

BY CHERYL MORGAN

A FUTURE FOR

I'm writing this article in response to the recent

Dialogue between Mike Resnick and Barry Maltzberg that touched, amongst other things, on an apparent declining attendance at Worldcon. For those of you who don't know me, I'm fairly notorious in fandom for suggesting changes in the way that Worldcon is run. It should not surprise you, therefore, to hear that I agree with much of what Mike and Barry had to say. However,

their article also contained some highly debatable statistics and some rather muddled ideas about how Worldcon works. If writers want Worldcon to be a successful event (and I hope that you do) then you need to understand it better. Hopefully this article will help.

When Worldcon started, back in 1939, the attendance was around 200 people. That may well have accounted for a substantial part of the science fiction reading and writing community of the time. These days, however, we have won the culture war. Millions of people watch science fiction in films and TV, while fantasy novels dominate the bookstores. It was inevitable that the convention market would grow and diversify to cater to the burgeoning interest in what we offer. So Worldcon is no longer the only game in town, and as everyone is being careful with money these days it is entirely reasonable that people are making choices about which convention to attend. There are very good reasons why you may pick a big, commercial event such as San Diego ComicCon or Dragon*Con, or a smaller, specialist event such as World Fantasy or WisCon. You might also choose to go to your local regional. But possibly Worldcon is still the right convention for you.

Of course if Worldcon really is dying fast then you should jump ship right away. Attendance numbers, however, can tell a variety of tales. The first thing to note is that your personal impression of the size of an event can easily be mistaken. Worldcon committees know that many of their attendees are older and perhaps less able, so they make a determined effort to allow plenty of space and avoid queues. Conse-

quently the event doesn't seem crowded. One of the results of this is that young people attending Worldcon for the first time are sometimes dismissive in their blogs. They will assume that the event wasn't very popular because it didn't have huge queues like the media and anime cons they attend. Even older people sometimes grumble that the membership counts can't be right.

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Worldcon membership, however, is something that does get studied. The World Science Fiction Society (WSFS) has an independent, ongoing committee devoted to keeping Worldcon history, and one of their jobs is to try to audit attendance figures. It isn't an easy task, because members come in various types. Is a day member equivalent to someone who attended for all 5 days? What about someone who could not attend but bought a "supporting membership" so that she could vote in the Hugo Awards? Or a journalist from a local newspaper who got in on a press pass? Or young children who came with their parents? Where possible I'm going to stick to the count of unique individuals who actually attended and paid to do so.

You can find the historical list of Worldcon attendances online here: [<http://www.nesfa.org/data/LL/TheLongList.html>]. If you take a look at the numbers, one thing you will notice is that different parts of the world have very different attendance levels. Consequently you can draw some very misleading lines between pairs of points. If I looked at the decade from 2000 (Chicago, 5,794) to 2009 (Montréal, 3,912¹) I could argue that Worldcon has dropped by a third in size. But if I looked at 1999 (Melbourne, 1,548) to 2008 (Denver, 3,752) then miraculously the convention has more than doubled in size.

The reality is less alarming. If you take into account different attendance levels in different parts of the world then attendance

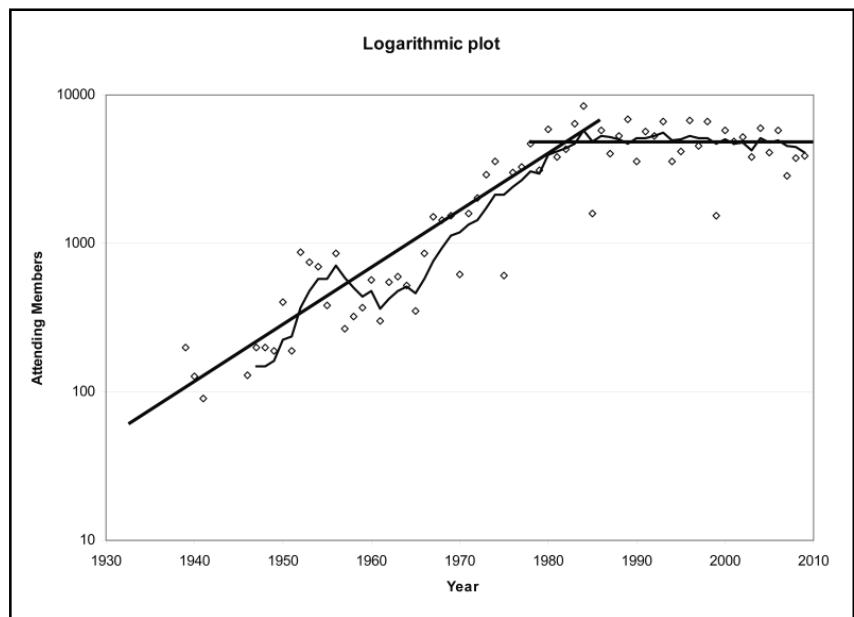
1. Figure unaudited, taken from email sent to convention staff list and published by File 770 [<http://file770.com/?p=1277>]. Believed to include no-shows.

