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Publisher Presentations as Promotional Paratexts

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This article will explore the increasing prominence of ‘publisher presentations’ — online streams where game publishers like Sony, Nintendo and Devolver Digital showcase their upcoming products directly to consumers through pre-recorded livestreamed presentations. Digital publisher presentations are a recent form of videogame advertising, having emerged during the 2010s amidst the decline of trade shows like the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), and this article argues that they should be considered as a key contemporary promotional paratext that offers insights into how their respective publishers attempt to shape their brand identity and corporate vision. This article identifies a range of key characteristics to publisher presentations then conducts a close analysis of three publisher presentations — a Nintendo Direct, a Sony State of Play and a Devolver Direct — to highlight how they are constructed to shape perceptions of the products they promote and the publishers themselves.

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1 INTRODUCTION

As the videogame industry has grown, in/formalised (Keogh 2019) and arguably become oversaturated, gamemakers and publishers are being confronted with a myriad of challenges they must overcome for their games to be commercially successful. A key concern is determining how to stand out in a crowded market. Digital distribution has allowed more and more gamemakers to distribute their games, but it also has led to increased competition in the market. Ball (2025), in his comprehensive ‘State of Videogaming’ 2025 report noted that the number of games releasing on PC distribution platform Steam each year has increased by over 1000% over the past decade; more games were released every month in 2024 than the entirety of 2014. This glut of supply has increasingly seen gamemakers, especially independent gamemakers, move towards entrepreneurship and particular marketing strategies to promote their releases (Whitson et al. 2021). This has also made any opportunity to gain meaningful audience attention from players an increasingly desirable commodity.

While there are many ways to promote games, this paper focuses on understanding one of the most visible within current gaming cultures; what we call publisher presentations. These presentations are often viewed as pivotal events in the calendar for enthusiastic ‘gamers’ given they are perceived as providing hotly anticipated news, trailers and announcements regarding upcoming game releases. While the format, length and structure of these presentations vary, they generally refer to recorded videos released on digital platforms constructed by major publishers like Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft, as well as minor publishers like Devolver Digital, that string together a series of game promotions and announcements. These events have become such a fixture of the industry that they have become a marketing template

that others are following, as seen in examples like the Triple-i showcase, Galaxies Showcase and Frosty Games Fest. These presentations represent a desire for publishers and gamemakers to use the affordances of digital platforms to bypass journalists and other cultural intermediaries and reach consumers directly in a format they control.

This article offers a critical analysis of publisher presentations and argues that it is productive to conceptualise them as promotional paratexts that reveal the brand identity and corporate vision of their associated publishers. Describing them as paratexts situates publisher presentations alongside both videogames and the publishers themselves in such a way that shapes both. As one of the preeminent forms of game marketing in the industry, it is essential these presentations, and the impact they have on the market power of publishers, videogames and digital platforms, be properly examined. To that end, our work also situates these presentations as part of a lineage of gaming advertising paratexts that includes publisher magazines like Nintendo Power, game trailers and E3 showcases. Through a breakdown of key characteristics of publisher presentations, and a close analysis of three examples — the Nintendo Direct broadcast September 14th, 2025, the PlayStation State of Play from September 28th, 2025, and Devolver Digital's 2020 Devolver Direct — we showcase how these presentations serve both as promotional tools that shape the games being presented and allow publishers to represent their brand identities and corporate visions without relying on cultural intermediaries to interpret them.

We begin with an analysis of game advertising more broadly, and the intersection between advertising and paratextual analysis. We suggest that considering advertising as paratexts is productive in how it allows us to study ads as *texts*, thus revealing how they shape the central text (the games) as well as other paratexts around the publishers. We also identify meaningful antecedents to publisher presentations, namely publisher magazines, game trailers, technology keynotes and, most directly, E3 showcases. We then identify four key characteristics of the publisher presentation — a focus on scale through many trailers strung together, the presence of host(s), fostering a sense of 'newsworthiness' that uses the games press for further promotion, and being centred on a sole publisher as the key unifying brand. Considering publisher presentations as promotional paratexts with these key characteristics is productive in how it allows us to analyse how they shape the perception of the products they present and the underlying brand identities of their associated publisher.

From there, we move into the close analysis of three publisher presentations; a Nintendo Direct, a State of Play and a Devolver Direct. Our analysis of these presentations is based on an iterative open coding process; as a team we watched these presentations and coded multiple variables for each announcement including the format of announcement within the presentation, what information the announcement was centred on, the relationship between the product and the publisher in charge of the presentation, the relative size of the game developer, the release date, and any other important notes. After confirming our coding, we then used this data in conjunction with a textual analysis of the presentations — focusing on the direction and framing of individual product reveals in relation to one another — to gain a greater understanding of the function of these presentations. We suggest Nintendo's Direct reaffirms the company's unique brand identity as a hardware manufacturer that focuses on developing playful entertainment rather than technology. Sony's State of Play, in contrast, reaffirms a range of hegemonic cultural narratives around games culture, through a focus on technology and graphical fidelity. The State of Play also seeks to associate Sony's first-party 'PlayStation Studios' games with prestige and quality. Finally, Devolver's 2020 Direct exemplifies the publisher's countercultural image by drawing attention to many of the publisher presentation tropes while simultaneously affirming the need for these presentations in the current landscape of game advertising. Each showcases an example of how publisher presentations are a productive area of analysis in how they reflect, reinforce and shape different cultural expectations around videogames and the prominent games publishing companies that shape them. They also reveal how — in an era

dominated by digital platforms — these publishers can use said platforms to project a specific cultural or brand image of the company directly to consumers without making use of cultural intermediaries in the ways they have historically done so.

2 VIDEOGAMES, ADVERTISING AND PARATEXTS

The role paratexts play relative to videogames has become increasingly prominent since Consalvo (2009) applied Genette's work (1997) — describing paratexts as anything that extends the novel such as illustrations, the preface and more — to the field of games. Per this description, a paratext not only sits alongside the text, but allows entry to the text — it elucidates it, reveals it, contextualises it. While Genette only alludes to other applications of the paratext outside the literary novel, the term has since been adapted far more broadly, with the rise of communication technology greatly expanding the scope of paratextuality.

Part of this expansive work has been an increasing focus on understanding advertisements as paratexts (Gray 2010; Hackley 2019; 2022). Gray (2010) and Hackley and Hackley (2019, 6) acknowledge that “advertisements are quintessential paratexts”. Paratextual advertising may consist of traditional forms of advertising, as well as include various new hybrid forms like native advertising, search engine optimisation, product placements, celebrity endorsements and many more (Hackley and Hackley 2019, 8). As they describe, brand paratexts “could be [thought of] as any media content that is connected to a brand, explicitly or implicitly” (Hackley and Hackley 2022, 6). Branding and advertisement today regularly defines how we discover, encounter and respond to texts (Burgess 2026); indeed, today's media landscape is arguably defined by the fact we likely consume more promotional paratexts than we do actual texts (Gray 2010; Arsenault 2017, 90).

The games industry offers a wealth of videogame paratextual advertisements. Scholars have discussed advergaming (Ghosh et al. 2022), in-game advertising (Smith et al. 2020), product placements (Glass 2007) and magazine advertisements (Kirkpatrick 2012). We argue that an increasingly important form of paratextual advertisement in the games industry are publisher presentations. When it comes to publisher presentations, we have identified multiple advertising antecedents, including game trailers, publisher magazines, technology keynotes, and E3 showcases. To contextualise their emergence, we briefly run through each of these in sequences before providing a summary of E3 and how its rise and fall set the foundations upon which the contemporary prominence of publisher presentations has been built.

The most obvious point of comparison for these presentations is the game trailer, as trailers are often the primary method publisher presentations use to showcase games. Our work in this area builds upon Vollans (2023) analysis of game trailers as promotional paratexts. Like other paratexts, trailers' value as both an ad and a site of analysis stems from its ability to circulate separately from the game it is promoting and articulate the game as a “what could be”, even if this articulation is inaccurate (161). Vollans (2023) describes how, through studying trailers, “we can see how the product was presented, how the product's audience was positioned, constructed, and ultimately how the consumer was communicated with through context — games, ratings, formats, even the representation (or not) of players” (161). Like trailers, publisher presentations can also be thought of via Genette's (1997) epitext — texts that sit alongside one another and can be shared and consumed separately from the primary text. Importantly however, we argue that publisher presentations should be thought of as more than a collection of trailers; as our later analysis will show, the construction and framing surrounding these trailers is important and distinguishes presentations from the trailer format in key ways.

