Doing a Conference During a Pandemic – An Experience Report

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The Forum on design Languages 2020 (FDL'20) was, like most if not all international conferences since spring, heavily affected by the COVID'19 pandemic. After some deliberation, the organizers decided to not go fully virtual, but to try a "hybrid" format, with participants both in virtual space and locally in Kiel, Germany. At least for those involved this was a new experience, with little precedent for orientation. These notes started out as a draft for an E-mail report to the FDL Steering Committee. However, as the content started to exceed what would seem suitable for a simple mail, it morphed into a separate, informal on-line document. It is meant to be shared with anybody who might find themselves in a similar position.

Participants

FDL is a rather small conference, with around 50 participants in recent editions. Most of them come from Europe, around 10% from the US/elsewhere. The small size and the regional focus both were favorable for even thinking about a physical/hybrid event.

For the 2020 edition, it was clear since some time that participants from the US would not make it to Kiel, which included one of the keynote speakers and three more presentations. The recent deterioration of the COVID situation in several departments of France led to additional short-notice cancellations of physical participations, including another one of the keynote speakers (Nice/Sophia Antipolis), the Program Chair (Grenoble), and the Panel Chair (Rennes). At the same time, it was heartening to receive much positive feedback on our attempt to create a „real" conference as much as the circumstances would permit, both from those who made it here and from the virtual participants. Some of the participants took rather arduous trips here, and one of the participants was committed to take a 12 hour drive from Austria to Kiel until illness forced him to stay at home at the last minute. Generally, it seemed that the fraction of those arriving by car was higher than usual, so it was helpful to have a good parking situation.

We ended up with 22 participants in Kiel, hailing from Bamberg, Bremen, Dresden, Eindhoven, Kaiserslautern, Stuttgart, Verona, and Zurich. In addition, there were 39 virtual attendees, bringing the total to 61, a pretty good number for recent FDL history. Also, there were 8 participants from the US, up from 5 in 2019 and 3 in 2018.

Pandemic Adjustments

Our adjustments to the COVID situation included the following:
- Inform the participants. This included various mails and a regularly updated note at the conference home page, which finally read as follows: "*The current planning is to conduct FDL 20 as a hybrid event, allowing physical as well as virtual participation for both speakers and the audience. Current case numbers in Kiel are provided here.*

