome their current situations. Furthermore, they are systemically primed to do this, as they exist within communities of practice that are hardwired to play.

As a result of this, I envisage these communities as adhering to both the principles of Bahktin's *Carnivale*,[11] whereby the convention is seen as a liminal, carnivalesque space where the world is turned upside down, and those of Miguel Sicart, who sees play as a holistic experience and as linked specifically to a historicised moment (in this case, the moment of the convention).[12] The carnivale is a place of exploration and subversiveness, populated by unruly participants who work with a spirit of joyful experimentation since they know that this space is short lived, liminal, and relatively repercussion-free. I have previously used these ideas to position the convention as an enabling playful space where a specific game event at a convention – a games jam honouring science fiction author Iain M Banks – iterated playfulness, spilling out into, and reforming the environment around it.[13]

The playful behaviours of convention organisers can be methodologically linked with the theoretical precepts of fun and play through work drawn from the *Well Played Game*,[14]

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[10] Amended strapline for CoNZealand, the 78th Worldcon, post COVID-19, April 2020.
[11] Mikhail Bahktin, *Rabelais and his World* (Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1984).
[12] Sicart, *Play Matters*.
[13] MacCallum-Stewart, "The Gaming of Players."
[14] Bernard De Koven, *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).

discussions on emergent play,[15] and transformative play.[16] All of these ideas present playfulness as a result of engaged action, and as having a flexible approach to change and rapid iteration. Transformative play sees play and design as melded: "enabling the players to contribute to defining and changing the structures framing play, and ultimately to decide how and what they want to play."[17]

I see the enacting of these methodologies at conventions as inadvertent or emergent, rather than drawing from gamification theory which takes a more structured, long-term approach[18] and sees the effects of play as more long lasting. This is for several reasons. The play that emerges at these events is often spontaneous, without fully directed purpose or outcome. It is instead intended to relieve boredom, express frustration, subvert systems that participants are unhappy with or know that they can facilitate through playfulness. It is not used as a learning experience (much to the detriment of convention management, but this is a different paper). Finally, playful circumstances are sometimes created simply for sociality and fun. There is some long-term learning; providing coping mechanisms for how to playfully engage with non-playful situations, but within the volunteer organisers ("conrunners"), this is not always carried from event to event; instead, reinvention and reimagination within each management team is commonplace. Gamification Theory points itself more towards designing interactive systems to enhance user engagement,[19] whilst this study saw a series of short-term systems being developed in response to situations perceived as boring, frustrating or simply ineffective. At conventions, which are short-lived, liminal spaces, participants' chief objectives tend to be less about learning, and more directed to enjoying themselves and existing within a playful environment. This might include a displacement activity in which the playfulness created is an attempt to distract, rather than educate, and is not properly documented – or simply forgotten about – when the convention ends. It represents, then, an ephemeral element of industrial paratext.

Worldcon: "I would be perfectly responsible with a flamethrower"

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[15] Joris Dormans, "Integrating Emergence and Progression." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 – Think Design Play*. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/11310.25319.pdf. Josh Bycer, "Examining Emergent Gameplay." *Gamasutra*, September 16, 2015. https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/JoshBycer/20150916/253682/Examining_Emergent_Gameplay.php. Jesper Juul, "The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression," in *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2022), 323–329. http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/openandtheclosed.html.
[16] Olli Sotamaa, "Let Me Take You to The Movies: Productive Players, Commodification and Transformative Play." *Convergence* 13.4 (2007): 383–401. Jon Back, Elena Marquez Segura, and Annika Waern, "Designing for Transformative Play," *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, 24.3 (2017): 1–38. John Sharp and David Thomas, *Fun, Taste and Games: An Aesthetics of the Idle, Unproductive, and Otherwise Playful* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019).
[17] Back, Marquez Segura, Waern, "Designing for Transformative Play," 18.
[18] Brian Burke, *Gamify: How Gamification Motivates People to do Extraordinary Things* (New York: Bibliomotion, 2014).
[19] Gabriel Barata et al., "Improving Participation and Learning with Gamification," in *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Gamification*, October 2013.