Another antecedent to publisher presentations are publisher magazines from earlier eras of videogame promotion. These were magazines that catered to videogame players and offered reviews, guides and previews, but were owned by a

particular publisher, with examples including Atari Age, Xbox Magazine, Official PlayStation Magazine and, perhaps the most recognisable, Nintendo Power. As Arsenault (2017, 83) characterises it:

Nintendo Power was dressed up (some would say ‘masquerading’) as a magazine but was actually less of a video game magazine in the now-traditional sense of the term and more of a house organ for the firm... *Nintendo Power* was entirely funded by Nintendo of America as a fusion and extension of the Fun Club newsletter and the Powerline.

Nintendo Power therefore allowed Nintendo greater control over both their brand identity and how their games were promoted. This is particularly true when compared to the coverage of their games in any magazines run by independent gaming journalists, given the magazine was given “privileged and systemic access” (Arsenault 2017, 86) to any first- and third-party games released on Nintendo hardware. It was also hugely successful - Kline et al. (2003, 120) notes that by 1990, *Nintendo Power* had become the highest selling magazine for children, with over two million paid subscribers in the United States and read by double that. Given the limited opportunities other magazines had to cover Nintendo games, Nintendo Power in the 1980s and 90s claimed a near monopolistic power over the promotion of Nintendo consoles and games (Provenzo 1991, 13), allowing Nintendo to “control the flow of information without interference from independent sources in journalism or criticism” (Arsenault 2017, 90) in much the same way contemporary publisher presentations allow. Notably, Nintendo Power only ceased circulation in 2012, the year after Nintendo began their Nintendo Direct pre-recorded presentations.

Another antecedent worth examining is a promotional example from outside of the games industry, specifically the technology keynote popularised by Steve Jobs and Apple. These keynotes also involve senior company staff taking to the stage to stimulate both press and consumer excitement for the supposed new devices and innovations to soon be released. They also tend to obfuscate the promotional components of Apple keynotes in such a way to make consumers want to watch them directly as a source of interest rather than advertisement. Similar discourses tend to circle publisher presentations - fans and players tend to see them as events, something to anticipate and scrutinise rather than a blatant marketing tool. Wenzel and Koch (2018, 639) also describe such keynotes as a genre of “strategic communication” that use various discursive practices to shape the way viewers come to understand the technology being presented; *how* Steve Jobs promoted the iPhone, for example, was arguably as instrumental to the product as what it was. Much of this is also true for publisher presentations and how they can shape the perception of particular videogames, though the modern versions of these presentations eschew the in-person event with a live audience in favour of more curated and often digitally-backgrounded recorded communication.

Finally, the Electronic Entertainment Expo, colloquially known as E3, arguably includes the clearest historical antecedent to the publisher presentation. E3 emerged in 1995 as a direct result of key gaming industry figures feeling “sidelined and neglected” (Liao 2021) when attempting to advertise products at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in the early 1990s. Serving as an event dedicated to the gaming industry, E3 began as a trade show in 1995 focused on retailers, but over time the show shifted in purpose to become more focused on appealing directly to consumers. We argue E3 showcases are a direct predecessor to the publisher presentation format in how they began the trend of publishers forgoing cultural intermediaries, writers and journalists who conventionally function as tastemakers and negotiators of cultural value for consumers (Nieborg & Foxman 2023, 63), in favour of targeting consumers directly. Given E3’s significance, and the relative lack of academic analysis of the expo and its history, the rest of this section will briefly chart its history and relevance to the characteristics of contemporary publisher presentations.

While E3 always had its roots in games promotion, the initial iterations of the show were positioned as an industry trade event organised by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) that was focused on pitching upcoming gaming software and hardware to both retailers and the games press in much the same way that CES (Consumer Electronics

Show) had previously. Information from the event would be conveyed to the general public via various cultural intermediaries including gaming magazines and — as the years progressed — online gaming news sites, though this was not the event’s initial focus. However, over time E3 developed a tension between its focus on presenting to retailers and the press, and broader public perceptions of the expo. This led to attempts to downsize E3 in 2007 and 2008 in response to rising costs for publisher booths and increased access from smaller bloggers and outlets. This move sought to restrict who had access to the event and its related flow of information, a move supported by the ESA but negatively received by many other stakeholders (Sinclair, 2016). This downsizing was ultimately unsuccessful, and the show expanded again in 2009 and the years that followed.

This concession speaks to the internal shift that occurred in E3’s character over its years of operation, from a trade show primarily focused on informing intermediaries in the games industry — such as retailers and press — about upcoming products to being a live billboard for major games publishers worldwide to advertise to potential audiences directly. While press conferences hosted by publishers were always a part of the show as a way to appease retailers, their role shifted from 2009 onwards into flashy presentations designed to appeal directly to consumers. As technology improved, it became possible to stream press conferences directly to consumers via the internet, further diminishing the mediating role the games press originally held in providing information to players themselves. While conferences prior to this had been primarily focused on catering to the industry insiders in attendance and appeared more akin to tech keynotes, the shift towards being broadcast necessitated an increase in production values — focusing on highly produced trailers being packaged together containing all the information needed to excite an audience of consumers. These later iterations of the presentations fully embody their role as “strategic communications” in a way that even extends beyond the traditional technology keynote and which targeted the consumer far more directly, as opposed to the cultural intermediaries who would relay the information after the fact. It also began the habitual reliance on digital platforms such as YouTube and Twitch to connect with players directly that publisher presentations continue to maintain. In truth, this pivot is one which was only possible thanks to the emergence of these digital platforms and the proliferation of easily accessible online video in that they opened up previously impossible avenues of communication between creators and fans across a variety of media industries (Burgess 2021).

This shift from retail to consumer focus became even more noticeable in 2013 when Nintendo eliminated their E3 press conference entirely and replaced it with a pre-recorded presentation broadcast online. While they had experimented with providing presentations directly to consumers through other avenues before — via the aptly named ‘Nintendo Direct’ label that would become even more prominent over time — replacing the traditional E3 press conference with a Direct represented a significant shift in the way larger publishers and developers like Nintendo engaged with fans and consumers. Nintendo’s 2013 move to online Directs targeting players without intermediaries like the ESA or gaming journalists set the template that was steadily adopted by other developers and publishers in the years that followed; EA pulled out of E3 in 2016 and Sony in 2019. In an ironic turn of events, the publisher presentations that E3 helped popularise seemingly outgrew the need for the expo. As Kohler (2016) put it the year EA pulled out, E3 was no longer “a trade show, at which makers of packaged goods try to convince wholesalers and retailers to buy large quantities of their forthcoming products”. This shift in focus is what ultimately led to the expo’s demise. After multiple cancelled conferences due to COVID-19, the ESA eventually announced E3’s conclusion in December of 2023, citing the “new opportunities our industry has to reach fans and partners” as being instrumental in its closure (Park 2023). Invariably, the publishers and developers whose support initially prompted its creation viewed the expo as outgrowing its utility, preferring to bypass journalists and retailers in favour of digital platforms and influencers to more directly reach fans and consumers.

The contemporary prominence of pre-recorded streams of game announcements therefore owes its lineage to the presentations first facilitated by E3. At the time of writing, Nintendo has been relying on the Nintendo Direct to structure its announcements for almost fifteen years, and it is surrounded with a myriad of other digital presentations, both from other publishers like Sony and Microsoft as well as presentations organised autonomously around a specific theme. This shift to digital platforms has also diffused presentations throughout the year, despite the presence of E3-inspired successors like former gaming journalist Geoff Keighly's 'Summer Game Fest'. This shift to online offerings targeting consumers directly requires greater critical scrutiny, both in how it consolidates publisher's market power and control over their brand identity, as well as how they change how games themselves are promoted.

3 DEFINING PUBLISHER PRESENTATIONS

Before conducting our close analysis, it is worth briefly defining the parameters of publisher presentations, particularly as the digital recorded showcase has become more frequent within games promotion. Indeed, publisher presentations can take many forms, though our categorisation focuses on four non-binding but key characteristics. On a basic level, publisher presentations typically do not focus on a single game and instead present a wide array of hardware and software,ⁱ have a host (or hosts) associated with the publisher physically appearing between segments as an anchoring presence,ⁱⁱ contain reveals of information not previously known publicly and are oriented around a single games publisher rather than multiple.

While multiple exceptions to all these elements exist, we identify them as integral to our definition for two reasons. First, they emphasise the ties that this format of presentation has to E3, where all these characteristics were far more embedded in the structure of the showcases that dominated the trade show. While we acknowledge the format of publisher presentations remains distinct from E3, we also argue the format was incubated and evolved across the conference's history. The nature of the presentations including a wide breadth of showcased games is a direct result of E3's showcases being primarily designed to inform retailers of all upcoming releases and ensure they could pre-purchase sufficient amounts of stock. Hosts, meanwhile, were a necessity for a trade show, particularly in the predigital age which E3 originated in. The focus on revealing new information in contrast derives from the transition of E3 into a promotional rather than industrial event, and the orientation around each individual publisher also continues the segmented nature of E3's weekend of showcases, with clear delineation between the products of one distributor and the next. While these presentations are no longer tied to E3 and can differ in notable ways, with some recent examples being created not by publishers but by developers or other interest groups in the gaming landscape, we argue that at the current stage in the format's lifespan, they remain intrinsically tied to this history, a claim will we expand on throughout this section.