Travel restrictions for entering Schleswig-Holstein, where Kiel is located, are found here. Entering without quarantine is not allowed if you come from a high-risk area, as listed here (with an English version at the bottom). If you have any doubts concerning your safety or your personal health status, we suggest to participate virtually. Measures to minimize the risks for participants include: a) we have moved to a significantly larger venue, b) face shields will be provided to all participants, and c) breaks and the social event will take place outdoors as much as possible - bring a warm jacket! Before arriving in Kiel, we also encourage participants to use the COVID testing facilities at home or when entering Germany, if possible. Hamburg Airport also provides COVID tests, see here. If you do participate and are tested positive within two weeks after the event, please inform the organizers immediately."
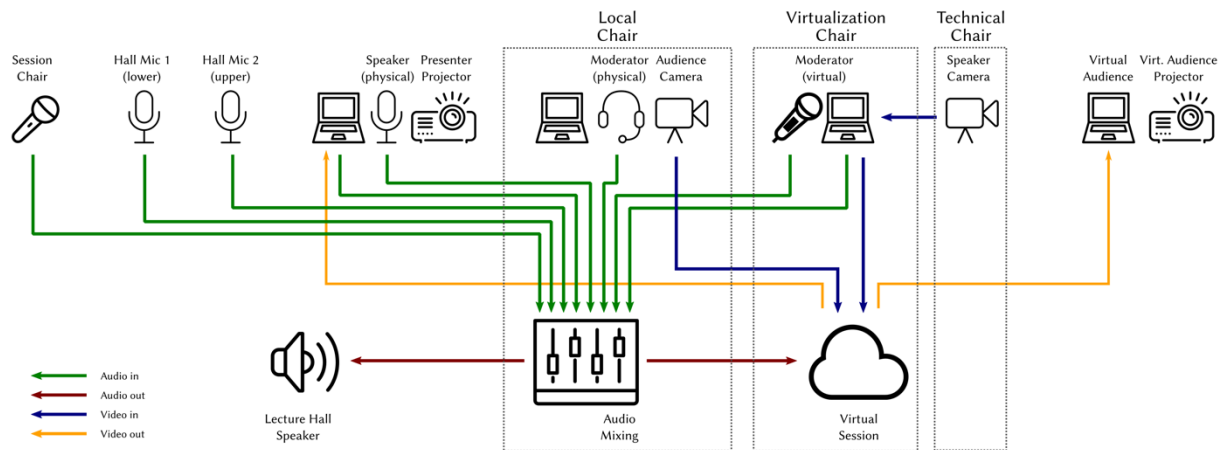
- Move to a much bigger venue that originally planned for. The venue we ended up using regularly has 430 seats. Under the university's COVID policy, which requires seats to be 1.5m apart, there are 55 designated places. We spread this out further, with >2 m between the seats.
- Assign fixed places to the participants. We posted a seating plan and allowed participants to reserve seats in advance, but that was not really used.
- When not in session, move things outdoors. I.e., the breaks and also the poster reception took place outside. To encourage participants to leave the building, all food/drink supplies were handed out from a table and a cart („Bierwagen") stationed outside. That cart also provided a bit of shelter against the elements, but fortunately, the weather turned out very decent, so there was no need for it. Also, the social event was moved from a historic steamer to a sail ship. The restaurant for the conference dinner also had a big terrace with a bit of outdoor heating – or so we were promised. It turned out that three of the four outdoor heaters were not operational, but fortunately the attendees were good sports and made do with some blankets. And I had pointed out in about 3-4 mails that it can get cold in Kiel at any time of the year, advising to bring a warm jacket …
- Provide all participants with face shields. Some participants used these, others used their own face masks. Generally, masks were to be worn whenever moving around indoors.
- Food/drinks were generally not self-service but served by staff. One exception were little snacks (olives etc.) during the reception that participants helped themselves to; for that occasion, a „hand sanitizing station" was placed next to the food.
- Additional university regulations, e.g., that restrooms were to be used by one person at a time.

The Hybrid Format

The adopted format required to bring together presenters, session chairs and audiences from both physical and virtual space. The basic idea was to do everything "**live**," be it on-site or remotely. Some presenters chose to be there for live Q&A but to pre-record their lectures, which worked fine – when we got the material on time. It is one thing to transfer a set of slides, transferred via USB stick if E-Mail fails, from somebody who is physically present and who might just present from their own laptop if need be; it is another to hope that that large video will be posted on time somewhere, to be downloaded and sneaked on the presentation laptop while in session. But overall there were only a few noticeable

glitches. Ironically, it appeared that live presentations done from the US, or a hotel in China, worked at least as good as others done from rather nearby places within Germany.

FDL'20 Hybrid Conference
Technical Setup

The **presenter projector** showed the slides, plus, in case of virtual presenters, the presenter. A second projector, aimed to the side, presented the virtual audience.

A stationary wide-angle **camera** (GoPro HERO7 Black) streamed an image of the physical audience. Another camera (Sony RX100 Va), with optical zoom and connected via HDMI-Out and a USB capture card, showed either the physical presenter, or the image of the main projector. The latter gives virtual presenters an upper bound of the lag of their presentation, which in some cases was a couple of seconds. During Q&A, the camera moves around in the physical audience, focusing on the session chair or somebody asking a question.

The hardest and most time-consuming part was **sound**. In particular getting proper sound from the physical to the virtual audience was tricky and not really satisfactory until the end. We had considered different options, but due to COVID decided against any that would have required either the audience or a helper to move around. Thus, the session chair, who was seated at a designated seat equipped with an extra microphone, was obliged to repeat the question from the audience if need be.

As conferencing platform we opted for **zoom**, which worked pretty much as expected. Zoom is not made for a full-fledged conference experience, but the basics are there, and performance seemed good and reliable throughout the conference. We ended up with four active zoom clients from the organization side, two connected to the projectors and two for the cameras.