The World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon), and the smaller satellite Science Fiction conventions that both support and engender it, exhibit a number of specific behaviours which are slightly different from commercial "on the gate" conventions such as Comicon.[20] An on the gate convention is usually run by a commercial events management team, and is more focussed around celebrity guests whom attendees pay to receive photographs and autographs. On the gate events often give preferential space to commercial and artisanal vendors selling relevant products. Science fiction conventions are structured more around talks, panels and discussions. This changes the demographics of attendance and member movement – science fiction conventions attendees tend to remain on-site, usually in hotels, for considerable amounts of time (up to five days), then spend high amounts of money on off-site evening entertainment such as restaurants, whereas on the gate conventions deal with a high volume of more transitory traffic and eat from on-site fast food outlets during the day.

Worldcon is the longest-running science fiction convention in the world, having begun in 1939. The event has a specific focus on the Science Fiction and Fantasy genres. Worldcon and science fiction conventions are a crossover between an academic conference, with many tracks running panels, workshops, poster sessions and scholarly talks, where fans meet and socialise with authors and publishers who give readings, autograph their work and launch their new publications. In addition, science fiction conventions may feature an exhibit space which showcases a mixture of scientific stands, themed displays celebrating Guests of Honour, art from science fiction and fantasy creators, and dealers selling books and associated products. Worldcon also hosts the Hugo Awards (the science fiction and fantasy Oscars), and attendees who have paid in advance (known as "members") are eligible to nominate and vote for these awards since the attendance fee grants short term membership of the World Science Fiction Society, the organisation responsible for the administration of the Hugo Awards. Attendance rates of American Worldcons tend to run to about 4,000–5,000 people, whereas those in non-American countries are becoming significantly larger at 5,000–8,000 people.[21] Crucially, Worldcons are run by groups of volunteers and not by professional event management teams, and everyone, barring the Guests of Honour, pays to attend. The location of the event, and the groups managing each event change every year.

The demographic of Worldcon attendees is different from commercially run on the gate events. Attendees are relatively affluent, as international travel is often required.[22] Approximately 65% of all attendees at a USA located Worldcon are from the USA,[23]

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[20] Camille Bacon-Smith, *Science Fiction Culture* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
[21] Wikipedia, "List of Worldcons" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Worldcons, accessed May 23, 2022. Note that these figures show the amount of people who have bought memberships as well as those estimated to have attended. Figures for 2015 were skewed by a faction of people who had no intention of attending, but who bought supporting memberships in order to try and manipulate the results of the Hugo Awards. This is a form of creative play, however the ill intent of these actions means that they will not be discussed here.
[22] Vincent Docherty and Colin Harris, "Application for Release of Final Subvention Payment," *Interaction 2005* (Personal File); Vincent Docherty, Colin Harris, and Mark Meenan. "RPF for Glasgow 2024," *Glasgow in 2024* (2018, Personal File).
[23] René Walling, "Worldcon Membership Demographics 1961–1980," *Adastra.com*, August 31, 2018, accessed April 16, 2020 https://www.adastrasf.com/report-worldcon-membership-demographics-1961-1980/.

changing to approximately 35% at a non-US event.[24] The age group of attendees skews towards a middle-aged bracket of between 40–60 years. Tickets are bought in advance and cover attendance to all on-site events (although some may be ticketed to control numbers). The event is volunteer organised and run, and 1 in 6 attendees volunteer in some capacity, either during or before the event.[25]

The volunteer ratio of Worldcon members is important because it means that attendees are frequently involved in the running and organisation of events. Many attendees have prior or current experience of volunteering for a science fiction convention and therefore know at least some of what goes on behind the scenes. This additionally means that their experience allows them to make (semi-)informed commentary on the current event and how it is manifesting. In a community where volunteering is so commonplace, everyone has an opinion about the running of the event at hand. Everybody.