We will now go through each characteristic in a bit more detail. The focus on quantity of trailers exemplifies the videogame industry's interest in what Keogh (2023, 33) describes as an "ever-increasing amount of content and scale". Indeed, scale and its relationship to games production and exploitation is one that is increasingly garnering scholarly attention (Graham 2025), and speaks to both increasing saturation and a desire from certain cohorts of games culture for games that are bigger, longer, more detailed and ultimately grander in scale. Publisher presentations, with their typical focus on breadth over depth when it comes to showcased games, arguably exemplify this interest in scope, with publishers seeking to convince consumers that their upcoming lineup is extensive, comprehensive, and more than they could ever play. Despite being disconnected from E3 and its origins as a trade show which necessitated revealing a large swathe of upcoming products, these presentations continue to focus on quantity with the Nintendo Direct analysed in this piece being, at the time of writing, the longest Nintendo Direct ever.

Publisher presentations also make their E3 lineage more explicit with host(s). Particular hosts tend to legitimise publisher presentations as events that players and fans should pay attention to. Until his death in 2015, Nintendo president Satoru Iwata was known for hosting every main Nintendo Direct — in the time since the role has generally been filled by the company’s Senior General Manager Yoshiaki Koizumi and Executive General Manager Shinya Takahashi. Similarly, Microsoft’s Developer Directs and Xbox Showcase events have often been hosted by Microsoft’s leadership team at the time, including people like Phil Spencer, Matt Booty, or Sarah Bond,ⁱⁱⁱ while Sony’s State of Play and PlayStation Showcase presentations have included executives like former and current PlayStation CEOs Jim Ryan and Herman Hulst. The presence of these recognisable executives depict a presentation as being one of particular impact and helps set it apart from the other — less significant — forms of promotion and is another example of the influence of technology keynotes on the format of publisher presentations.

Another key publisher presentation characteristic is their constructed sense of ‘newsworthiness’. Presentations deliberately evoke the high expectations fan fostered for bygone E3 conferences that managed to attract the attention of wide audiences through a focus on ‘reveals’, with most game showcases being complemented by the release of new information not previously publicly known, most commonly release dates and the first look at gameplay. This curated sense of anticipation is often accentuated by ‘leaks’ that tend to circulate around major presentations in the form of rumours consisting of when publisher presentations will be revealed and what content they may include.

Creating this sense of ‘newsworthiness’ allows publisher presentations to attract greater coverage from games journalists who — unlike with E3 — often find themselves reporting on the news from these presentations alongside the consumer audience rather than having privileged access. Games journalism has a long and complex relationship to the industry; Kirkpatrick (2017) describes early game magazines as functioning symbiotically with industry, guiding it towards the types of audiences that were interested in games while also being shaped by its commercial imperatives. Today, Nieborg and Foxman (2023, 70) describes there being an “implied quid pro quo — if not a massive power imbalance — between the industry and the press”. Game publishers, like the ones illustrated in these presentations, wield disproportionate power when it comes to receiving favourable coverage, in the form of exclusive resources like press events, unrevealed information and connections with industry professionals. The increasing degradation of games journalism as a field has exacerbated these concerns further. As gaming-oriented publications are downsizing worldwide, the lines between “gaming journalists, individual influencers and dedicated fans” have become increasingly blurred — a problem exasperated by the different obligations these roles have (Stanton and Johnson 2024, 13, 15). This has been exacerbated by digital platforms, who have not only disrupted how conventional media journalism functions, but have also empowered publishers to bypass these cultural intermediaries entirely.

It is these challenges with games journalism — its increasing degradation, the power imbalance between industry and press, and blurring of the lines between journalism and promotion — that publisher presentations are arguably primed to capitalise on. A productive comparison here is the pseudo-event. The description originally comes from Boorstin (2012 [1962]) who describes how news corporations report on ‘pseudo-events’ to fill in the gaps of traditional reporting, in the form of spectacles contrived by politicians such as cutting the ribbon on a reopening. Hackley and Hackley (2019, 5) describes pseudo-events as a marketing device that are “designed purely to be reported upon as if it is news”. We suggest that, while publisher presentations are not entirely pseudo-events given they do contain new information, they are similarly engineered to be reported upon by the games press. They evoke a sense of ‘newsiness’ and anticipation that draws the attention of both players and press; indeed, publisher presentations that do not contain enough new information are typically seen by players as a ‘disappointment’ or ‘waste of time’.

Much of this can be seen in the coverage of the most recent Nintendo Direct and State of Play. Publications like IGN (Bankhurst 2025), Press Start (Grixti 2025), Vooks (Vuckovic 2025) all published listicles titled ‘Everything Announced at the September State of Play/Nintendo Direct’, often with the official trailers directly linked to and with a focus on the ‘newsiness’ and reveals provided by the presentations, while also uncritically repeating the presentation’s promotional language. This typically involves a focus on release dates, gameplay and game reveals, with IGN and Press Start also both ordering the announcements based on significance, with Sony’s first-party releases *Marvel’s Wolverine* and *Saros* being mentioned immediately. These listicles are not only updated with news moments after it is revealed in the presentation but are often created before a presentation even goes live: IGN’s list was posted before the event and, rather than containing announcements, contained information about “How To Watch Today’s PlayStation State of Play.” This practice is often done explicitly to ensure that an individual site’s coverage of the presentation ranks well in SEO by flooding the zone with coverage as soon as possible; a practice which benefits the publishers who are guaranteed plenty of coverage. The final version of IGN’s list also links to several articles that are entirely dedicated to specific reveals, such as the gameplay of *Wolverine* (Yin-Poole 2025) or *Saros* (Cripe 2025). These strategies not only help extend the reach of publisher presentations to an even wider audience who were not watching the presentations live, they also distil and filter the presentations down into their most ‘newsworthy’ pieces, insinuating what announcements or reveals fans should be paying most attention to (Nieborg & Foxman 2023, 63). Publisher presentations therefore exploit the state and functions of the games press to accentuate their reach and effectiveness, while the games press often rely on the visibility that these events provide to boost their online profile and continue functioning.

Finally, publisher presentations, as the name suggests, are oriented around the branding and products of a single games publisher. Publishers act as an orienting logic around which everything in the presentation circulates, from the aesthetic to the types of products promoted. Some publishers have even come up with different branded titles for their presentations depending upon their intended goal; for example, Nintendo has labelled their various presentations as Nintendo Directs, Nintendo E3 Directs for those that aired during E3, Nintendo Direct Specials that focus on a single game and the Nintendo Direct Mini and Micro presentations that focus on smaller, third-party games. Xbox varies between presentations with an in-depth focus on a small handful of games via the Developer_Direct format and the more varied Xbox Games Showcase or Partner Preview presentations. Sony typically relies on State of Play presentations while devoting time to their larger scale PlayStation Showcase events, though these have become less frequent over time. These various branding labels tend to impact fan expectations leading up to presentations, with certain labels like Partner_Directs and the Nintendo Direct Specials garnering less attention compared to more familiar E3-style showcases. This characteristic highlights how deeply interwoven publisher presentations are with a game publisher’s brand identity and market power, making them instrumental to the analysis of games promotion and branding more broadly.

It is worth noting that this final characteristic, while integral to our own analysis, is increasingly not required for other presentations. While this is true when it comes to the most prominent examples, the popularity of Nintendo Directs and State of Plays have also led to an increasingly diffused and arguably cluttered ecosystem of similar presentations. This includes both digital and in-person events hosted by Geoff Keighley including Summer Game Fest, Gamescom Opening Night Live and The Game Awards, which also tend to promote themselves as including ‘world first’ premiers and announcements from major publishers. Other smaller and more unusual presentations have also begun to emerge, such as Kojima Productions 10th Anniversary “Beyond the Strand” stream which featured a wealth of interviews with key creatives and updates on a variety of projects the developer is involved with.

