Roguelike Celebration 2016 transparency report

On September 17, 2016, we hosted a Roguelike Celebration in San Francisco: a conference-style gathering for approximately 200 fans and developers of roguelike games. It was great fun — nothing quite like this had ever happened before, despite roguelike games having a history back to 1980! We were inspired by the International Roguelike Developers Conference, a wonderful smaller developer-focused event.

This was an all-volunteer not-for-profit event; the ticket prices went to funding the event, with leftover money donated to the nonprofit that fiscally sponsored us. Inspired by the Lost Levels 2014 transparency report, we wrote this report to explain how we accomplished this event. We hope this encourages other people to organize special-interest events too!

Editor's note: We wrote most of this report in October 2016 and March 2017, but we left it incomplete because we needed to devote our energy to organizing the 2017 event. In February-March 2021, we revised and expanded it for publication.

2016 organizing team:
Allison Hughes
Asheesh Laroia
Britta Gustafson
Noah Swartz
Philip James

Table of contents

Planning

On September 14, 2015, Noah emailed a few friends about organizing a roguelike celebration. Initially he intended to focus just on core roguelikes such as Nethack, Crawl, ADOM, Angband, and Rogue.

On November 5th, Britta Gustafson and Noah created a survey to learn about what games and events people would like to see at a potential Roguelike Celebration, and to collect email addresses from people who might be interested in attending or speaking. We posted it on Reddit and Twitter, and we sent it to friends. We received 45 responses to this survey with a wide range of topics that people were interested in.

We started meeting for a couple hours approximately twice a month to work on planning the event, with additional work separately.

On January 13th, Asheesh Laroia joined Britta and Noah in organizing the event. We created a group email address to help us keep track of progress, and we began looking for venues to host the event. We decided that the first step was to find a venue and plan a potential date so that we could begin inviting speakers. We asked a number of spaces about hosting and received few responses.

We had a meeting with a Microsoft event space in San Francisco, but they were unconvinced that we'd be able to attract enough attendees to make it worth them keeping the space open. The Microsoft space is aimed at attracting developers, and they were unsure that there were enough fans of roguelikes or that roguelike developers would be suitable for their outreach needs. They also didn't want to host an event that had fewer than 100 attendees. They recommended that we hold the celebration as an online event or host it as part of a small local game meet-up.

By January 27th, we had received one offer for a space from our friend Philip James, who worked at Eventbrite. They'd be willing to host us in their office event space for free for one day, and they only had a few requests from us to make sure the event was reasonable and wouldn't disrupt their work.

Since we now had a venue lined up, we created a Call for Proposals and began soliciting speakers. We set up a simple website hosted by Douglas Thrift, a friend of an organizer. We set the date aspirationally for July 31st.

It turned out that that date didn't work for Eventbrite, so we moved it to September 17th. We continued to meet regularly and promote the event, including reaching out to potential speakers individually as well as keeping a web form up for people to propose their own talks.

In May, we held a small free meetup to test out the idea of a roguelike event - see the ["Hosting a roguelike meetup"](#) section.

In July, Allison Hughes joined our team, and we started working on swag - see the ["Swag"](#) section.

Overall, we had about 20 organizer meetings between November and the event on September 16.

Financials

Our ticket pricing structure in Eventbrite looked like this and got the following number of people:

Tier	Price	Tickets sold
Attendee (Early Bird Price)	$20	57
Attendee With T-shirt (Early Bird Price)	$35	70
Attendee	$30	46
Attendee With T-Shirt	$45	46
Speaker	Free	Not applicable

Editor's note: We wrote this section in 2021. In 2016 we weren't yet keeping comprehensive spreadsheets in our shared folder (we started that in 2017), so the following budget is an estimate based on emails, invoices, and meeting notes.

Our budget:

Item	Category	Dollars
Tickets + advance T-shirt purchases on Eventbrite ticket platform	Income	$8300
Cash from T-shirt purchases and donations at event	Income	$425
DigitalOcean sponsorship	Income	$500
Eventbrite ticket platform service fees	Expense	-$660
Attendee T-shirts	Expense	-$1600
Speaker T-shirts	Expense	-$450
Socks	Expense	-$1600
Pins	Expense	-$1040
Challenge coins for speakers	Expense	-$375
A/V services (livestream and recording)	Expense	-$1200
Travel reimbursements	Expense	-$1300
Event supplies (decor, name tags, etc.)	Expense	-$300

Noisebridge fiscal sponsorship fee	Expense	-$700
Total for 2016		$0

A roguelike meetup

On May 17th, we hosted a small pre-event roguelike meet-up at a San Francisco event/coworking space where another friend worked, [DG717](). We organized this free event (on a weekday evening) to help us gauge interest and prepare ourselves for running a larger event. We had 3 speakers give short talks (Noah, Britta, and Jason Grinblat) and around 30 attendees.

We promoted this meetup by making an Eventbrite page, posting it on Reddit and Twitter, sharing it with friends on Facebook, and sharing it with some local game developer groups on Facebook. The attendees were friendly and fun to talk to, and after our mini-talks, a few of them spontaneously turned the meetup into a show-and-tell, bringing out laptops where they demonstrated games they were building.

The success of this small event encouraged us while we continued to plan the larger event.

Fiscal sponsorship

In June we reached out to [Noisebridge](), a San Francisco hackerspace nonprofit where an organizer knew people, to ask them to be our [fiscal sponsor](). They agreed. This enabled Roguelike Celebration to take ticket money and make payments as a nonprofit project.

Company sponsorships

We reached out to a number of companies about sponsoring various aspects of the event, especially speaker travel and food/drink. We received few replies to our requests, but [DigitalOcean]() was willing to sponsor us for $500, which covered the cost of one of our speaker flights.