Emergence: The Convention Ribbon

> Being playful is the engine of innovation and creativity: as we play, we think about thinking and we learn to act in new ways. As a cultural form, games have a particularly direct connection with play.[26]

Much as the paratext, as threshold, science fiction conventions are liminal spaces. Participants may have come from many different places and institutions, and thus their shared experiences relate not to who they are, their social demographics or their cultural experiences, but the thematic nature of the convention itself. This means that a microcosmic environment is created for each individual event where rules and codes of behaviour must be re-established, and cannot be taken for granted. Attendees create ritualistic practices in order to engender a sense of belonging and to instantly connect with new people or those they may not have seen for some time.[27] The convention space itself echoes Huizinga's idea of a magic circle: a new, unfamiliar space with different rules, codes of behaviour and practices that dissipate once the event is over. It is therefore a space of textual negotiation. Directly applying these precepts to issues within the convention space allows playful problem-solving to be initiated.

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[24] Dublin 2019, "Membership Statistics: Where our Members are Coming From," *Dublin 2019*, accessed April 16, 2020https://dublin2019.com/whos-coming/membership-list/membership-statistics/.
[25] Kevin Roche, "Chair's Speech'," *Closing Ceremony, Worldcon 76* (California: San Jose, 2018).
[26] Zimmermann, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century," 21.
[27] John Goodger, "Ritual, Solidarity and Sport," *Acta Sociologica*, 29.3 (1986).

Figure 1: Ribbons on a Name Badge at Dublin 2019 (image by the author)

A ribbon is a piece of cloth with a sticky edge that allows it to be stuck to a convention name badge (usually a rectangular laminate displaying the participant's name and possibly affiliation), or to other ribbons. There are various different claims as to when ribbons were first introduced to conventions, but an early image of ribbons can be seen at Norwescon (Worldcon) in 1950 – an image taken by Martin Alger shows Mel Korshk wearing at least one on stage.[28]

Several companies specialising in conference goods sell ribbons online, allowing buyers to upload their own designs, or quickly create personalised ribbons through an easy design tool. Ribbons are sold in batches, with the minimum purchase being around 50 to 100. They are relatively cheap to buy in bulk and are available in a wide variety of colours and fonts. Ribbons are extensively used at all Worldcons. These ribbons also serve the purpose of establishing paratextual relationships between the volunteers and the convention.

Ribbons were intended in the first instance to delineate a role – for example "Chair" or "Hotel Liaison," but also to facilitate more general requirements such as "Access All Areas." Since a convention's volunteer pool is both large and transitory, ribbons gradually began to

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[28] Martin Alger, "Norwescon 1950 – photos," *Fanac.org*, November 8, 2007, accessed April 20, 2020, https://www.fanac.org/photohtm.php?worldcon/NorWesCon/w50-028.

differentiate further roles through both explicit (words) and indicative (colours) representation in order to help groups identify each other. For example, colour-coded ribbons might all be linked to one team or division so that volunteers could recognise each other, such as "Tech Team" or "Programme." Differentiation of members also became useful – demonstrating if a person was exhibiting in the "Art Show," speaking as a "Programme Participant" or perhaps being a "Guest of Honour." Thus, not only did ribbons become an expression of status, but a volunteer or member of the convention might need several different ones in order to depict their various roles and activities during their time at the convention. Fig 1., for example, demonstrates that the attendee is a staff member, has roles in the Facilitation Division and Chair's Team, but is also a "Party Organiser."

Convention attendees quickly saw playful alternative uses for ribbons beyond simply the demarcation of organisational roles, refiguring their meaning as cultural artefacts. Ribbons are very visible to other participants, and denote belonging. This is a particularly salient need amongst groups that are internationally networked, and thus may not know each other's likes, dislikes or affiliations on sight. Ribbons were quickly repurposed by non-host groups to promote other conventions and demonstrate affiliations, such as membership of a society or fandom of a TV series. In-jokes or fannish quotes and puns also became popular as again, they suggested clannishness and signified a sense of place. The act of giving out and collecting ribbons immediately pivoted towards a more social occupation – attendees might pick a ribbon up *gratis* on a fan table advertising another convention, or they may have to seek out someone giving out a specific ribbon and say a codeword or phrase in order to gain it. Ribbon givers might spot "their tribe;" for example, I was once given a ribbon in an elevator after another occupant spotted me playing *Pokémon Go* on my phone. As a result of this, at large conventions, it is easy to acquire a significant amount of ribbons in a short period of time, as well as having an opportunity to hunt for the more discreetly dispatched ones.