has been pretty much steady from 1980 onwards. Canadian Worldcons have never exceeded 4,000 members, so Montréal was not unusually small. British Worldcons just exceed 4,000. The numbers in the USA are more varied. The largest Worldcon ever was L.A.Con II in 1984 which drew 8,365 people. It did that, at least in part, on the back of being the first venue ever to show the original three *Star Wars* movies back-to-back. Of course that would not be a draw these days. No other Worldcon has exceeded 7,000 members. Of the 20 US Worldcons from 1980 onwards, 13 of them have had fewer than 6,000 members. Two have had fewer than 4,000. Both of those have been in Denver.

What's wrong with Denver? Mike had it spot on when he mentioned driving. Worldcons draw their attendance primarily from three distinct groups: those who are happy to fly wherever necessary to attend; those who will stump up the hotel cost if they can drive there in a day; and the locals whose only costs are gasoline and memberships. For Denver, the number of people in the 1-day drive market segment is relatively small. I worry about Reno, because while it is quite a large city it doesn't have an active local fan group or a large local convention. Thankfully the Reno committee does seem to understand the need for marketing.

Worldcons outside of the USA do tend to be smaller than those inside it, but Australia aside they are by no means tiny. Japan and The Netherlands, both non-English-speaking countries, drew over 3,000 attendees. Glasgow draws more people than Denver. Thanks to the facilities glut that will be produced by the 2012 Olympics there is a good chance that the 2014 Worldcon will be in London. If that happens it could prove to be the biggest Worldcon in a long time.

Many people have argued that if Worldcon wants to compete with Dragon*Con it should settle down in one place, and it certainly would grow if it did that. It would also change the nature of the event quite significantly. In marketing you should always be aware of the unique features of your product. As far as Worldcon is concerned, its unique features are as follows:



- It is run by fans on a volunteer basis for the SF&F community;
- It is an international event that brings the convention to the fans rather than expecting them to come to it; and
- It is the home of the Hugo Awards.

Settling down in one place would obviously remove the second point, and would probably remove the first because an operation the size of Dragon*Con could not easily be run by volunteer fans year after year.

There is also a question as to who would make the decision. There are no “powers that be.” Unlike SFWA, WSFS does not have any elected officers who set policy. It isn’t even incorporated. Each Worldcon is an entirely independent legal entity, and the sites of future Worldcons are decided by a vote of the membership of the convention two years in advance. In practice the people who vote are mostly the people who attend Worldcon ever year—the market segment that can afford to fly—and of course they select places they would like to go to. However, there are several hundred of them. They are not a group that is easy to influence.

The good news for US-based people is that, after Melbourne, the next three Worldcons are likely to be in the US. Reno already has 2011, and there are strong bids announced for Chicago (2012) and San Antonio (2013). Neither of these bids is opposed. As I mentioned above, there is a good chance that 2014 will see Worldcon in London.

If Worldcon is to grow, however, or even keep its current size, then it does have to change. Attendance may not be collapsing as fast as Mike and Barry fear, but it is getting older. And one of the reasons why there are fewer US Worldcons these days is that there are fewer Americans willing to do the work. Canada, Europe, Australia and Japan are all happy to do one Worldcon a decade. That leaves US fans to do six, and without any new blood they’ll find it harder and harder to find willing volunteers.