The emergence of these streams suggests that the publisher presentation has begun to crystallise into a familiar promotional format that is now being replicated across the videogame industry. Even grassroots presentations are

beginning to form centred around certain genres and themes, marketing themselves in direct contrast to this crystallised form. For example, 2025, as part of the Summer Game Fest, saw the inaugural launch of ‘Frosty Games Fest’, a digital showcase of upcoming videogame releases from Australia and Aotearoa (New Zealand) put together with the support of both local industry and government funding via national funding body Screen Australia (Gibbons 2025). More interestingly, the Triple-i Initiative is a yearly showcase organised by prominent developers in the “indie” scene, which is not associated with a single publisher and advertises itself as having “No Host. No Ads. Just Games”; a move which directly positions it in opposition to the established format we have outlined here. The emergence of smaller showcases like this, which are also regularly designed to embody the breadth and personability of the larger publisher presentations, suggests that the publisher presentation is a format that is still evolving and growing. Thus, while we position these presentations as a form of promotional paratext that play a key role in the *present* state of the games industry with a *history* deeply tied to E3, more research is required to determine what the *future* of these presentations may look like, particularly in regard to how creators respond to this format, as seen with the Triple-i Initiative.

We therefore propose that the ‘publisher presentation’ as a category refers to a broad umbrella of promotional events defined by these four key but non-binding characteristics. This includes a large quantity of trailers, host(s), a sense of newsworthiness and being created by a single games publisher. Even within these confines, there is still significant room for variation as the myriad of smaller and differently branded publisher presentations highlighted above indicate. Even beyond defining the format, the significance of these presentations requires greater analysis, which this article conducts through considering them as a form of promotional paratext that elucidates how players are primed to think about the promoted games and the underlying brand identities of the publishers themselves.

4 PUBLISHER PRESENTATIONS AS PARATEXTS

We argue thinking about publisher presentations as paratexts is productive in how it foregrounds the impact these presentations have on how we understand both the games being presented and their associated publishers. Paratexts frame and cue the cultural meaning of texts, acting as thresholds that shape interpretive strategies we bring to them (Gray 2010, 26; Hackley and Hackley 2019, 1). Describing publisher presentations as promotional paratexts foregrounds two key aspects—they reveal how publishers shape and reframe how players interact with and respond to the main ‘texts’ of the videogames being promoted and provide a glimpse into the corporate visions and brand identities that undergird them.

Beginning with the first aspect, publisher presentations reveal how exactly publishers want us as viewers to think about, respond to and ultimately play the key texts of the videogames being promoted. Indeed, videogame advertising has long had a shaping effect on the perception and consumption of games, particularly regarding the gendered connotations of games (see Condis & Morrisette; Cote 2018). As Vollans (2023) describes, game trailers, and arguably game advertisements more broadly:

act[s] as a form of documentary, depicting how the industry wants itself to be seen. In presenting an idealised consumption of its product, the industry is implicitly making claims about how they see themselves, and how others may or should see their product. (172)

Second, publisher presentations give us a glimpse at the brand identity and corporate visions that drive their associated publisher. Nandan (2005, 265) defines brand identity as something that originates from a company designed to imbue itself with specific characteristics. It is “how a company seeks to identify itself” and is instrumental in communicating identity and values to both consumers and other stakeholders. Videogame publishers have long sought to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Donovan 2010, 306; Harris 2014), making how they position their brand

identities and what unique attributes they foreground notable. Videogame brands especially have also long been invested in appealing to consumers' emotions to foster brand authenticity (Burgess 2026; Mumby 2016, 15), a point notable to publisher presentations given they are designed to foster excitement, anticipation and pleasure in their fanbases. They can arguably be thought of alongside Ahmed's (2010, 29) "happy objects" that are defined as having a sticky affect that "preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects".

Adapting the definition of corporate visions from Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method, publisher presentations also articulate a certain vision of videogames and their players — they tell us "what [a videogame] is supposed to do and, by extension, implies how it can be used and by whom". Publisher presentations are also productive in how they elucidate how major videogame publishers see themselves — the branding, rhetorics and methods of promotion all illustrate the sort of corporate vision companies like Nintendo, Sony and others wish to convey directly to players, rather than through journalists or other intermediaries reporting on their work. This in turn further shapes how the games they are promoting are perceived and reinforces their specific vision. As Hackley and Hackley (2019, 17) describe in relationship to studying paratexts more broadly, studying publisher presentations is done so with the goal of "arriv[ing] at a sense of how the cultural meaning of the brand is inflected by, and refracted through, its paratexts". It is therefore through publisher presentations that we can observe how such publishers want to be seen, what emotions they want to imbue in their products, what they believe makes them distinct and ultimately how they think.

This research therefore solidifies the significance of publisher presentations as a key example of videogame advertising that shapes how both games and publisher brands are received, discussed and read. This makes the understanding of publisher presentations and how they foster market power and brand identity crucial to understanding contemporary videogame promotional practices. To further this understanding, we will conduct a close analysis of three publisher presentations: the Nintendo Direct broadcast on September 12, 2025, Sony's State of Play from September 24 of the same year and the smaller publisher Devolver Digital's 2020 "Devolver Direct", initially broadcast on July 12, 2020. The first two were chosen for multiple reasons, including their recency; at the time of writing they were the most recent significant presentations from Sony and Nintendo. In addition, their close proximity to each other in terms of broadcast dates and their ability to fit the criteria previously used to define publisher presentations made them both productive case studies to compare. In contrast, the 2020 Devolver Direct has been chosen as it explicitly serves as a response to the format and structure of many of these presentations, parodying the format at the same time that it adopts it. Despite its age relative to the other examples, it serves as a relevant counter to many of the trends and ideas discussed in the first two presentations.

Each of these presentations were subjected to a mixed methods approach; every product, both game and otherwise, discussed in each presentation was subject to an open coding procedure which identified eight key variables: the name of product, the format of its announcement (does the host introduce it, is a trailer show, is there narration, etc.), the content of the announcement (what, if any, new or exclusive information was shown), its release date, its relationship to the presentation's publisher (ie. first-party or third-party releases), whether the product was a game or something else, whether the game qualified as an "indie" or not, and (exclusively for the Devolver Presentation) whether the announcement was real or a parody. With this data recorded, the analysis then consisted of a combination of statistical analysis of the data, and a more general textual analysis of the content of the presentations themselves through a focus on how the presentations shape the particular messages viewers receive about the brand identity of the publisher and their associated games.

5 ANALYSING PUBLISHER PRESENTATIONS

5.1 Nintendo Direct

We argue that the September 2025 Nintendo Direct serves as a productive lens through which to analyse Nintendo's contemporary brand identity as a family-friendly transmedia entertainment company. Nintendo is a particularly unique games publisher in the current industry. Contrasted with other console developers like Microsoft and Sony who prioritise graphical fidelity and powerful technical specifications in their consoles, over the last several decades the Japanese-based publisher has increasingly sought to foster a brand identity centred around developing novel or innovative modes of interaction, as seen through their Nintendo Wii and Switch consoles. This desire to distinguish themselves arguably extends beyond hardware and games, however; the publisher was the first to withdraw from E3 and focus on publisher presentations delivered directly to audiences. This marketing approach has now been established by over a decade of Nintendo Direct presentations, and their late 2025 Direct is a particularly helpful example for understanding how Nintendo desires to present and position itself in the larger games market. The contrast between Nintendo's position as an entertainment company and the technological ethos underpinning Sony and Microsoft has become a subject of discussion for key Nintendo executives (Kamen 2015) and is apparent in the Direct itself through a focus on not just Nintendo games but also Nintendo branded toys, films, museums and more.

Let's begin with a brief quantitative breakdown of the Direct's contents. The Nintendo Direct that was broadcast on 12 September, 2025, is notable for being the longest Nintendo Direct released at the time of writing, with a length of sixty-six minutes. The size of the direct is not just notable in terms of length, but also content — 51 different products were featured throughout the presentation. This breadth derives in part from the fact the Direct also served as a celebration for Mario's 40th anniversary, with the celebration specifically taking up the first third of the Direct and being responsible for ten of the announcements in the showcase. Of the 51 products, the majority are upcoming game releases - 34 of the 51 products discussed were games that had not been released at the time of the presentation.^{iv} Out of the remaining seventeen products, four announcements were for updates to already released games, three were paid DLC for released and upcoming games, and ten were for non-digital-game products. Nearly half of the announcements were for products which Nintendo had a direct hand in producing, with 22 products being directly affiliated with the brand (all ten non-digital game announcements, all three paid DLC updates, and nine first or second party published Nintendo games, meaning Nintendo owned the studio that developed them - or the IP which the game was centred around).

When discussing this breakdown, we use the term 'product' intentionally to be inclusive of the fact Nintendo has long given attention to non-game releases and reveals. Indeed, almost a fifth of the Direct was dedicated to discussing non-game products, a notable distinction from other publisher presentations. What is also notable are the types of products on display - rather than foregrounding traditional hardware that enhances the gaming experience like speakers and controllers, as Sony's State of Play does, Nintendo's Direct discusses physical replicas of in-game storybooks, offers a lengthy update on physical venues like the Nintendo Museum and mentions the Nintendo Today news app. These announcements are atypical and rarely generate much interest from hardcore Nintendo fans, even from the audience tuning in to watch the Direct live.^v They remain significant, however, in how they reveal insights into the brand image which Nintendo aims to cultivate and which these Directs function as a tool to reinforce.