The act of ribbon collecting is playful, and the display and swapping of them closely mimics gamified practices of achievement, representation and effort needed to obtain them. Members must choose how to display them on their badges, and this can quickly become chaotic. The "ribbon beard" is a long tail of ribbons that stretches downwards to excessive length, and for many people, this accumulation becomes competitive. In particular, children like to collect as many individual ribbons as possible and compare numbers. These are sometimes repurposed – I have seen a ribbon corset, and a member wearing a cloak made of ribbons, which must have taken some time to accumulate. I have used the backs of ribbons (usually blank, and porous) to acquire signatures when nothing else was to hand, and have given out fannish ribbons both for my own conventions, to celebrate author Chuck Tingle, and in exchange for dramatic short readings of Guy N Smith's *Night of the Crabs* series. Whilst ribbons are a well-established tradition, they are constantly inventive, changing in content if not in format.

Contextualising within the concept of paratexts, we can see that goal-oriented engagement can shape the wider convention experience, as well as providing indication of otherwise hidden or ephemeral roles. Hamari found that awarding badges to participants resulted in an

increase in engagement,[29] and there is consistent evidence to show that rewards enhance learning,[30] and encourage players to spend more time on tasks that may be subsidiary to their central goals.[31] Ribbon production and collecting is a member-generated form of this. There is no formalised game or set of rules, and the act of wearing ribbons is usually voluntary (unless convention organisers have stated that volunteers must wear ribbons describing their roles – even then, people often take these off or turn them around to signal that they are "off duty"). Ribbon wearing demonstrates the long-term adaptability and transformation of a practical exercise into something more playful and fun, with participants continuing to iterate on the original (the "ribbon beard," the secret ribbon of Team Mystic). Whilst not a troubleshooting activity *per se*, the repurposing of the ribbon towards a social signifier demonstrates the innate ability of convention attendees to repurpose a practical artefact for their own ends.

Transformative Play and Game Design: The Dublin Queue Problem

> Play and game design are fundamental literacies required if we want to build and use these systems to solve the challenges of our time.[32]
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> For such a systemic society, games make a natural fit.[33]

As demonstrated via ribbon repurposing, organisers and participants come to conventions with an expectation of play and of fun, which bleeds into their behaviours as well as their consumptive practices of the event itself. Their appropriation of ribbons also shows a relative fearlessness and challenge to authority – there is no consideration by attendees that playfully refiguring an organisational aspect of the convention might result in repercussions or detrimental effects. Fig. 1 demonstrates a reciprocal awareness of this – the plastic badge itself now says "STAFF" in large letters to avoid the problem of the ribbon contents below blurring the lines between functional and fun. Emergent practices refigure each other as they unfold. The paratextual ribbons then serve a purpose to shape the experience of the convention, while also providing a touchstone for nostalgia and indications of community status.

This second example demonstrates that playful solutions are not always engendered by fun. At the Dublin 2019 Worldcon, attendee numbers caused an unforeseen level of queuing. This

[29] Juho Hamari, "Do Badges Increase User Activity? A Field Experiment of Effects of Gamification," *Computers in Human Behavior* 71 (2017).

[30] Lucas Blair, "The Use of Video Game Achievements to Enhance Player Performance, Self-efficacy, and Motivation." Electronic Theses and Dissertations (Orlando: University of Central Florida, 2011).

[31] Mickael Jakobsson, "The Achievement Machine: Understanding Xbox 360 Achievements in Gaming Practices," *Game Studies* 11.1 (2011).

[32] Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding, "An Introduction to the Playful World," in *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, ed. Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015), 15.

