

# VikingPLOP 2006 Report

By Aino Vonge Corry, Kristian Elof Sørensen and Pavel Hruby

VikingPLOP 2006 was a three day conference, held from September 28 to October 1 (from Thursday evening to Sunday afternoon) at Højstrupgård Castle near Helsingør, 60 km north of Copenhagen, Denmark.

## Organizers

Program chair: Aino Vonge Corry

Conference chairs: Kristian Elof Sørensen and Pavel Hruby

Program committee: Juha Pärssinen, Uwe Zdun, Kevlin Henney, James O. Coplien, Klaus Marquardt

## Attendees

VikingPLOP was attended by 19 participants, and by 3 guests that joined Saturday afternoon and evening sessions. VikingPLOP still primarily serves Nordic countries and Germany.

Participants per country are: Denmark – 6, Norway – 3, Sweden – 1, Finland – 1, Germany – 5, USA – 1, Canada – 1, India – 1.

## Papers

Organizers received 11 submissions, from which the program committee rejected one paper before shepherding and one paper after shepherding. The decision to reject a paper before shepherding was based on three expert evaluations that all indicated that the paper shows lack of domain knowledge and shepherding would not sufficiently improve it for writer's workshop. One paper was rejected after shepherding, because of lack of improvement of the paper during shepherding.

Program committee accepted 9 papers for writers' workshops; 7 pattern papers and 2 non-pattern papers (a case study and a paper about formalizing patterns). The reason of accepting the non-pattern papers was their high quality.

## Program

We scheduled 2 parallel tracks of writer's workshops for pattern papers. We decided to workshop the non-pattern papers in a large writer's workshop with all conference participants, because the papers were interesting for participants in both groups. See also comments in Lessons Learned – Suggestions for Improvements.

We had four focus group sessions scheduled for all participants (two sessions on Christopher Alexander's Nature of Order, one on Model-Driven Design and one on Dating Patterns).

Thanks to Jim Coplien as a game master we played usual PLoP games. As an alternative way of team building we also scheduled golf training for beginners on a par-3 golf course around the castle (green fee was only 50 DKK (less than 10 USD) for conference attendees, and we wanted to take advantage of this opportunity).

## Finances

VikingPLOP has been budgeted with a small profit, and the budget was based on our experience and actual data from VikingPLOP 2002, held at the same location. The financial result of the conference was a loss, because of substantial and unanticipated increase of

prices at the conference centre (mostly consumption that does not appear in a contract and had to be estimated) since 2002.

### Lessons Learned – Things to Keep

- We should keep a location outside the city.
- The rain game and the name game seem essential, and morning and after-lunch games are highly appreciated, too.
- An entertaining evening presentation, a light, but a pattern related topic. Aino Corry held a focus group “Dating Patterns” in a bar, based on a Solveig Haugland’s book Dating Design Patterns.
- High quality of writer’s workshops is important and contributes significantly to overall satisfaction. Therefore, organizers should only accept papers of outstanding quality and reject the rest, even if it would mean less number of participants.
- The golf event was positively mentioned several times, but it should be a voluntary event, part of “free time”. Some people prefer other kinds of activities.
- We should keep bar as a natural part of the conference program. This assumes free soft drinks, beer, wine, and snacks. We had a beamer and screen in a bar, which we used for Aino’s presentation, and for showing pictures from earlier pattern events. The bar also had a jukebox and piano – both were heavily used, although not at the same time. After dinner, we served coffee in a bar, which made a smooth and natural transfer from dinner to bar.
- The writers’ workshop groups stayed together for lunch, which was positively commented. Writers’ workshop was scheduled just before lunch and people moved from the writer’s workshop room directly to dining room when their writers’ workshop ended.
- Participants appreciate excellent food, but we in fact have never tried serving bad food, so honestly speaking, we do not know how important good food is.
- We have not printed draft proceedings and instructed participants to download and print the papers themselves. This worked quite well.
- People like quick responses to e-mails (within hours) and organizer’s ability to quickly resolve special requests from participants before and after the conference.

### Lessons learned – Suggestions for Improvements

- We still do not know what to do with non-pattern papers, but we know that writers’ workshops for non-pattern papers and large workshops do not work well. We should probably not accept non-pattern papers for writer’s workshops. We might accept non-pattern papers for shepherding and, for example, suggest the author to hold a focus group for a non-pattern paper.

- We should evenly balance the workload during the days. There should be similar amount of writers' workshops every day (an introductory workshop does not count). People easily accept different schedule every day, but require similar amount of work each day.
- We should schedule for longer breaks (we scheduled 15 minutes) between writer's workshops, so people could talk to the authors right after the workshopping their paper.
- Include free time during the day. Free time in a bar does not count. Our program was filled with activities, and we should also schedule some time for "doing nothing". Organizers should inform about sport activities in the area.
- The conference should be cheaper. This is a conflicting force with excellent food, free bar, long conference, and location outside the city. If we balance the forces, the conference should definitely not be more expensive.
- Surprisingly many participants play some music instrument. We might instruct participants to bring music instruments with them, and arrange a jam session.
- Have a single place in a conference centre for announcing schedule. As there are changes in the schedule, there should be a single place to post the most up-to-date schedule.
- Timeline (which Linda Rising often makes) is required by many participants. Timeline is a wall with time axis, on which participants post colored cards with a text describing their impressions and thus providing feedback. Participants do it during the whole conference.
- Marketing: organizers should make more effort to advertise PLoP conferences outside a pattern community. While non-pattern mailing lists do not seem to have a tangible effect, a solution might be in personal communication – simply mention VikingPLoPs at presentations, meetings for other communities the organizers and potential participants attend.

