

Problems and Solutions

NarraScope 2020

The headline business of NarraScope 2020 – streaming talks on interactive narrative to the world – ran smoothly. However, challenges arose during the event which the committee failed to address to the standard which our attendees deserved.

Our mistakes, and our attempts to make them right, consumed a great deal of time and energy behind the scenes – both during and after NarraScope. We consider it our duty to give an overview of these problems, the ways we fell short in addressing them, and how we hope to improve next year.

Failures of Organization

NarraScope 2019 ran smoothly, with no crises and almost no surprises. This was gratifying, but it left us with the impression that we had nothing left to learn about conference organization.

The week of NarraScope 2020 proved that wrong. The stress of events uncovered several errors:

- The committee was too small and an eight-day event was too long. We were operating in a state of exhaustion, making poor and hasty decisions, and then making more mistakes in trying to fix our mistakes.
- Poor communication within the committee. At several points, different committee members had personal discussions with speakers, attendees, and moderators. These were often valuable and constructive discussions, but they did not always pull in the same direction. A great deal of energy was wasted asking each other “What did you say to X, and does someone else need to talk to them?”
- Poorly-thought out public responses to criticism. As problems arose, committee members were prone to react immediately with self-justification and argument before attempting to solve the problems.
- Insufficient planning and preparation of the moderation volunteers. The volunteer moderators did not have explicit guidelines or a workflow for deciding how to deal with different kinds of disruption. They had no way to quickly escalate a situation to the committee.
- Lack of diversity on the committee. This was the week that our good intentions (“we really ought to have some people of color on this committee”) proved blatantly inadequate. Any decision or statement about current events ran into the question, “Have we run this past *anyone* who isn’t white?” Ultimately that burden fell on friends and conference volunteers of color. They were extremely

supportive and we are incredibly grateful, but we should in no way have put them in the position of having to help.

- Similarly: not enough voices and points of view when selecting and reviewing program items for the conference.

Specifics of Problems

To explain what led us to this understanding, and for the public record, we must describe some of the problems in detail. We will not identify individuals by name.

The Moderation Incident

The first visible problem was a moderation incident during the keynote talk. The repercussions were serious enough that we will attempt to describe the timeline in detail.

A complete description of this incident is difficult to reconstruct because the Twitch Video on Demand (VOD) that could serve at least partially as a transcript is no longer available. VODs for ordinary Twitch accounts (including NarraScope's) are only retained for 14 days. The Zoom meetings in which NarraScope speakers presented were isolated from Twitch, and the videos posted to the NarraScope YouTube channel were based on those Zoom recordings. As a result, some of this description may not be accurate. This description is based on contemporaneous Twitter and Discord discussion, as well as discussion and review by conference committee members.

At one point during the NarraScope keynote, one attendee (Attendee A) made a both-sides argument related to fascism in the accompanying Twitch chat. Another attendee (Attendee B) disagreed using profanity. One volunteer moderator and two conference committee members were present on Twitch at the time.

The volunteer moderator:

- Sent a message visible to all participants in the Twitch chat reminding all participants of the NarraScope code of conduct.
- Deleted the message of Attendee B that contained profanity. (This may have been prompted by Twitch's AutoMod feature.)
- Blocked Attendee B from posting in the NarraScope Twitch chat for 10 minutes.
- Took no public action in relation to Attendee A.

One committee member suggested in Twitch chat that a channel named #propaganda be created in the NarraScope Discord and the discussion move there. This was not discussed as policy before the suggestion was raised in public. (The channel was not implemented.) The committee members present otherwise took no public action.

Again, the events above took places in the Twitch chat adjoining the keynote. The keynote itself was not disrupted and completed without further incident.

Shortly after the keynote ended:

- A committee member deleted Participant A's messages pertaining to the both-sides argument.
- A private channel was created for the moderators and the committee members to communicate as a group.
- Several conference speakers requested that the volunteer moderator at the keynote not be given moderator control during their talks.
- The volunteer moderator was removed as Twitch moderator by a member of the committee. This was not a punishment, but a response to speaker concerns. Though the errors that had damaged the speakers' trust were ultimately our responsibility, they still left the volunteer in a position where they could not moderate effectively. Committee members privately apologized to the volunteer and they were privately encouraged by to continue as participant.
- Committee members had a discussion with Attendee B, indicated an error had been made in the actions taken against them, and apologized.

The day following the keynote, a committee member posted an announcement to the NarraScope Discord. This described the incident, took responsibility (on behalf of the committee) for the errors of moderation, apologized, and listed actions the committee had taken to rectify the issue.

Two days following the keynote, a committee member posted a clarifying announcement to the NarraScope Discord. This explained that the volunteer moderator had moderator privileges taken away, but was still a valued member of the group and was still welcome to participate in the conference.

Streaming Black Out Request

The next crisis was not as publicly visible. One speaker communicated that they wanted to postpone their talk, as part of a "Black Out Tuesday" protest being discussed in the entertainment industry. We fully supported that decision. However, in a hasty and poorly worded message, we tried to communicate with other Tuesday speakers to let them know what was going on and find out if they had similar requests. This caused great confusion which we were only partially able to repair.

Much of the subsequent discussion among moderators, volunteers, and speakers revolved around the Black Lives Matter protests which were rocking the country during the week of NarraScope. In particular, there was a great deal of constructive discussion about how NarraScope could support that cause. However, due to the stresses of the situation and ongoing communication problems, we (the committee) did not follow up on any of these suggestions until the last day of the conference, when we posted a collected list of BLM resources and donation funds.

Failed Afterparty Planning

As a further casualty of our coordination failures, we were unable to move forward with the “afterparty” event which we had planned and announced. We had already contacted several guests to host games and discussions in an online social space. At the last minute, we had to cancel those plans and apologize to the people involved.

Conclusions

First, the NarraScope committee apologizes to the attendees as a body and to all of the individuals who were involved in these events.

What can we do to address these problems? This is far from resolved. The current NarraScope committee are still discussing the question, both among ourselves and with the IFTF Board of Directors. However, this much is clear:

- The committee must be larger and include more viewpoints. Particularly from BIPOC and trans and genderqueer perspectives; also a diversity of socioeconomic and disability status.
- The committee must also have enough members to handle the work with the full reserve of energy, wisdom, and patience that it deserves.
- IFTF will allocate money for a paid diversity consultant and/or other recompensed resources.
- The Code of Conduct should be clarified.
- The moderation guidelines should be greatly clarified, with detailed escalation policies. These should recognize the difference between discussions that have gotten out of hand and viewpoints that are inherently against the Code of Conduct.
- Moderators must have more support, including live training and ongoing communication with each other and the committee.
- Our communication systems must be revamped. All email sent or received on NarraScope business must be archived such that the committee can review it.

We hope it is not presumptuous to end this section with a few problems from 2019 which we successfully addressed:

- Last year, we did not pay speakers (beyond a couple of free lunches). This year, we were able to offer a small honorarium to every speaker, and a larger one to our keynote speaker. (The guests invited to take part in the cancelled afterparty event were included in this offer.)
- Last year, we recorded a few of the talks and made the videos available after the event. This year, we streamed every talk live, making NarraScope accessible to many more people worldwide.
- Last year, we offered three workshops. This year we offered five workshops and an Inform 7 boot camp.

- Last year we had a low-intensity expo room. This year we had an enthusiastically-attended game jam.