To trace Nintendo's history back to its early days is to reckon with the legacy of the company as one which began not focused on technology like Sony or Microsoft, but instead on toys. Founded in 1889, Nintendo spent its first several decades distributing playing cards, before expanding into other forms of toys over time (Kinder 1993). In the 1970s, the company began to dip its toes into the digital games market, and quickly became a household fixture after the release of

the Famicom and NES in 1983 and 1985. Notably, when adapting the Famicom into the NES for worldwide release, the company intentionally rebranded it to an entertainment system to differentiate it from the video and computer game market which had recently undergone a historic downturn in the United States.^{vi} This also had the effect of foregrounding the company's history as a toy maker, de-emphasising technological words like 'computer' and 'video' in favour of the toyetic and playful elements of their devices.

While Kinder (1993, p. 90-92) highlights a brief stage where Nintendo became focused on technology — something Arsenault (2017, 100) supports in their reading of Nintendo Power issues published around that time — this focus did not last. In recent years Nintendo's brand identity has since shifted, in response to competition from Microsoft and Sony, towards a return to their roots as a toy and entertainment company. Former Nintendo CEO Satoru Iwata has characterised Nintendo as a "games first" company and stated that "[Nintendo] believe[s] other companies (in the console marketplace) see themselves primarily as technology companies." (Kamen 2015). Shigeru Miyamoto — creator of *Mario*, *Zelda* and multiple other storied Nintendo game series — has also described Nintendo as a "toy company" that "want[s] to retain that product nature of the games that we create so that people can do that and have that experience. To [him] that's something that's very important about entertainment itself" (Nintendo Dream Web 2024).

The Nintendo Direct therefore exemplifies the company's historical origins as a "toy" company which supplements their games with peripheral experiences. This is a unique aspect of Nintendo's brand image relative to the other major game publishers who release videogame hardware. While games consoles might form one part of a larger technological and entertainment business for other companies, Nintendo presents itself as focusing much more meaningfully on the experiences associated with their properties. This clarifies the emphasis on things like museum updates, film announcements and memorabilia relating to their games as Nintendo reaffirming their interest in synergies between different forms of toys and playful experiences. This can also be seen in the aesthetic branding of the Direct, which uses predominantly red and other primary colours alongside playful music and excited narration that emphasises the kid-friendly nature of the company. This is most clearly illustrated in the opening titles for the Direct that show the convergence of a multitude of simple three-dimensional shapes which look like the learning blocks that toddlers play with while upbeat music with a bouncy tempo plays (see figure 1).

Returning to the games, which nonetheless still received the brunt of the Direct's focus, over half of the announcements were for 2025 releases (27) with 19 highlighting 2026 releases and only two products having no release window beyond 'coming soon' — though both of these products ultimately released within six months of the direct.^{vii} This temporal framing arguably acts as an extended promotion of Nintendo's most recent console, the Nintendo Switch 2, that was released in June, with the immediate and future releases sketching out a roadmap of future content for the console. What is also telling is the fact that five of the nine previously unannounced games were first-party or second-party productions, meaning they were games developed by studios — or featuring IP — owned by Nintendo itself. All these games had release dates scheduled within roughly a year from the direct and were framed in a way to appeal to a wide variety of potential consumers who may be otherwise hesitant to pay the steep asking price for the new console.

It is also worth noting that most of these games, alongside all the DLC announced in the presentation, are only available on the Nintendo Switch 2 console. Exclusives have been a consistent pillar of the Nintendo brand, with Shay and Palomba (2020, p. 495) demonstrating that "the brand image of Nintendo's first-party software does have a positive relationship with the perceived quality of Nintendo's console", even when the consoles themselves have underperformed commercially. This reinforces the idea that Nintendo's first-party and second-party software is a key component of their brand image and something which they aim to emphasize in their Directs.^{viii}

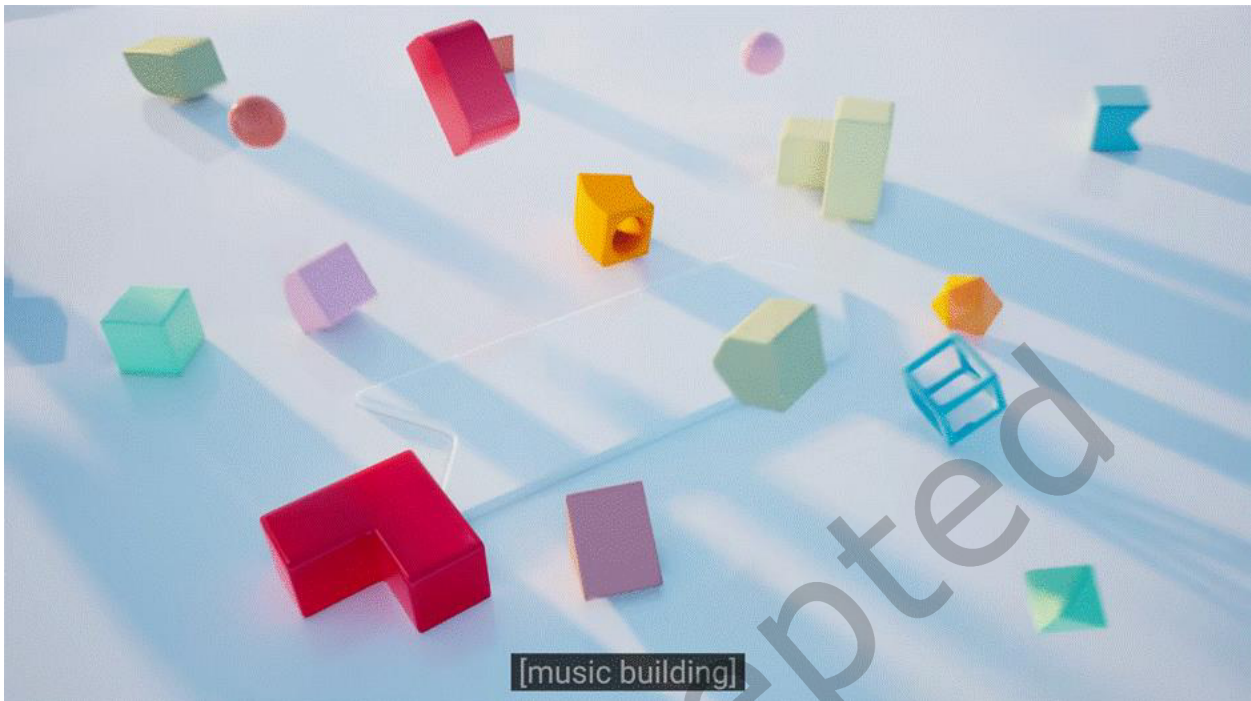


Figure 1: September 2025 Nintendo Direct Opening Animation

This can also be seen through the aesthetic framing of the Direct itself, with announcements central to Nintendo’s branding and IP consistently taking central focus. The most illustrative example involves when the hosts of the show — Shigeru Miyamoto and Yoshiaki Koizumi — appear to deliver addresses to the camera. Out of the 51 announcements, 21 involved direct commentary from Miyamoto or Koizumi mentioning the game or product being showcased. More significantly, all but four were products which had first-party involvement from Nintendo themselves; 16 out of 22 first-party announcements received this direct to camera address, while only 4 out of the 29 other games were given this level of prominence in the Direct, three of which occurred in the same single announcement about recent Resident Evil games being ported to the platform. This positions the first-party content as being of great significance through the Direct’s communication. This rhetoric primes audiences to expect that when Koizumi or Miyamoto appear it is likely because the next reveal is for a product directly related to Nintendo, or for an otherwise large announcement.

This carries through to how other games were showcased. Broadly speaking, there were four ways that gameplay was presented through the Direct: a full trailer, a narrated overview of gameplay, a combination of trailers and narrated gameplay, and a brief snippet of gameplay shown as part of a “headlines” compilation of some upcoming releases with no host narration. Generally, there was a great deal of flexibility in how games were presented — Nintendo’s upcoming games received both trailers devoid of narration (*Metroid Prime 4*, *Fire Emblem: Fortune’s Weave*), a narrated overview of the game (*Mario Tennis Fever*, *Yoshi and the Mysterious Book*) or some combination of both (*Pokemon Pokopia*, *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment*). The one exception is the headline format — a less than two-minute segment that montaged through brief snippets of eight upcoming releases. These games were the only ones not to be explicitly spoken about and named either by the hosts or the narrator. Six of these headlines also did not contain new information about the games, which stands in particular contrast to every other game or product shown during the presentation. We suggest that this is the reason that these games were confined to this brief headline format in that it allows them to serve

as “filler” of sorts that showcases a depth and breadth of games available on Nintendo’s platform, but without taking up time which could instead be devoted to the more consequential first- and second-party games which Nintendo makes a pillar of its brand identity.