[33] Eric Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century," in *The Gameful World. Approaches, Issues, Applications*, ed. Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 20.

was partly due to the layout of the convention centre itself, partly a result of the convention being a victim of its own success (panels were much more popular than anticipated), and partly bad spatial planning by the convention team. Queueing is not a familiar element to science fiction attendees, who are used to walking into a panel before it starts and easily finding a seat. Instead, attendees found themselves unable to get into the sessions they wanted to and waited for considerable amounts of time before each session. Queues formed on top of each other, causing confusion, congestion and further difficulty in getting into rooms.

Whilst the second aspect was quickly solved by putting down marker tape and barriers to manage the space better, attendees were still left waiting outside their chosen sessions. With unexpected time on their hands, they quickly took to social media in order to complain. These complaints bolstered the perception that queues were long and disorganised. Despite room capacity markers added to the floor, attendees were still surprised that sessions were filling up, and found themselves being turned away from sessions, causing disappointment and frustration. People with accessibility issues, or unused to waiting outside sessions for them to begin, were upset and angry. This was an unfamiliar and disruptive experience. Rooms were at capacity, with Health and Safety and accessibility requirements meaning more seats could not be added. Frustrated people were still having to wait in advance and were disappointed to find queues filled in advance, meaning they missed multiple sessions (to queue meant attending the desired session, but missing the slot before).

Queuing is probably one of the least fun experiences one can have at an event that specifically promised hundreds of easily accessible events, panels, talks and more and comprised a significant number of people with physical needs that made standing an unpleasant experience.

Worldcon divisions are rather like workplace departments in that various groups have overall responsibility for tasks within the organisation. Tammy Coxen, an experienced convention runner, was the Dublin 2019 Division Head for "Member and Staff Services," which looked after front-facing concerns from attendees and volunteers. Her team was also responsible for the Information Desk, which bears the brunt of queries, complaints and concerns from members. Dealing with angry people who wanted to voice their distress at the queue situation rapidly became the main topic, and this in turn caused its own logjam at the desk – stopping people with other queries from being able to ask questions.

Tammy's solution did not solve the queue problem, it refigured it into a game. On the first day of the convention, a member of the Irish Tourist Board (Fáilte), attended the event in order to canvas attendees about their wider experiences in Dublin and at the Convention Centre (CCD). She was delighted to find a captive, vocal audience standing in long queues, more than willing to break up this monotony by speaking to a sympathetic ear about how the venue could improve their experience. The Fáilte representative left the venue at the end of the day having spoken to over 100 people, far more than usual, and with a wealth of data about logistics in the CCD. Tammy realised that complaining had allowed these members not only to express their frustrations but that the Tourist Board canvasser had distracted the

queuers, giving them something to do during the times and inadvertently providing a pressure valve which stopped issues repeatedly being brought to the Information Desk. In the absence of the canvasser, she decided to create her own questionnaire to divert attendees.

By the end of the second day, survey results were being displayed over the Information Desk like leader boards. These documented the day's survey results, the results of which were later published as "Results of the Highly Scientific Queue Surveys Conducted at Dublin 2019: An Irish Worldcon."[34] These were also posted on the convention website and published in the convention newsletter. The questions were largely nonsensical ("Please rank this survey on a scale of 7–42"), fan-related ("What is your favourite Star Wars Movie – Wrath of Khan or ET?" – neither are Star Wars movies), and situational ("On a Scale of 1–5, which floor are you on?" – not only are US and European floors designated slightly differently – US floors start at 0, whereas UK and Irish ones start at "Ground," with 0 being the basement, but the CCD used a confusing system of naming which was flummoxing attendees). Answers were posted in a similarly ridiculous way – for example the question "Pineapple on pizza – threat or menace?" produced the answer "74% of respondents properly identified the threat of pineapple on pizza, 26% seemed not to understand the question," and was accompanied by a pi(n)e(apple) chart which did not tally with these statistics (Fig 2.)
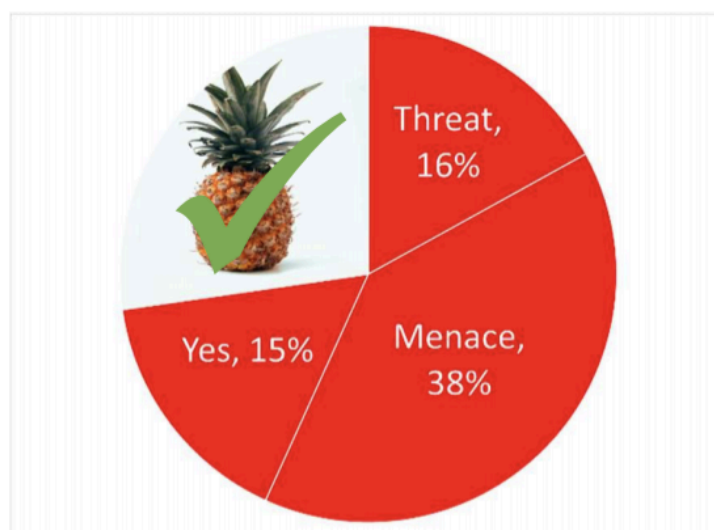

