

The Blind Spot in the Greenlight

Why every publisher needs a standing, independent studio and title review function, and how to build one

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Every publisher CEO has lived some version of this. A game is green for eighteen months, and then suddenly it isn't. The date moves. The budget grows. The vertical slice that won the greenlight room turns out to have been the only slice. By the time the truth reaches the top, the cheapest options are already gone.

Nobody lied. That's the problem. Everyone reporting on that game was telling the truth as they saw it, from where they stood.

Everyone in the room has a stake

Consider who you rely on to tell you whether a game is working. The studio head, whose studio depends on it. The producer, whose job is to ship it. The executive sponsor, who championed it at greenlight. Finance, whose model is built on its date. Each is competent, but each is invested: in the team, the plan, the decision already made or the number already promised.

Milestone reviews don't necessarily solve this, because milestones measure deliverables, not delivery. A team can hit every checkpoint and still be building a game that won't close: production math that only works if velocity doubles, a core loop never proven with players, a leadership structure that can't make the cuts the plan requires.

Most publishers fill the gap informally: a trusted veteran asked for a gut check, a consultant brought in once a project is already on fire. It's ad hoc, it's late, it's inconsistent, and nothing it learns compounds. What's missing isn't more reporting. It's an unbiased assessment from people whose only job is to look hard at the team and the game and say what they see, with no studio to protect, no budget to defend and no greenlight to justify.

A healthy team can ship the wrong game. A great game can sit with a team that can't ship it. You need to see both, early.

Why now

- **Bets are bigger and fewer.** Nine-figure budgets and five-plus-year cycles mean a single miss can define a fiscal year.
- **Late truth is expensive truth.** Restructuring or cancelling in year four costs multiples of doing it in year two. Much of the industry's recent wave of late-stage cancellations and studio closures reflects the cost of recognizing problems too late.
- **Portfolio decisions must be defensible.** Boards and investors increasingly expect evidence, not just conviction.
- **The industry is starting to formalize this.** Some of the largest platform holders and publishers have begun building dedicated roles to review titles across their studio portfolios, onsite, at key moments in development.

The question is no longer whether this function should exist, but how mature yours will be.

What the function is, and what it isn't

The right model is internal assessment, not another layer of management. Evaluators are employees; their independence comes from structure: who they report to and what they don't own. Here, **independent means nonstakeholder**: no budget, no headcount, no title of its own and no vote. It advises. It doesn't control.

It is	It isn't
A standing function whose sole job is assessing studios and titles	A greenlight committee or a vote
Reporting to the CEO or portfolio leadership, outside the development line	Part of the chain of command it reviews
A written recommendation: Proceed, Proceed with Conditions, or Pass	The decision. Owners keep the call, and the accountability
Led by someone who has shipped games and led teams	Analysts reading dashboards
A partner to studios, with findings shared and discussed openly	A surprise inspection or a back channel
A codified method that is measured and improved over time	A rotating set of opinions

Two questions

Every assessment answers two separate questions, because each can fail without the other.

Can this team deliver? (Studio Assessment)	Is this game worth delivering? (Title Review)
Creative and production misalignment	Unvalidated core
Technical and product misalignment	Vision drift
Decision and ownership gaps	Unproven audience thesis
Team capability gaps	Production math doesn't close
Evidence and adaptability gaps	Business model misalignment

Each pattern carries defined warning signs, so every studio is examined for the same things in the same way, calibrated to stage: a prototype isn't judged like a beta. Evidence comes from the build, milestone history, production plans, budgets, player research and direct conversations with leadership and the team, not from the pitch deck.

When it's used: partner selection and pre-signing; greenlight; milestone reviews, when a project slips or asks for more time or money; acquisition diligence; and on a regular portfolio cadence, so the first look is never a crisis.

How to build it

1. **Put it outside the line.** Report to the CEO or portfolio committee, never to the organization whose titles it reviews. That reporting line is the independence.
2. **Start with one veteran dev.** Credibility with studios is earned by people who've taken games to launch and led teams through it. Begin with a single senior assessment lead, supported by the user research, finance and technical specialists you already have. Add dedicated assessors when portfolio demand warrants it.
3. **Advise, never decide.** The assessment lead writes the recommendation; the owner makes the call. Record both. Over time, that record becomes the most honest dataset your company has on its own judgment.
4. **Codify, then evolve.** Start with a defined framework: patterns, warning signs, stage calibration, a standard report. Then check every recommendation against what actually happened and refine. A method that doesn't learn is just a checklist.
5. **Make it the studio's ally.** Share findings with the team before leadership sees them. Good assessments surface problems teams already sense but can't escalate, and earn great teams more room, not less. Hold developers to a higher standard, and give the best ones the clarity and cover to do the work that made them fall in love with making games.
6. **Pilot before you scale.** Three titles at different stages over two quarters. Judge it on one question: did leadership learn something important earlier than it otherwise would have?

What you get

Not fewer risks; games are risky by nature. Earlier, cheaper truth. An independent review produces three kinds of outcome, and each is a win:

- **A deal that shouldn't happen, doesn't.** Example: A veteran-led team with an impressive pedigree, but dual-role leadership and loyalty-driven hiring. The recommendation was to pass, and the budget went somewhere better. Pedigree doesn't predict performance. Structure and discipline do.
- **A project that looks troubled gets funded with confidence.** Example: Surface chaos and real issues, but a team with exceptional self-awareness and course-correction. Funding continued, backed by evidence instead of hope.
- **The answer is neither yes nor no.** Example: A small team with conflict-averse leadership, approved on the condition that it restructure first.

Each of those decisions would have been made anyway. The review changed how well, and how early.

The cheapest moment to learn the truth about a game is almost always earlier than the moment it arrives. A standing, independent assessment function moves that moment forward.

My aim is a more collaborative, more honest relationship between the people who fund games and the people who make them. If you're building this function, or wondering whether you should, I'd welcome the conversation.

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