While this Nintendo Direct represents the company’s largest to date, in many respects it is quite traditional in its focus on the playful, all-ages experiences that Nintendo has long oriented their brand identity around, and its interest in fostering a walled garden approach of its games exclusives functioning as near-future extensions of their latest hardware. While its lack of archiving livestreamed comments limits our capacity to analyse it in depth, a further point of analysis beyond our current scope is looking at how this brand identity and games shaping promotion is received by fans. Curiously, the general sentiment we identified while watching the livestream of the Direct was decidedly mixed, with fans criticising Nintendo’s greed regarding the perceived abundance of remasters, rereleases, ports, and DLC during the Direct, as well as for recent controversies the company had been involved in regarding patenting game mechanics (Blake 2025). This does suggest a potentially productive disconnect between the games and brand identity Nintendo Directs are encoding, and the way fans are receiving and decoding this promotion that requires further analysis. This suggests that, despite bypassing intermediaries, viewer’s interpretation of brand messaging remains complex and contested. This problematises publisher presentation’s goal of conveying specific brand identities and corporate visions and would be a productive site of future analysis.

Putting this contested sentiment aside, though, we argue that this Direct projects a clear brand identity for Nintendo; one which focuses on the publisher’s nature as toymaker who provides experiences for players in contrast to the normative focus on technology and fidelity that dominates much of the rest of the industry. To do so, the Direct consistently foregrounds the unique first- and second-party game experiences available on Nintendo’s consoles — primarily the recently released Switch 2. Even when third-party games are mentioned, the Direct consistently works to provide examples of how these games will provide unique experiences on Nintendo’s platform or provide exclusive information for fans to get excited about. We suggest all this works to demonstrate how the Nintendo Direct functions as a tool to further cement a specific brand image of Nintendo.

5.2 Sony State of Play

Sony’s State of Play presentations offer a productive point of comparison to Nintendo’s Directs. Sony’s first State of Play was in 2019 and followed Xbox and Nintendo’s moves away from E3 shows and towards their own curated recordings. Since then, approximately 36 States of Play have aired, averaging six per year. We conduct a close analysis of the State of Play that aired in September, 2025. While it was not scheduled to celebrate a particular anniversary in the way Nintendo’s Direct was, it did coincide with the annual Tokyo Games Show (TGS) expo in Japan. This scheduling is likely intentional, allowing Sony to capitalise on the media attention drawn by TGS while still maintaining tight control of their own promotion. We argue that Sony’s September State of Play highlights how the company continues to embrace a focus on technological progression and graphical fidelity while also offering a dual approach between a ‘broadchurch’ of third-party games being promoted and available on the platform alongside curated first-party releases that garner special attention designed to surround them with a sense of prestige, quality and anticipation.

The September State of Play (SoP) was smaller in scope than Nintendo’s, lasting forty minutes and showcasing eighteen games and two devices — PlayStation branded speakers called ‘Pulse Elevate Wireless Speakers’ and a *God of War* 20th anniversary PS5 controller. This also means that, on average, the SoP spent longer on each product than Nintendo — approximately two minutes per product, compared to 1 minute and thirty seconds in the Direct. Of the eighteen games, three were remasters/remakes and two were newly announced DLC. Regarding release dates, only six

(or 30%) products were given 2025 release dates, compared to Nintendo's over 50%, and four games provided no information beyond '2026' or 'in development', which does show how Sony's focus is less on a new console's immediately upcoming slate. The SoP was hosted by Shawne Benson, Sony's global head of third-party titles and Sid Shuman, senior director of global content communication, and contained Sony's conventional branding iconography, such as contrasting black/white/blue and the triangle, x, circle and square signs that accompany their controllers (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Sony's September 2025 State of Play splash page.

We begin with Sony's focus on hardware. As described by former Nintendo CEO Satoru Iwata (Kamen 2015), Sony has long maintained a more explicit focus on videogames and their underpinning technology through their brand identity and corporate vision, and their SoP's tend to embody, both explicitly and implicitly, the logics of the games industry that valorise graphical fidelity and technological 'newness'. As Keogh (2023, 33) describes, the period of the 1980s to the late 2000s, the latter of which Sony emerged as a dominant console maker amidst the rise of the studio-publisher model, "normalised a cultural imagination of the videogame as consumer software driven by innovations in processing power and graphical fidelity, an ever-increasing amount of content and scale, and limited to a finite number of action-centric genres". Players over time have also been conditioned by marketing and journalistic discourse to evaluate games based on "technobabble" and technological literacy rather than aesthetics or actual play experiences (Arsenault 2017, 77). All these logics, to varying extents, appear in Sony's September State of Play (SoP) and articulates how Sony promotes themselves as being deeply aligned with the normative values of the videogame industry that valorise technology, fidelity and scale.

This appears both in specific trailers and recurring details in the SoP more broadly. As an example, a trailer advertising Sony's new speakers is filled with "technobabble" highlighting how their "planar magnetic drivers" and "AI-enhanced noise reduction" allow the product to "elevate your perception". Sony's more expensive and graphically intensive version of the PS5, the PS5 Pro, is also implicitly present throughout much of the stream. Multiple games, including *Battlefield 6*, *Crimson Desert*, *Saros* and *Marvel's Wolverine*, contain footage with small text reading 'captured on PS5 Pro'. Aslinger (2016, 60) describes consoles and console games as typically being associated with "notions of quality in terms of aesthetics, technology and play experience", an association that is core to the marketing appeal of the Pro console highlighted here. Innovation and technological progression are often associated by the industry with better games, and iterative consoles play a key role in this perception. While not explicit, this same underlying narrative remains apparent in Sony's SoP, particularly through many of the games exemplifying a focus on fidelity and photo realistic graphics (see also Galloway 2004).

Perhaps the most overt example of a focus on technology occurs through SoP's concluding focus on *Marvel's Wolverine* from Insomniac Studios, and the accompanying game developer interviews. The following quotes from multiple developers neatly articulates how the game is being promoted ahead of its 2026 release:

"Marcus Smith (Creative Director): It's the full package. This is a level of detail we've never been able to do before.

Jess Reiner-Reed (Project Director): You can see it in the trailer, you can see pores, you can see it in the blood between his teeth - I love the attention to detail.

Marcus: It's exciting that we're going to be able to bring that kind of fidelity to players."

A short period of time is even dedicated to what is described as "blood tech", the underlying graphical systems created to visually represent the blood that appears during gameplay. This focus on fidelity, "blood tech" and *Marvel's Wolverine* receiving pride of place at the end of the showcase as a PlayStation exclusive neatly highlights the types of brand associations PlayStation wishes to leave viewers with - exclusive, visceral and detailed. This also contrasts with the focus of the Nintendo Direct, where discussion of technical benefits were entirely absent from all first-party releases - even when talking about games releasing both on the Nintendo Switch and the more powerful Switch 2 hardware.^{ix} While Sony's State of Play did not explicitly distinguish between how things like "blood tech" work on a PS5 versus a PS5 Pro, the constant reminders of the Pro's technical prowess emphasises their desire to advertise it as technologically superior.

The fact that Sony bookended its SoP with PlayStation 5 exclusives — beginning with *Saros* and ending with *Marvel's Wolverine* — is also revealing in how these games are positioned as extensions of Sony's brand identity and are used as markers of prestige for Sony first-party titles. This is even seen in the accompanying branding - while most games showcased in the SoP receive a concluding splash page with their title and release date, both *Saros* and *Marvel's Wolverine*'s splash page's colours are re-designed to echo the aesthetics of each game — quite literally marrying Sony's branding with each title and ensuring they stand out amidst the third-party releases (see figure 3). Sony's privileging of first-party titles in their SoP is not abnormal, and is modest relative to Nintendo, but we argue that their positioning in the SoP, alongside their embodiment of key games industry values such as graphical fidelity and action, suggests Sony utilises first-party titles as markers of prestige and significance. It recalls prestige associations found alongside other media brands like HBO's "Home Box Office" or Annapurna Interactive's "boutique indie" marketing (Parker and Ruffino 2020). Both brands seek to characterise their involvement as a "seal of quality", not dissimilarly to how Sony positions their first-party releases.