The question we should really be asking is not “why has Worldcon attendance collapsed?” because it hasn’t, but rather “why did Worldcon stop grow-

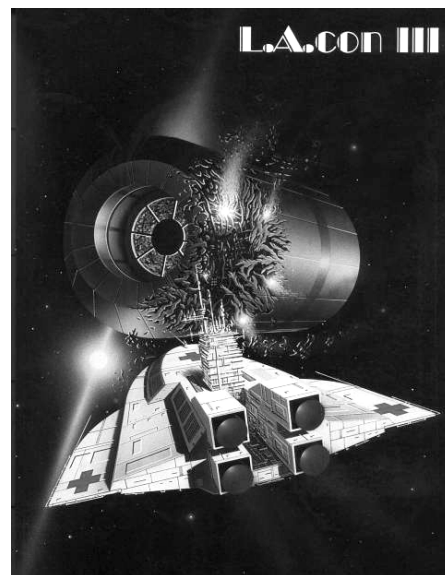
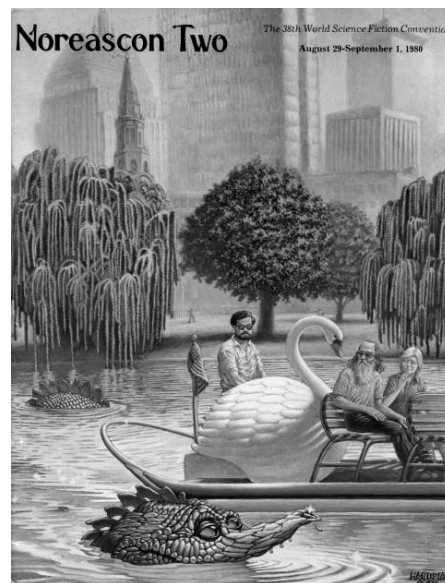
ing?” There are a number of good reasons for that. Here are a few.

Firstly it is true that some Worldcon regulars have become a bit elitist. The vast majority of the people who attend Dragon*Con and San Diego ComicCon are **primarily** interested in TV and movies, with comics and video games next on their list. Worldcon has continued to insist on the primacy of the written word. Indeed, a few diehard Worldcon attendees still insist that works published on the Internet should not be eligible for the Hugos, because only words on paper matter. The devotion to writers is perhaps something that SFWA members should be grateful for. But it is also true that many people who go to movies and watch TV also read books. A popular writer can often find more of her fans at Dragon*Con than at Worldcon, simply because there are 10 times as many people there. Also the PR people from the big New York publishing houses won’t get out of bed for a convention of less than 10,000 people. They have budgets to worry about too, and they go where the big crowds are.

Part of this is the result of a ghetto mentality on behalf of older fans. Back in the days before *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* it really was a “proud and lonely thing to be a fan”. Nowadays vast numbers of people enjoy science fiction, but are they “fans”? The older fans say, “no, they are not part of our community, they don’t think like we do, they don’t have our shared history.” This, however, is a recipe for extinction. We live in a world of constant change and Worldcon, just like everything else, has to adapt to survive.

Another issue is the difficulty of running a very large event with a volunteer crew. A modern Worldcon takes over 200 staff to run. No local fan group can do it on their own, so they rely on the regular attendees who volunteer year after year. There is a real concern that if Worldcon were to grow much beyond the 6-7,000 member mark it would be too big for a volunteer group to cope with. That makes people reluctant to go for growth.

Having a different committee each year also makes it difficult to work with publishers. The PR people who do trade shows and buy advertising like to have a regular contact they can go back to each year.



Is there any hope? Well I certainly think so, otherwise I would not be writing this article. Here are some suggestions, including ideas as to how SFWA and its members might get involved, should they feel inclined to do so.

Another restraining force is financial prudence. Each Worldcon is an entirely separate entity. The senior management may have little experience with an event of that size. There won't be a "next year" to make back your losses if you screw up. So Worldcon committees tend to err on the side of caution. It may well be true that by cutting membership fees they could attract a lot more attendees and thereby not lose any revenue, but no one has had the courage to try.

Finally fans in general are not good at marketing. They are geeks, not salesmen, they have a hard job going out and promoting what they are doing. Just as many writers are uncomfortable with writing blogs, arranging their own books tours and all of the other things they have to do these days because publishers aren't doing them for them, so most fans would much rather just run their convention and let anyone who is interested turn up. Aggressive salesmanship, and even working with sponsors, is foreign to them. Commercial events have no such qualms.

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including ideas as to how SFWA and its members might get involved, should they feel inclined to do so.

