The OSRA explained

What is the Open Source Robotics Alliance and how does it work?

Summary

The Open Source Robotics Alliance (OSRA) is an initiative created by the OSRF to improve the governance of our open-source projects, and provide funding, greater community involvement, and long-term stability to those projects. It is based on a mixed membership and meritocratic model, following the examples of other successful foundations for open-source projects, including The Linux Foundation and the Eclipse Foundation. The OSRA will enable the community to participate in the technical governance of OSRF projects, provide funding to support those projects, and contribute to growth in contributions and adoption. Participation in the OSRA is open to all organizations and individuals either as a paying member and as an open-source contributor.

Background

The Open Source Robotics Foundation (OSRF) is a non-profit organization, but it had a for-profit subsidiary, the Open Source Robotics Corporation (OSRC). Much of the development of the OSRF's open-source projects were both funded and contributed by this company. In return, the community supported the OSRF and OSRC in stewarding the projects for the benefit of the community.

With the growing size and scope of the OSRF's open-source projects, the Board of Directors and Officers of the OSRF wished to shift to a more "traditional" governance and funding model that relied on funding and technical contributions from a diverse set of stakeholders, while providing room for voices of all types of stakeholders to be heard. With the growth in usage of the OSRF's projects, particularly the ROS Suite, by commercial entities and a growth in willingness by these entities to directly invest in the software for the good of all, OSRF management decided the time was right for a change in governance model.

To meet these needs the OSRF has designed the Open Source Robotics Alliance (OSRA) and sold the OSRC.

What is the OSRA?

The OSRA is an initiative created by the OSRF that provides its open-source projects with both funding and governance. It is based on a mixed membership and meritocratic model, following the examples set by many other open-source software foundations, including the Linux Foundation and the Eclipse Foundation. The mixed model enables participation in the way most appropriate for each organization or individual: contributing funding as a paying member, contributing directly to project development, or both.

The OSRA is assigned responsibility for governance of OSRF open-source projects by the Board of Directors of the OSRF. The OSRA then governs those projects, both at a high level and at the day-to-day level. The high level governance is managed by the Technical Governance Committee, which has oversight of projects and sets OSRA-wide technical policies. The day-to-day is managed by a Project Management Committee for each project, which handles at-the-coal-face decisions.

The structure of the OSRA

The structure of the OSRA is shown in the figure below.
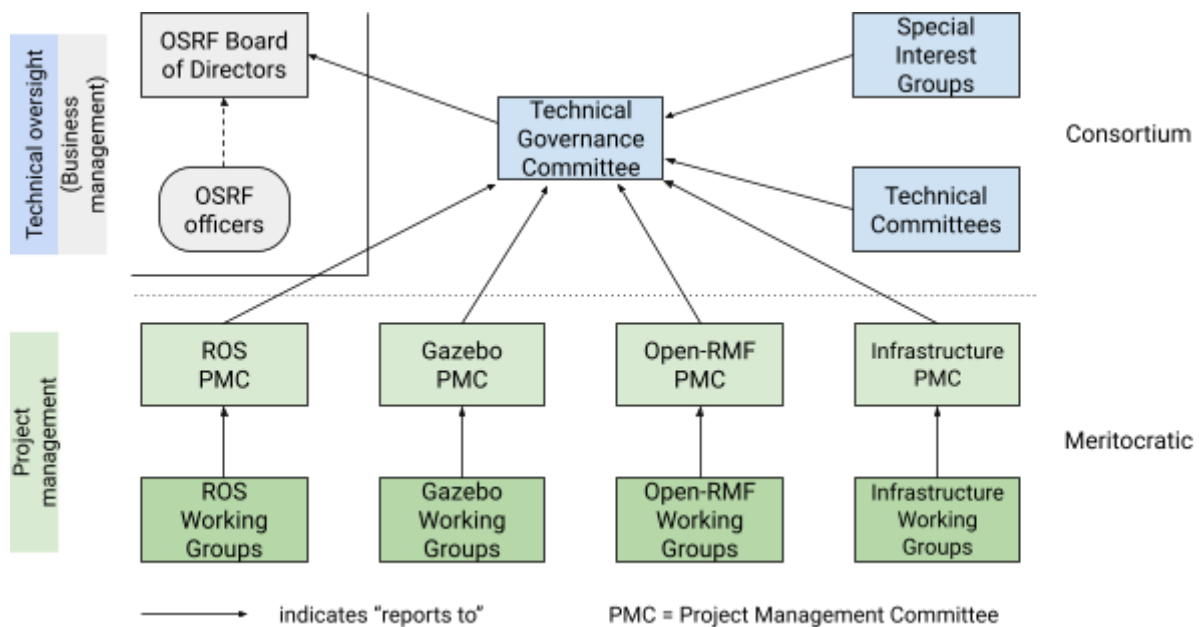
The top half of the organization is what we call the consortium layer. Participation in this layer is generally based on elected representatives, half of which are from paying members and half of which are from the projects. This layer's center of activity is the Technical Governance Committee (TGC). The TGC is responsible for managing the overall technical affairs of the OSRA, such as setting technical standards for projects to follow and having oversight of the activities of projects.