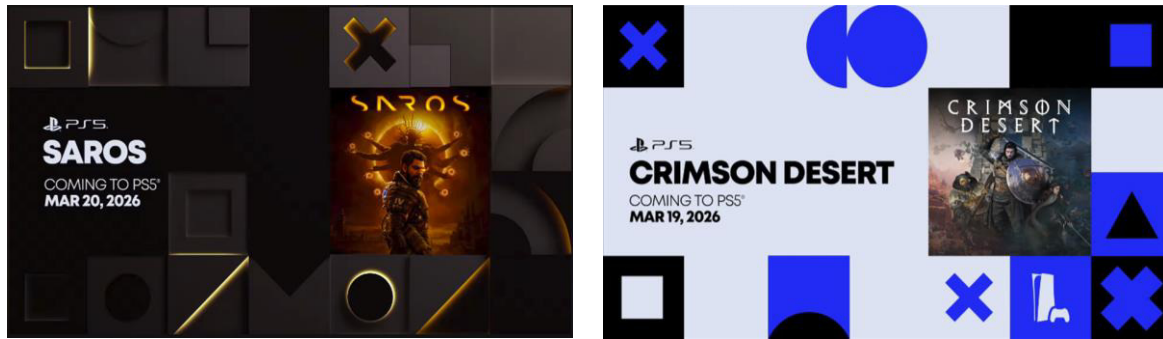


Figure 3. Sony's September 2025 *Saros* splash page alongside the splash page for non-exclusive *Crimson Desert*.

In contrast with Nintendo, however, Sony tends to complement their first-party offerings much more strongly with a broadchurched approach to games on their platforms. Indeed, *Saros* and *Marvel's Wolverine* are the sole PlayStation exclusives and first-party titles in the lineup, with the rest of the SoP including a wide array of other publishers and studios, including one from competitor Microsoft in the form of *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2024's* (Asobo Studios 2024) PS5 launch reveal. In this way, Sony is arguably a more traditional games publisher than Nintendo, given their desire to highlight games that are available elsewhere but supposedly 'play best' on PlayStation hardware. The publisher seeks to position themselves as valuing and foregrounding third-party relationships; this is also visible through the inclusion of global head of third-party portfolio Shawne Benson and even the mention of a different publisher, Koei Tecmo Games, within the presentation itself. Given the SoP coincided with the 2025 Tokyo Games Show, it is also notable that seven of the eighteen showcased games were from Japanese studios, with many like *Final Fantasy Tactics: The Ivalice Chronicles*, *Let it Die: Inferno* and *Chronoscript: The Endless End* also including introductions from developers. This reflects Sony, and much of the games industry generally, as inherently global (Huntemann & Aslinger 2016; Kerr 2017), and deeply interwoven with various national and international production contexts through their third-party relationships.

Sony's State of Play therefore balances multiple different interests, all of which work to reinforce the perception of them as a leader in the normative values surrounding the games industry. In presenting a broadchurched of non-exclusive ports and reveals which are shown to run particularly well on the PS5 Pro, Sony valorises the technical performance of their console and shows that they are the destination for players interested in high-fidelity and performance experiences. This is further supported by the first-party games showcased; while they take up less of the showcase compared to Nintendo's offerings, we argue the time and special attention provided to games from "PlayStation Studios" developers seeks to imbue them with a particular degree of prestige and quality. Like Nintendo, the SoP also seeks to elicit a sense of 'newness' — indeed, almost every game showcased involved some sort of reveal, whether that be gameplay, of the game itself, a release date or more. While Sony's approach is similar, if more diffused, to Nintendo overall, Sony is also far more explicit in embodying hegemonic notions of games culture regarding a focus on graphical fidelity and technological rhetorics compared to Nintendo's play-first brand identity.

5.3 Devolver Direct

The final presentation chosen for analysis — Devolver Digital's 2020 Devolver Direct — differs in many ways from the Nintendo Direct or State of Play discussed above. Not only is it a historical presentation from 2020 but the publisher featured, Devolver Digital, is far smaller than Nintendo and Sony. Devolver is an independent publisher that specialises in the release of independent games with no hardware and minimal development studios of their own.^x Devolver is also

particularly notable for the countercultural image it projects through its marketing and public relations. Vanderhoef (2020, 32-33) analyses Devolver's brand image and concludes that "their outsider rebel branding strategies, and its enactment of an ironic retrograde masculinity, suggest that not only does the company not oppose the logics of neoliberalism that undergird the dominant video game industry but they also reproduce, rather than repudiate, toxic forms of masculinity present in dominant circles of gaming cultures — albeit this reproduction manifests as an alternative, ironic masculinity." We therefore argue that, in contrast with Sony and Nintendo, Devolver attempts to distance themselves from the broader games industry and cultivates a seemingly countercultural brand image, but nonetheless ends up reproducing many of the business logics and hallmarks of gaming culture they supposedly seek to avoid, including the use of publisher presentations as promotional paratexts to cultivate a specific brand image in the public eye.

Vanderhoef supports these claims, in part through analysis of Devolver's previous E3 presentations; the 'Big Fancy Press Conference' events hosted by Devolver's fictional 'Chief Synergy Officer' called Nina Struthers. According to Vanderhoef (2020) in these press conferences:

Devolver approaches its role as a game publisher with the sneer of a court jester, treating each promotional opportunity with a duality of sardonic infiltration and business acumen... it again deconstruct[s] industry tropes in a ploy to perform its own superiority and reinforce its distance from traditional corporate practices. (26)

It is this context that informs the 2020 Devolver Direct which, in many ways, serves as a culmination of the publisher's seemingly countercultural publishing strategy and the culmination of an ongoing narrative built around Nina Struthers in these conferences. Presented not as a live showcase but as a pre-recorded Devolver Direct, the show not only directly satirises the branding of Nintendo's Directs in both its name and its graphical presentation (see figure 4), it also includes frequent narrative cutaways to a frame story that provides explicit metacommentary on the nature of game marketing past, present, and (at the time) future. We argue that, while this presentation positions itself as a knowing subversion of the traditional publisher presentation format, both the presentation and associated free game *Devolverland Expo* reiterate Vanderhoef's (2020) claims that Devolver's brand identity is a facade. Devolver Digital uses these presentations the same way that traditional publishers do; to establish a unique — in this case, aesthetically countercultural — brand identity for the publisher to excite and entice audiences.

When examining the statistics of the Devolver Direct, clear differences in the format and content of the presentation immediately appear. In contrast to the fifty-one and twenty products in the Nintendo and Sony presentations respectively, this showcase only features six genuine games (*Shadow Warrior 3*, *Fall Guys*, *Carrion*, *Olija*, *Serious Sam 4*, and *Devolverland Expo* — which also included separate advertisements for *Weird West* and *Blightbound*). These games were the focus of approximately a third of the showcase, with the remaining time split between joke announcements for games like "Getting Down With Bennett Foddy" and the narrative frame which made up the bulk of the show. The show contains no references to non-game products like hardware as other more recent showcases do, though it did feature one seemingly legitimate advertisement for an indie game company hiring prospective developers. Given its prominence, the bulk of this our analysis will be dedicated to examining the narrative and meta-commentary of the Direct, through comparison with our previous case studies.

The presentation's narrative framing — which, it should be noted, bears an aesthetic resemblance to the hypermasculine action films of the 90s which Vanderhoef points to being a key part of the publisher's identity — involves Struthers being forced to host endless presentations against her will at the behest of corporate villain Linda Masters. Masters serves as a cynical representation of the corporate marketing these presentations embody in how she proclaims that hype for games is more important than the games themselves, going so far as to pressure real developers

into announcing fake games which they have no intention of releasing in a satirical cutaway. In contrast to Masters' embodiment of corporate greed, the protagonists of the presentation hope to free Struthers using "Devolverland", a supposed antidote to "the rise of hype over games". One of the protagonists comments that while the Direct is "just words and hype... [Devolverland] is bigger than hype. It's real." The presentation also includes copious references to current and recent events in the gaming industry, demonstrating the publisher's "gamer capital" with jokes about other publishers like Ubisoft and Konami to reinforce their irreverent, counterculture image.



Figure 4. Devolver Direct's opening title.

Most interestingly, the Direct explicitly calls out the demise of the traditional E3 presentation format and the rise of the online presentation format. While the Direct was made during the pandemic — the first year since 1996 to not have an in-person E3 — it was not yet known that 2019's E3 would be the last in-person E3 before its demise in the following years. Nevertheless, the plot directly comments on the fact that E3 has become obsolete — with Masters at one point claiming indifference to the absence of E3 that year as "The future's... in super targeted high concept digital showcases, and we're already all the way on top of that."

There is an inherent tension in 2020's Devolver Direct, however. While it regularly lampoons the tropes of publisher presentations, it nonetheless still functions within the expectations of one, and contains half a dozen announcements, including five game reveals and even an advertisement for job openings at a small studio in Canada. While the segment highlighting *Carrion* may be hosted by a puppet representing the monster at the heart of the game who adopts the personality of a temperamental diva, this merely serves as a frame for a genuine announcement of the game's release date. This announcement also features a cameo with then-Xbox boss Phil Spencer, showing a willingness to use the recognisable industry talent like other showcases do, even as the narrative frame of the showcase mocks the corporate nature of those same showcases. Similarly, the trend of announcing which games will appear in showcases is both

mocked and encapsulated in the gameplay reveal of *Shadow Warrior 3* which had itself been announced as appearing in the presentation ahead of time.