While in session, there were three roles to fill:
  1) Managing the various zoom sessions, including having an eye on the waiting room and the chat (Virtualization Chair)
  2) Managing the second camera (Local Technology Chair).
  3) Managing and monitoring (with headphones tapping into zoom) the sound and regularly disinfecting speaker desk, speaker laptop, and session chair seat and microphone (Local Chair).

Observations/Lessons Learned

- Any conference is a **team effort**, but this one especially so. We had created the new positions of Virtualization Chair and Local Technology Chair, and the Local Chair had more duties during the sessions than usual. Also, serving food and drinks instead of doing self-service and regular disinfections of tables etc. required additional personnel. To have some redundancy proved helpful, as e.g. in our case the person in charge of food/drinks had to miss the preparation and start of the conference due to an outstanding COVID test result. And of course there are the usual non-COVID complications to deal with that require some last-minute action, such as the provider of drinks and the "Bierwagen" silently dropping the whole order due to a missing confirmation fax (getting the drinks on short notice was no proble, the Bierwagen had to be organized from a different town), the cruise for the social event threatening to get cancelled due a payment being stuck somewhere in the system (resolved by paying immediately again, this time from personal funds), or the local network being not fully usable, probably due to some closed ports (remaining a problem until the end). All in all, there were nine people on the ground fulfilling various roles.

- The pandemic provides for an unstable environment that makes it difficult to plan ahead. Still, **preparation and testing** are essential. About three weeks before the conference we reserved a day for trying out a first technical set-up. We had planned for 2-3 hours and ended up using most of the day. A second try-out, with further equipment, was done about a week in advance, again lasting most of the day. That was none too early; parcels with much needed components kept trickling in until the day before the conference. The morning of that day, this past Monday, was used to do the final set-up; the afternoon was reserved for a "dry-run" with all virtual presenters.

- For the **dry run**, the 21 virtual presenters were scheduled into four different slots of 90 minutes each, of which typically 20-30 minutes were actually needed to get everybody through. At first, not all participants were convinced of the need for such a dry run, but afterwards everybody agreed it was essential. The dry run not only stress-tested the local set-up, but also made sure that the set up at the participant's side worked properly, including things like lighting and the size of the mouse pointer.

- During sessions, the physical/hybrid border often seemed to disappear, with joint discussions connecting everybody. Most of the time, most virtual participants were in the zoom session. However, quoting a participant from a feedback form: "*As a virtual participant, I followed the overall trend of disabling my webcam outside of my own talk. This makes it sooooo tempting to do other work, which of course is always detrimental to a conference. It may be a good move to motivate the virtual participants to keep their cam active in order to maintain a critical mass of visible faces.*"

- The physical/hybrid border was much more discernible during the breaks. Lacking a good concept (and, at some point, extra time and energy), we had simply encouraged virtual/physical participants to use their own devices/channels to connect with each other. The success of that seemed to be limited. Another quote: "*As a virtual participant I felt exposed and there was no incentive to interact, or exchange opinions and experiences. Which is a pity, because I truly believe that the quality of the works presented were among the highest I've ever gotten to see at a conference, and I could*

have learned much from interacting with the presenters." This will probably remain a hard problem, but there should be room for improvement.

- On some aspects, we certainly just got lucky, such as the fact that the local COVID situation in the area was reasonably stable at the time of the conference, or the very cooperative weather that facilitated out-door time. Also, the university administration was very supportive at all levels throughout this endeavor, which was probably the first such event at Kiel University since the beginning of the pandemic.

- Despite the aforementioned points for improvement, the overall feedback on the approach and its execution was overwhelmingly positive, which definitely has made this effort worthwhile. To the first questionnaire of who would plan to participate physically if the situation would not deteriorate significantly, sent out shortly after paper acceptance notification, about two thirds responded that they would plan to come, some quite enthusiastically so. That enthusiasm carried on until the conference itself and was motivating for everybody. As one participant noted, having a "real" conference was particularly inspiring for young doctoral students who did not have pre-pandemic conference experience yet.