The bottom half is what we call the meritocratic layer. Participation in this layer is based on individual merit. This layer has a set of Project Management Committees (PMCs), one for each project. Each PMC is responsible for one project, and manages the activities of that project, including managing roadmaps, making design decisions, managing releases, and coordinating the work of committers. Apart from a representative of the Supporting Individual members of the OSRA (there to represent end users) and the Chair of the TGC, participation in the PMC can only be earned based on merit and the acceptance of the existing members of the PMC. This ensures that the people working directly on the project are the people making the day-to-day decisions about that project.

Types of memberships in the OSRA

The OSRA consortia membership is available with a tiered structure. It has 4 tiers of membership available to for profit companies. It also has a tier for non-profit companies and a separate membership class for individuals.

Each membership class has its specific membership benefits, but for most classes the most important is representation on the TGC. The level of representation varies across the different membership tiers.

The member representatives are balanced in the TGC by an equal number of representatives from the projects. This ensures that neither paying members nor meritocratically-selected representatives have the ability to dictate policy in the TGC.

Benefits for members

Members will benefit from the OSRA in several ways. Most importantly for those members who build their products on OSRF software, the long-term stability that the OSRA will bring to the projects gives commercial users the confidence they need to build products on the software and support those products for their planned life.

Members will also receive marketing- and perception-related benefits from being involved in the OSRA. Members will be promoted on the OSRA's publicity materials, and be able to promote their involvement to potential customers and potential hires.

As with commercial users, in the longer term those who use OSRF projects to support their research will benefit from an increase in development speed and software quality. Reliable software will lead to easier development of prototypes and experimental implementations, allowing researchers to get more done.

Benefits for OSRF projects and their users

The OSRA will provide a stable source of funding for the support of the open-source projects. This is the most significant benefit for the projects. As well as paying for on-going operational costs, such as cloud computing costs for the continuous integration (CI) systems used by the projects, this will enable projects to request funding to cover one-off project costs. For example, a project's PMC will be able to request funds to cover tools or services required to improve software quality, if open-source or free options are not available. The OSRF will also be able to use funding to hire expertise in areas that are typically difficult to attract outside contributions in. An example that will resonate with many users of open-source software is documentation: with enough funding, the OSRF will have the capacity to hire technical writing experts to assist with documentation creation.

Projects will benefit from the new governance structure provided by the OSRA. Through its open processes and achievement of status through merit, there are more reasons for individuals to get involved with the OSRF's projects, and ways to be recognised for

contributions. The open management of projects will enable more transparency, and by ensuring all stakeholders have representation, the OSRA will enable projects to be more responsive to community needs.

Getting involved

If you want to be involved on an individual level, then simply contributing to the OSRF's projects is enough. Any and all contributions are welcome, and the more contributions you make, the greater the recognition you will receive from others in the community. We also offer you the opportunity to become a Supporting Individual member in the OSRA and contribute to the financial stability of the OSRF and its projects.

If you or your organization is interested in joining the OSRA as a paying member and supporting the future of open source robotics, you can apply right now. See the section on membership on the OSRA's website for more information. We look forward to working with our members and all other contributors and users on growing open source robotics on the sound foundation that the OSRA will provide.