



The Eighty-Fifth issue of a sort-of letter substitute, fanzine kinda thing. Maybe weekly, maybe not. Available from:

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Available via the World Wide Web, or as an email attachment. I recommend the Portable Document Format (pdf) or, if you insist, a word or Rich Text Format (rtf) can also be emailed or posted. Get in touch and we'll sort something out. Another burst of fannish energy from Tommy, proofread by Eugene Doherty. Dated, already, 16/05/2021.

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## Conventions.

I've been ruminating on my convention-going recently – in part because of how EasterCon did, or didn't, go so well as a Virtual con and also the plans I'm starting to hatch around hosting a Corflu in Belfast in 2023. I'm also vice-chair and treasurer of the Belfast Con [TitanCon](https://titancon.com/) (<https://titancon.com/>) and we've been wrestling with some of these ideas as well. Been an interesting time in my mind!

Virtual cons: good or bad? Inherently I think these are bad. Let me explain. My fandom is about people – meeting them new, getting reacquainted with old friends and enjoying the convivial hospitality that a convention offers. We all know what that is like – I met Doug Bell at WorldCon and we chatted and riffed on stuff as if we'd just met the previous week. I met Geri Sullivan for the first time and we straight away 'got' each other and when I met Nigel Rowe at Corflu Heatwave – he 'still' remembers that drink I owed him! These kinds of stories just aren't made at virtual cons and can't be re-told and re-played in the same way as nattering over a beer.

I volunteered for a bit at OctoCon (<https://2020.octocon.compunctuation>) and have attended a few virtual events – even looking forward to Punctuation 2 (<https://punctuationcon.uk/>) later this month– and have seen some of the challenges. There is an over-reliance on volunteers with the skills, knowledge and ability to wrangle technology – including initial set-up and testing, as well as on the fly during the event. The ability of the committee to deal with con-goers, guests and other participants on a social level without non-physical clues is a real challenge; text on discord or via email is never the same as in person, tone and meaning is often lost. This is a real skill set that not a lot of traditional tech ops have, even less so the gophers and people who cut their con teeth by just pitching in and helping out. Moderating a zoom panel is a different art to moderating an in-person panel.

Don't get me wrong – I can see the benefits of virtual conventions from many angles. I got to host a book review panel at OctoCon and it was great fun – mixing with people I knew of – Nicholas Whyte – to those I didn't know and even a local fan in Belfast joined in. I'm fairly sure that would not have happened in a real life con. In fact, I know it wouldn't – I met Nicholas at WorldCon in the fan bar and my attempt to strike up a conversation just failed (for a number of reasons!) The best bits of virtual events are the streams that allow a whole bunch of new people to interact and get to see their favourite authors, TV stars or guests speak or be interviewed. The range of people I've been able to hear and to get to ask questions of over the pandemic and

variety of events has been amazing. I would normally have to go to an EasterCon, OctoCon or even our local TitanCon to see Adrian Tchaikovsky speak – or Jeanette Ng – now they're only a click and a camera away.

Will I go to a virtual con again? Yes – though I wouldn't pay full fee or anything like it. I think something in the region of £20 seems appropriate – based on the costs of venue hire and guest fees and expenses. This back of a napkin figure should allow for the costs of the tech – which I think are the main factors for a virtual con. I just can't see where you would spend £60 - £80 of a membership fee (depending on numbers of course) and justify that to a con. And the con committee need to factor that in. Going completely free does attract a lot of people, though free stuff doesn't always get the 'buy-in' compared to when you pay for it: ascribed value and all that.

Again, I would love to volunteer at a virtual con - I think the mixture of well-known platforms like Zoom with Discord seems to strike the right balance. When we move into Twitch and Gather Town then I'm not so sure – I think they are both resource intensive for those watching them and skills intensive for those hosting them. Having said that – I've not signed up to help out at the two virtual cons I'm due to attend over the next few months.

Would I ever run, or be on the committee, of a virtual convention? No. I don't think I have the energy to upskill to what is required, or even manage those people who have those skills. I know my strengths are numbers, risk and inter-personal skills – none of which readily translate into remote events. I don't know if TitanCon in Belfast will ever be virtual or indeed have much of a virtual stream as its main con. We have a tight knit community in Belfast – with existing challenges after burn out over a number of years and the current core committee don't fancy it either! This year we cancelled our in-person event and will have a Moot on the Friday night of what would have been our con instead. This will consist of our usual 'Literature Night' – where our guests and featured participants read some of their work or works in progress and we socialise. It's always a great way to start our convention and this keeps up that tradition at least in part.

Having said all that though it is still the face-to-face meeting up of friends that will always be the key driver for me. Meeting guests – especially authors I enjoy and admire - who will still (mostly) allow you to buy them a drink and bother them for a bit –especially the smaller events just cannot be replaced by online events. Getting to virtually meet Ken McLeod is never the same as hearing him in person.

That is why I'm really looking forward to Corflu Concorde (<https://corflu.org/>) in November and possibly even Novacon 50 (<http://www.novacon.org.uk/n50/index.php>) the following weekend. Why don't you come along, I might even buy you a pint?!

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Next issue will be looking back at a couple of my favourite movies – real guilty pleasure stuff – and more of your Locs. Of course – I'll need to keep getting those if I'm to print any!