From a marketing point of view, one thing that Worldcon does really badly is advertise the amazing number of authors who attend. That's partly because some fans believe you should only use the Guests of Honor to promote the convention, partly because they don't always know who the big draws might be (many of them don't read urban fantasy, or YA novels), and partly because they are afraid they'll offend people whose names don't get used. What I'd like to see is each Worldcon web site listing, very early on, the names of authors, artists and other celebrities who are intending to be at the convention. Possibly having someone from SFWA that committees can talk to would make it easier to put that list together.

Next I want to see "Exhibits Only" memberships. At present, Worldcon really only caters for one type of fan - the person who wants to spend all day sat in (and participating in) discussion panels on a wide range of subjects. But not all fans, particularly the locals, want such an intense experience. Many of them would be perfectly happy to have an opportunity to buy cool stuff, gawp at even cooler stuff that they can't afford, and get the autographs of the people they admire. Cheap admission to the Dealers' Room, Art Show and Exhibits Hall would be perfect for such people. The good news is that those things are relatively easy to provide, so you can grow membership without growing the effort necessary to look after it nearly as much.

In addition I'd like to see every Worldcon have what I call an "Outreach" department. This would be responsible for liaising with writers and local venues (book stores, schools) to arrange public events in the city during the week before the convention. After all, if you are flying a long way to go to the convention, why not make the most of it and meet as many readers as possible? Hopefully some of the people attending these events would buy convention memberships as a result. Again a relationship between Worldcon and SFWA might make it easier to arrange such events. (Some of you may remember that we did book store events before Worldcon in Glasgow in 2005.)

Finally I have been trying to encourage Worldcon to make much better use of the Internet in involving people who are unable to attend. If your convention travels around the world, the chances are that most of the people who would like to attend are unable to do so more than once a decade. There are maybe 1,000 people who attend Worldcon regularly, but that means that in every city it visits there are between 500 (Melbourne) and 5,000 (Chicago, Boston, L.A.) who only attend once a decade. That's a huge number of people, if only we can keep them interested and participating from year-to-year.

(continued on page 40)

Year	Attendance	Year	Attendance
1939	200	1976	3014
1940	128	1977	3250
1941	90	1978	4700
1946	130	1979	3114
1947	200	1980	5850
1948	200	1981	3792
1949	190	1982	4275
1950	400	1983	6400
1951	190	1984	8365
1952	870	1985	1599
1953	750	1986	5811
1954	700	1987	4009
1955	380	1988	5300
1956	850	1989	6837
1957	268	1990	3580
1958	322	1991	5661
1959	371	1992	5319
1960	568	1993	6602
1961	300	1994	3570
1962	550	1995	4173
1963	600	1996	6703
1964	523	1997	4534
1965	350	1998	6572
1966	850	1999	1548
1967	1500	2000	5794
1968	1430	2001	4840
1969	1534	2002	5162
1970	620	2003	3834
1971	1600	2004	6008
1972	2007	2005	4115
1973	2900	2006	5738
1974	3587	2007	2852
1975	606	2008	3752
		2009	3912

Last year for Montréal I created a web site called ConReporter.com. All this did was take feeds from the blogs, photo streams and Twitter accounts of Worldcon attendees and publish it in one place where fans all around the world could find out what was happening at Worldcon. A number of writers with big online followings, including Neil Gaiman, Cory Doctorow and John Scalzi, agreed to let me include their reports, and Tor.com was also very helpful. Over the 5 days of the convention the site was visited by 1,950 people from 59 different countries, including most of Europe, most of Latin America, Russia, China, India, Japan and South Africa. These are all people who have attended Worldcon before, or would love to do so given the chance. The potential worldwide audience is huge.

With Worldcon being in Australia in 2010 I expect the audience for online coverage of the convention to be much bigger. I'm also talking actively with the Melbourne committee about how they can do online events.

All of these ideas will require work to make them happen. Some may require serious polishing before they will work well. All of them will be resisted by older, more conservative fans (and possibly some more conservative writers as well). But people can be persuaded to change. One of the most important venues for changing Worldcon is SMOFcon, an annual convention about running science fiction conventions. It takes place in December, usually in the USA. In 2010 it is being hosted in San José by San Francisco Science Fiction Conventions, Inc., an organization of which I and my partner in revolution, Kevin Standlee, happen to be directors. The theme of the convention will be "Building Bridges", and we'll be talking about how traditional SF conventions such as Worldcon can reach out to different fan groups (anime fans, steampunk fans, comics readers and so on) and also to people in the industry. I very much hope that someone from SFWA will come along and brainstorm with us.