### Lessons Learned – Finance

VikingPLoP 2006 used the "Nordic Design Patterns Association" set up for VikingPLoP 2004 and administered by Rebecca Rikner, as a legal entity and bank account. For the future we should find an account with smaller annual costs, able to keep the balance more or less intact in a period between conferences.

Organizing pattern conferences is still considered as a kind of service to the community. It is based on voluntary work, and organizers strive to make the conferences as cheap as possible. If conferences are budgeted around break-even point, it is natural that sometimes there is a profit (such as VikingPLoP 2002), and sometimes loss, due to unexpected events. If we would decide to keep the profit from VikingPLoP 2002 in Denmark instead of helping following VikingPLoPs, we would still be in a positive balance. Current expectation, in which the organizers pass eventual profit to the next year conference, which they cannot influence in any way, but have to cover the eventual loss from their own money, seems unfair.

So, the current situation should change, and it can change in various directions – from making VikingPLoP conferences for profit, to a decision of not organizing a conference, unless there is a corporate sponsor, such as VTT in 2005.

## Appendix: Conference “Writers Workshop”

At the end of VikingPLOP 2006 we held a "writers workshop" on the conference itself. The conference chairs were flies on the wall, Cecilia Haskins a moderator, and the rest of the participants made a circle providing feedback. The feedback is relevant mainly to the organizers of the next VikingPLOP.

The following text is a transcription of the notes taken during this writers' workshop.

### Positive Feedback and Things to Keep

- Location
  - Outside a big city
  - You have to be at the venue all the time during the conference
  - You have to stuck here, which is a positive thing
- Games, especially those at the beginning of the conference (editorial note: the rain game and the name game), they facilitate interaction among the participants.
- Quality and amount of food were good (editorial note: there was unlimited amount of food).
- Drinks - free bar (editorial note: we had beer, wine and soft drinks)
- Golf
- Best chemistry amongst people of any PLoP the commenter has ever been to
- Everyone at the conference was very responsive; it felt as if I knew them already. (said by a first time participant)
- Perfect number of people - facilitates interaction (editorial note: 19 people took part in the whole conference, 3 visited for one afternoon and evening)
- The "Dating Design Patterns" Focus Group was great
- Small writers workshops (editorial note: the 19 people was split roughly evenly into two groups)
- It was great to connect the usual PLoP curriculum to Nature of Order and Alexanders' work in general. (editorial note: we had a focus group on Nature of Order Volume 1)
- The Writers workshop groups stayed together for lunch. This was good. (editorial note: It happened because a writers workshop was scheduled right before lunch and people moved from the WW to lunch when their WW ended)

- Before the conference organizers feared they would have too few papers for the writers workshops, but after the writers workshops were finished we felt that the amount of papers was correct.
- The bar worked very well. (Editorial note: we had a cozy, living-room-kind-of a room available in the evening with a bar, coffee, cake, snacks and a piano. The entire group of people mingled and talked in small groups or held BoF style sessions in a bar every evening)
- The bar also works at EuroPLOP but not at PLoP (editorial note: this is a participant's comment).
- The transition from dinner to bar worked. There was not possible to sneak away after dinner. (Editorial note: we had a two course dinner in a dining room, and coffee and cake was served in a bar).
- The welcome session

### **Suggestions for Improvements**

- Large writer's workshop of non-pattern papers (editorial note: 19 people) do not work well. Authors lacked a conclusion of a session, and they did not distinguished very well between suggestions for improvements and things to keep. If we do a large workshop, we should not do it with a first-time author. The result is that we do not know, yet, how to handle the non-patterns papers.
- Do better at helping authors of non patterns papers (editorial note: the authors of non-pattern papers were informed 1 day advance that their paper will be workshopped in a large group, because a large group should provide more expertise and therefore better feedback. This obviously did not work, see the comment above).
- Pay more attention to details in the organizing of the conference.
- Day 1 had a much lighter workload than day 2 -> strive to even out the workload. 1 WW on day 1, the rest on day 2
- Make the conference shorter and cheaper.
- The conference should not be shorter because the group dynamics, and building trust requires about 3 days; a weekend is not enough.
- Make the conference longer, there was no time for longer sessions.
- Provide information on the conference website on sports facilities etc. available near the conference venue

- Ask participants to bring music instruments, or arrange some (editorial note: one of the participant attended a conference, with a hired professional musicians and equipment, and they facilitated a jam session for nearly all conference participants)
- Make conference papers available to the conference participants earlier (editorial note: final conference papers were posted on a web site about 2 weeks prior to the conference, and workshop groups were announced about a week prior to the conference)
- Schedule time for talking to authors in private, immediately after their papers has been workshopped.
- As the conference schedule changes during the conference, there should be a single place in a conference site that contains the most up-to-date version of a schedule.
- Make a timeline which Linda usually facilitates (editorial note: timeline is a wall in which participants can post colored cards with a text providing feedback. Participants do it through the whole conference.)
- "as the conference did not do any marketing . . ." (editorial note: we sent a call for papers and a call for participation to the mailing lists somehow related to patterns. We should obviously find a way to reach non-pattern audience. However, at VikingPLoP 2002 we made much bigger effort in non-pattern mailing lists, but did not seem to have any tangible effect - all newcomers come for different reasons than these postings.)
- Does it have to take place right before or after JAOO? (Editorial note: only one participant, Eric Evans came to VikingPLoP also because he attended JAOO). It would be worth of investigating beforehand whether JAOO organizers will invite people from patterns community, and base a decision on this information.

#### **A short poll on Where First Time Participants Heard of VikingPLoP**

- 3 heard of it from someone who had been to earlier VikingPLoP conferences
- 2 found it on the Hillside website