

GOVERNANCE

What is governance?

The most basic definition of governance is the process by which the interests and activities of an organization are structured, sustained, regulated, and held accountable. On one hand, governance as simply a set of agreed-upon rules about how things should be run. But it's also about the Big Picture questions: Who are we and who do we serve? Why is this important to us? How can we remain sustainable? What will we be doing 5, 15, 15 years from now? And who is responsible for answering these questions?

Whether your group is an incorporated non-profit, a team of festival organizers, an ad hoc arts collective, or "a bunch of friends who got together one day and decided to do something cool", they all involve governance whether explicitly stated or not.

How do you develop a governing MODEL for your game exhibition, event, or organization?

There are no easy or right answers to these questions, but a good first step might be to scope out your project and compare your goals and needs with your current resources. If you're a group of students running a monthly game jam for local peers, and your venue is a university classroom provided to you for free, then you might not have much need for a high-level strategic plan, other than deciding who pays for snacks every month.

But say your game jam becomes extremely popular with the wider game development community, and what began as a small fun project between friends starts becoming an actual big deal. Say you start running an annual event that showcases all the best games that were made over the course of the year. Say the school starts offering you money in order to entice you to keep running it there, and some local game companies start offering sponsorships, and suddenly you find yourself running the biggest indie game event in the city even after the original founders have all graduated and are starting to move on to other things...

Or say you are an informal arts collective who wants access to government arts grants in order to run year-round events programming, but applicants are only eligible if they are incorporated. If you incorporate and become a registered non-profit entity, the government or whichever authority is responsible for handling such things will give you a set of rules that they expect every business to follow. You will have to figure out who gets to be the President, Treasurer, and Secretary, how often you meet, what bylaws need to be created and observed, and all sorts of administrative concerns.

Or, say you have been running an annual games festival out of your garage with a couple curator friends, and everyone is getting burned out because of how disorganized things have been behind the scenes. Everyone agrees the festival should continue, but it probably shouldn't be in someone's garage, and some kind of restructuring needs to take place in order to clarify who is responsible for making high-level decisions and who is responsible for acting on them. There is also some tension around what direction the festival should take as well: Is it primarily focused on experimental, artsy games, or should more commercial games be allowed to take part?

Or, you might have noticed that there's a serious lack of videogame events in your area that serve emerging BIPOC creators, and you want to organize a monthly social meetup. One of your primary concerns might be how to create a safe space for everyone.

- What is the vision or goal of the project?

- Who is the project serving? Who are its stakeholders? What are their wants and desires?
- What is the scope of the project? Under what conditions could you see the project coming to an end, or becoming sustainable? Are there plans for this project to continue even after the original founders have left?
- Is there money involved, either incoming or outgoing? Who is responsible for managing this?
- What other relationships and organizations are related to the project? For example: Funding bodies if applying for grants, sponsors, whoever is providing the venue, other organizations doing similar or related work that you are likely to cross paths with.
- How can we keep this fun and interesting for everyone? How do we prevent burnout? How do we deal with conflict?

Misc questions

- Bylaws
- Conflict of Interest policy

What is the LEADERSHIP structure?

One of the most common ways to structure an organization in the traditional non-profit world is by differentiating between GOVERNING and OPERATIONAL activities. Most people, when they think of videogame event planning, are probably envisioning the concrete logistics: Curating the games, renting the venue, getting sponsors, recruiting and training volunteers, getting everyone's bio and headshots, making sure there's enough bottled water on site, etc. But for initiatives that have need of a stable, longterm plan, or those who want access to sources of funding that require legally defined structures (such as incorporation), the question of GOVERNANCE comes into play:

What is the vision that drives your project? Who is responsible for defining its mandate? How can you ensure that the organization's operational activities are in alignment with its mission statement? How can the organization remain sustainable? How will the organization respond to changes and challenges in the indie/arts videogame landscape?

In a traditional North American non-profit setup, there are two main leadership roles who are in charge of these two types of organization activity: The Executive Director, and the Board. The ED handles the OPERATIONAL side of things: Managing the staff, programming logistics, purchasing equipment, the day-to-day activities that one normally associating with "getting stuff done". The Board, on the other hand, is responsible for holding the STRATEGY and VISION of the organization as a whole. The ED "executes" the decisions of the Board.

In smaller, more informal groups, the duties and responsibilities of these two roles are likely distributed amongst individuals. One or more members might act as both the people responsible for determining the direction and vision of the project, AND those responsible for carrying it out. Even if you aren't a fancy incorporated business entity, it might still be useful to consider how the Operational and Strategic sides of your organization will work together to achieve common goals.

Here are some examples of common organizational structures

- Working Board in which the governance Board and the operating staff are the same people. This is a common model for smaller non-profits, where the organizers wear multiple hats.
- Traditional incorporated non-profit with a governing Board of Directors that is separate from the operating staff. The Board of Directors are, by definition, volunteers and cannot be paid by the organization for their work. Though they make decisions about the strategic direction and vision, they are usually hands-off when it comes to deciding how that vision is executed by

staff. There is another layer of officers who are elected by the Board, who might also be Board Directors: The president, treasurer, and secretary.

Many orgs move from a working board to a traditional board to prevent conflict of interest issues. It also improves recruitment as while a working board might require a board member to also lead an initiative, a traditional board usually just requires higher level strategy advice - which tends to attract more experienced and highly knowledgeable board member applicants.

How do you organize into DEPARTMENTS?

The smaller an organization is, the more that activities and responsibilities will tend to blend together. Individuals will likely wear several hats. Common committees might include:

- Governance
- Financial
- Partners and Sponsorship
- Hiring
- Communications and Promotion
- Programming

How will leadership change over time?

A succession plan is often the last thing on people's minds when starting a new collective or venture, but the sooner you start thinking about it, the better prepared you will be. It's worth saying that it is totally okay if your festival or event series is only ever meant to last as long as the organizers can keep it running, as long as everyone is on the same page about that.

On the other hand, if you want your organization to outlive its founders, the best time to start considering new leadership is as soon as possible! It can take years to identify and cultivate someone into a leadership position, unless your organization is so well funded that recruiting a new Executive Director becomes similar to hiring for any other job: Finding someone with the right qualifications and experience, and paying them to work for the organization. Some ways to cultivate leadership include:

- Observe: Look for leadership potential in volunteers and event regulars who seem passionate, capable, and who bring diverse perspectives to the organization.
- Cultivating and training: Giving people the autonomy and freedom to run things in their own way while still fulfilling the responsibilities and values of the organization.
- Have strong processes in place so that when a new person is onboarded, they can easily fulfill routine administrative duties while concentrating on the more creative and fun aspects of programming.

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