Speaker logistics

We spent about $1,300 on flights for speakers. We distributed
sponsored flights ad hoc, as speakers requested them, and as we
determined that we had money to cover them. We would have preferred to
have a more structured process, but as we had no sense of the final
attendee count or total amount of funds we'd have, we had a hard time
determining how much we could cover. We sponsored flights for four
speakers total.

Talks and performances

We personally reached out to many potential speakers, which is where
many of our talks came from. We also put out a Call for Proposals for
talks and shared it in several online communities about roguelikes.

This was a one-day conference, and we had so much exciting content
that we ended up with two tracks of talks. We didn't plan ahead for
who would emcee the second track (a smaller room away from the main
stage), such as introducing speakers, and Brian Bucklew spontaneously
and graciously stepped up to serve in that role.

Throughout the day, a project called Bad News also did performances
with interested audience members, mixing procedural generation and
live performance.

Swag

In July, Allison Hughes joined in organizing the event and took up the
role of managing swag production. We knew we wanted swag for both
attendees as well as speakers. Our main objectives were having swag
that everyone could wear/use regardless of body type, and making
something special for the speakers, since they were volunteering their
time to be there.

We settled on attendee shirts that could be purchased alongside a
ticket, a speaker shirt and challenge coin to give exclusively to the
speakers, and a pair of socks and two lapel pins to give to everyone.

We asked [Amanda Glosson](), a pixel artist, if she would like to help us by creating the attendee t-shirt and one of the pin designs, and she agreed; she gave her work as a volunteer. Noah designed the other pin. Allison designed the socks, speaker shirt, and challenge coin for speakers.

We started researching companies online that could produce these products, specifically looking at price, quantity minimums, and lead time. In early July, we contacted various companies for quotes, starting with socks and lapel pin manufacturers, since those would take the longest to manufacture.

We ended up ordering socks from [Sock Fancy]() ($1600 for 300 pairs), lapel pins from [LapelPins.net]() ($520 for one set of 300 pins, $520 for the second set of 300 pins as well), challenge coins from [Challenge Coins Plus]() ($375 for 50), and t-shirts from [Jakprints]() ($1600 for single-color printing on somewhere between 150-200 attendee shirts, $450 for multi-color printing on 35 speaker shirts).

In the end, some of our swag ended up arriving mere days before the conference took place, and we had to purchase rush shipping for our speaker t-shirts. Doing this again, Allison would recommend making sure that designs were finished at least two months in advance of the conference, with orders placed as soon as the designs were finished for complementary swag, and as soon as sales ended for purchased swag, to avoid concerns about on-time arrival.

One of the biggest reasons that we purchased swag so close to the conference start was that we didn't have set numbers for attendees or speakers (and therefore no guarantee of budget to spend, or numbers to order for) until very close to the start of the conference. (In subsequent years, we were more confident that enough people would purchase tickets, so we set a ticket purchase deadline further ahead of the conference date.)

As a last-minute idea, our friend [Danielle Baskin]() designed and printed roguelike-themed name tags for attendees to fill out.

Decorations

An organizer's friend, Jay Freeman, has large-format printers, and he printed a collection of posters and banners as a donation: Roguelike Celebration logo banners, colorful letters representing Nethack monsters, and statements from Nethack. This included "You are lucky! Full moon tonight." because it really was a full moon on the night of the event.

Britta borrowed some Halloween decorations from a nonprofit she's part of, to serve as the Gates of Gehennom from Nethack along with various plastic skulls and skeleton arms.

To create a Nethack-style altar display, she rummaged around her apartment for Nethack dungeon-themed items (like altar-style platters, candles, and plastic lizards), purchased dungeon-style items from thrift stores (glass potion bottles, a glass orb, a small mirror, a candelabrum, a bell, etc), borrowed some more from friends (an oil lamp, a wooden flute, amulet-style necklaces, etc), and made some by hand (scrolls with Nethack scroll names scrawled in fountain pen, books covered with fancy paper to serve as scroll books, etc). Reimbursements for this were probably around $50.

At the end of the event, we gave away most of the posters and scrolls to attendees.

Video

We didn't plan ahead on how we'd livestream the talks and record video of them, but we got very lucky. On September 13 we started an email thread about how to figure this out, and on September 14, a brother of an organizer put us in touch with his friends who could record both tracks (and livestream them) for $1200. This was just about the amount of money we had left in the budget, so we agreed. It was definitely worth hiring them.

Code of Conduct

As our host event space, Eventbrite requested that we use their standard [Eventbrite Code of Conduct](). We posted this to our website, noted it verbally during our event introduction, and asked attendees to report any concerns to an event organizer. Organizers also kept an eye out for issues during the event. We did not receive any reports.

Conclusion

Looking back from 2021, our first event was a real success, more than even some of us expected. Despite a number of constraints for us as organizers (especially uncertainty about how many people would buy tickets for this first-time event), a lot of people had a wonderful time. A few speakers from this event have mentioned to us that they treasure their challenge coin.

This encouraged us to keep running Roguelike Celebration, adding new organizers every year who had been fans of the previous event, and improving our work as organizers over time.

Two of the important things we learned from 2016: having two tracks of content was somewhat frustrating for attendees and speakers (had to miss out on things!), and sending everyone out to buy their own lunch reduced important opportunities for people to talk with each other.

For our subsequent in-person events at GitHub (2017, 2018, and 2019), GitHub offered us two days of hosting (Saturday and Sunday), which meant we could have a single track each day. GitHub and other sponsors also paid for many catered meals those years, and we also spent some ticket money on food and beverages, including Friday evening and Saturday evening social events.

If you have any questions or want to help with organizing the next Roguelike Celebration, email us at [contact@roguelike.club]().