This means that, despite its satirical, countercultural framing, the Devolver Direct still serves the same purposes as the presentations it lampoons. At the end of the presentation, Struthers breaks free and berates the audience for unthinkingly buying into the hype culture embodied by the presentation and claims that the audience “deserves better”. Better in this case, is *Devolverland Expo*, a free downloadable “first person marketing simulator” that “takes all of the in your face stink and discomfort, pomp and circumstance of a high rent crowded convention hall... and packs it all up into what we really, really, really should be interested in anyway. An actual playable videogame.” Notably, this “actual playable videogame” is a short half-hour experience that serves as simply another form of advertisement, which has players exploring an abandoned recreation of the LA Convention Centre that hosted E3, using rudimentary stealth and shooter mechanics to navigate through multiple booths showcasing Devolver’s upcoming releases where they can watch trailers for these games and find hidden collectables teasing unannounced Devolver games. While some games in *Devolverland* were not featured in the Direct like *Weird West* (2022), others replicate the promotional materials from the presentation exactly; the booth for *Shadow Warrior 3* for example allows the player to watch the exact gameplay trailer which opened the Devolver Direct.

Devolverland therefore serves the same purpose as the Direct, just within different framing. While the Direct situates the publisher presentation as a vehicle for excessive hype and unrealistic expectations, and the Expo experience focuses on delivering trailers through the novel format of a playable experience, both remain focused on marketing Devolver’s games to discerning audiences or players. Even if the real games being advertised only took up a third of the presentation’s time, the presentation still served as a legitimate marketing tool for Devolver’s upcoming games. The smaller number of games being focused on here should not be read as an inherent rejection of the sheer quantity of announcements these presentations are known for. Instead, it indicates the small scale of Devolver as a publisher relative to companies like Nintendo and Sony who have their own consoles and game distribution platforms. Indeed, Devolver ultimately published eight games in 2020, which is the same number of games showcased when taking into account games showcased both in the Direct and in *Devolverland Expo*.^{xi} In this way, it is clear that Devolver’s anti-corporate rhetoric should be read as nothing more than a framing device; the underlying business rhetoric of the advertisements in the Direct are extremely familiar when compared to other publisher presentations and the framing device is itself simply a novel way of portraying a specific brand image.

Furthermore, while the narrative of the Direct may rail against the excessive amount of publisher presentations which have come to dominate games promotion, Devolver Digital itself continues to create irreverent publisher presentations — albeit disconnected from the meta-narrative which concluded this direct. In doing so, Devolver proves Vanderhoef’s (2020, 18) claims that, in the ideology of companies like Devolver, “entrepreneurial language is often obscured and replaced with the language of rebellion, authenticity, and alternative cultural production.” Despite the aesthetic differences, Devolver’s continued use of the publisher presentation format shows a subservience to the neoliberal ideals embedded in the formalised conception of the videogame industry. Devolver Direct is therefore emblematic of two key points — that publisher presentations have become such a prolific form of videogame promotion that they have their own tropes ripe for spoofing, and that they nonetheless remain effective and arguably the dominant form of macro games advertising for major and minor games publishers.

6 CONCLUSION

This article has explored the increasing prominence of ‘publisher presentations’ — online streams where game publishers, notably Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo but also smaller publishers like Devolver Digital, showcase their upcoming products directly to consumers. While these presentations have their origins in the history of trade shows like E3, they have grown to become a dominant form of game marketing over the past decade, outliving E3 and emerging as their own format. We argue that these digital publisher presentations are best conceptualised as paratexts that serve an important role in promoting the corporate visions of game publishers. As we have highlighted, publisher presentations are an important yet understudied form of gaming paratexts as they allow us to critically reflect on how games are promoted, and the underlying publisher brand identities they perpetuate. We have also highlighted what we believe are the key characteristics of the present format of the publisher presentation genre, though we acknowledge that this format is likely to continue to grow and evolve. Future research is needed to properly examine the future trajectory of the format, as we have primarily focused on clarifying what the format is and has been historically.

To showcase how publisher presentations are currently used, we conducted a close analysis of a Nintendo Direct, Sony State of Play and a Devolver Direct. Our findings here show how all three presentations are used to affirm the publisher’s brand identity, though all three do so in different ways. The Nintendo Direct uses hosts — a key pillar of the publisher presentation format — to anchor the large announcements directly associated with Nintendo’s brand that reaffirm their identity as a playful toy company in the gaming industry. Other announcements in the Direct affirm the unique features of their Switch 2 console, with almost every portion of the direct providing some new or exclusive information designed to prompt Switch 2 owner’s interests. Sony’s State of Play, meanwhile, emphasises Sony’s brand identity of both fostering important third-party relationships while also being a prestige publisher known for high quality first-party single player narrative games such as *Saros* and *Wolverine*. The State of Play also affirms hegemonic notions of games culture, such as an emphasis on graphical and technical fidelity. Finally, Devolver is a smaller publisher relative to Nintendo and Sony and their presentation leans into this, parodying the tropes of publisher presentations to portray Devolver as a counter-cultural publisher who prioritises quality game experiences over spin and hype. Nevertheless, our analysis revealed that this is mostly an aesthetic frame - underneath the parody, Devolver’s Direct follows many of the tropes of publisher presentations and also serves as a legitimate advertising product for several of their then upcoming releases.

In examining these three publisher presentations, we have highlighted how each embodies the logics of their associated publishers, shapes the presentation of their games in key ways and conveys a distinct brand and promotional image to consumers and journalists. In doing so, we argue that publisher presentations are an important tool in the marketing strategies of these publishers that represent fundamental shifts in the games industry away from intermediaries and towards platforms, curated brand identities and direct consumer targeting.

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ⁱ Some exceptions to this exist. Recent examples include Nintendo releasing two Nintendo Directs in 2025 dedicated to expanding on the then upcoming release of *Kirby Air Riders*, and Sony Interactive Entertainment's State of Play presentations focused entirely on *Borderlands 4*, or *Ghost of Yotei*.

ⁱⁱ Exceptions include Nintendo's smaller Nintendo Direct Mini and Partner Showcase presentations which may have a host voiceover transitioning between announcements but no physical host.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the time between the initial drafting of this article and final review, Spencer and Sarah Bond have departed from Xbox, with the current leadership team consisting of Booty and incoming Executive Vice President and CEO of Microsoft Gaming Asha Sharma. No Developer Direct or Xbox Showcases have been announced or aired under this new leadership regime at the time of writing.

^{iv} Three of these thirty four games were announced to be releasing later that day - a practice often referred to as a "shadow-drop", while ten of the games announced or showcased were either remakes or remasters of previously released games, or ports of previously released games to Nintendo consoles.

^v Unfortunately, specific reactions in the chat of the Direct livestream have not been archived on Nintendo's accounts on Twitch or YouTube, though both authors did watch the initial broadcast live and make a few notes around the general tenor of chat. A possible reason for the lack of archiving is that the chat itself malfunctioned partway through the livestream; for an extended period no new messages were able to be sent.

^{vi} This is evident in the naming of the console - Famicom stood for Family Computer while NES is an acronym for Nintendo Entertainment System.

^{vii} Three products did not have applicable release dates: the museum updates, the Kyoto marathon announcement, and a reminder about the already existing Nintendo Today App.

^{viii} Also notable is the way Nintendo intentionally blurs the line between first-party games (developed by internal studios) and second-party games (developed by outside studios exclusively for Nintendo and featuring Nintendo owned IP). This is an intentional move by Nintendo to keep focus on the broader brand rather than the specific developers, as in recent years they have neglected to even reveal who is developing certain games. For example, *Tomodachi Life: Living The Dream* was mentioned in this Direct and three weeks before launch the developer for the games was still unannounced. A deeper analysis of this approach would be worthwhile, but falls outside the scope of this research.

^{ix} It also contrasts with Nintendo's more family friendly and toyetic image we argue they focus on in their direct; notably while the Nintendo Direct previewed a collection of infamously gory games in the *Mortal Kombat: Legacy Collection* it avoided showing any gameplay containing blood or gore.

^x Since 2020, Devolver has purchased several developers including Croteam, developers of *Serious Sam 4* (2020) which is featured in the 2020 Direct.

^{xi} It should be noted that not all eight games showcased were released in 2020 - some games had released prior to the Direct while other games shown in the Direct or *Devolverland Expo* were released in 2021 or 2022.