Figure 2: The dangers of pineapple[35]

The utter lack of seriousness of this survey changed the atmosphere in the queues. After a certain amount of confusion, attendees began to enjoy the experience of being asked silly questions and on the second day, started to take part more fully by providing comparably odd answers. Salen and Zimmerman argue that transformative play happens when "the free

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[34] Tammy Coxon, "Results of the Highly Scientific Queue Surveys Conducted at Dublin 2019: An Irish Worldcon," 2019. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HYcISPVtP8h_tpTlyDDcboW-O4F8aHXR/view
[35] Coxon, "Results of the Highly Scientific Queue Surveys Conducted at Dublin 2019." Reproduced with permission.

movement of play alters the more rigid structure in which it takes place."[36] In this case, queuers were encouraged to be more light-hearted, and usually responded in kind. The queues were now being 'gamed', with platers vying to give the daftest answer and get on to the boards in the lobby. Whilst queues were still boring and long, the convention management had signalled a way of making them a little easier to endure, acknowledged the problem, and provided a playful response which, while it did not solve the problem, at least made it easier to bear.

This fix was not a gamified solution, nor did it provide long-term positive benefits. It simply transformed a localised issue into something playful. Interestingly, the convention centre itself responded in kind, changing digital signs around the building to show science fiction characters enacting and offering further organisational instructions "Hide from Daleks – use the stairs!," or "Keep elevators for those who need them most" (a sign showing wheelchair-bound *Doctor Who* villain Davros entering a lift), to help foot traffic move more effectively. This reciprocal behaviour showed play transforming official structures, as more official groups saw how playful responses diffused some of the tensions caused by elements like overcrowding that could not be changed.

Conclusion

This is a community where the expectation of fun is endemic to the experience of attending an event, but the behaviours that I have described are not unique to conventions. Instead, conventions provide a liminal space where these activities are visibly encouraged. A group that expects to enjoy itself, and has an element of awareness of organisational processes behaves as a critical, learning community, welcoming transformative play when it takes place. Short-term fixes to problems are therefore implemented in a way that allows reciprocal development – organisational signifiers become a game of collecting, and frustrating moments are replaced with distractions, later taken up by institutional bodies when they are seen to work. Tammy Coxen's solution did not teach anyone a lesson, instead it alleviated a problem through distraction; but it was reflected in the CCD's recognition that this technique worked, and adopting it in turn to develop further spatial management. The implication for study and further dissemination is also something that needs to be considered. The Worldcon community tries to learn from itself; for example through fannish events such as SMOFcon (an annual convention for convention runners), but does not always pick up on the playful aspects that underscore this behaviour. Circulating this information more effectively is something that is both needed, and recognised as needed by the community. The volunteer aspect of conventions additionally means that the "just a volunteer" moniker sometimes avoids deeper dissemination of these practices (for example for events management on a wider scale, or at different forms of large scale organised events). As many gaming scholars often opine, maybe it is time to take this form of play much more seriously. However, allowing the flexibility of play to happen demonstrates a transformative approach to organisation, which ultimately provides a useful pathway through difficult situations, and also

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[36] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 305.

demonstrates how unconscious practice can have a hugely beneficial effect on community development – even if this is only short-term.

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