

E3 gains publicity by letting in video game fans for the first time

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Evan Thorogood, better known in video gaming circles as Raceboy77, has been on a tweeting rampage since he landed in Los Angeles to attend E3.

"Going to E3 has been one of my dreams since I was a kid," said Thorogood, who tweeted a picture of the Xbox goody bag filled with candy waiting for him in his complimentary hotel room, his snap of a ticket to the Xbox news conference and the selfie he took on the way to the Los Angeles Convention Center hash-tagged #XboxE3 and #Epic.

Until this year, the 22-year-old from Alberta, Canada, was shut off from the gaming industry's most important annual event, which for its first 19 years had been closed to the public. Only journalists, industry officials and investors were allowed to attend, relegating hardcore [fans](#) like Thorogood to follow updates online.

But convention organizers and game companies are recognizing the power of their fans to promote the \$22 billion industry with an authentic voice. So for the first time, organizers are allowing up to 5,000 fans into the three-day convention, which kicked off Tuesday, with the hope that their followings on social media will amplify the expo's reach.

"It's another way to get the word out," said Rich Taylor, senior vice president of communications and industry affairs for E3's organizer, the Entertainment Software Assn. "Opening the doors to a group of energized fans creates more awareness."

The evolution underscores E3's transformation from an event largely focused on inking orders from retailers to more of a publicity extravaganza highlighted by splashy announcements of new games.

"E3 has changed from a place to go buy games to much more of an annual celebration of the industry where you can get free press," said Mike Vorhaus, president of media research and consulting firm Magid Advisors.

Tickets are not available to the public (a three-day pass for exhibitors costs \$995). Instead, fans were selected by exhibitors, who were allotted a certain number of tickets by E3 organizers. Exhibitors who paid for more floor space on the convention floor received more tickets for fans, Taylor said.

Siblings Domonic Moran and Destiny Moran of Santa Fe Springs, Calif., had no idea that fans were being allowed into E3 for the first time. They had always dreamed of attending, and couldn't believe their luck when they won tickets Sunday to the convention merely by standing outside the Nintendo World Championships gaming competition at the Microsoft Theater at L.A. Live.

The first 50 in line got passes from Nintendo, 25-year-old Domonic Moran said, "and we got there at 4 a.m."

His sister was so ecstatic she quit her job as a Sears salesclerk rather than explain to her boss why she needed three days off.

"I knew they wouldn't understand if I said 'E3,'" said Destiny Moran, 18. "They would have still made me come in."

The two brought a small video camera to capture their time at the convention. They plan on uploading the footage to their new YouTube

channel, NintendoInTime.

Another factor driving the change is that gaming companies rarely wait until E3 to showcase games to major buyers like GameStop or Wal-Mart anymore. Instead, they give buyers exclusive looks well in advance, which has opened up the opportunity to devote part of the convention to appealing to the people who play the games, instead of the companies that sell them.

"It doesn't mean E3 is not important," said Pete Hines, vice president of public relations and marketing for Bethesda Softworks, a Rockville, Md., game maker behind popular titles such as "Doom" and "Fallout." "At the end of the day, publishing games is a process. This event is one step in the path."

E3 started in the basement of the International Consumer Electronics Show in 1995, when there was no trade show strictly focused on video gaming. CES itself has been rethinking its purpose, particularly as many of the largest tech companies have sat out to avoid being overshadowed by all of the news coming out of the massive Las Vegas tech gathering.

In recent years, E3 has downsized after reaching 70,000 attendees in 2005 and exhibitors began fearing the event was getting too crowded. The convention had just 10,000 attendees in 2007 and was briefly held in Santa Monica, Calif.

But the convention is ramping up once again, with an estimated 48,000 people expected to attend this week. This year's show is highlighting new technologies such as virtual and augmented reality, live-streaming platforms and mobile games.

With eager fans roaming the expansive trade show floor, gaming companies have designed their booths to draw attention. Bethesda

decorated its floor space with statues of characters from "Battlecry," a multiplayer action game, and equipment from first-person shooter "Doom" to maximize the Instagram pictures and Facebook posts that they expected attendees would post on [social media](#).

"Now it's all about getting the word out there," said Jake Strouckel, a spokesman for Performance Designed Products, a Burbank, Calif., gaming accessory maker. "It's all about just shouting it from the rooftop."

The strategy by E3 organizers follows the lead of developers, who have long invited fans and gamers to their pre-convention news conferences to spur enthusiasm. Electronic Arts, for example, invited hundreds of high school and college students to its media briefing Monday.

"They like having the fans amp the floor up," Vorhaus said. "So at press conferences you have people screaming, applauding, ooing and aahing."

The atmosphere is not unlike Comic-Con with actors dressed as zombies, and "Star Wars" Stormtroopers and a Mario brother walking the floor and posing for pictures.

Thorogood was invited to E3 by Turn 10 Studios, which produces his favorite "Forza" motorsports video games. Xbox, which is owned by Microsoft, paid for his flight to L.A. and put him up at the Sheraton downtown.

"My dad used to say I should get out of the basement," Thorogood said about where he spends hours gaming. "Now he realizes it's a huge deal."

David Young, assistant manager of public relations for Nintendo, said such fans are the company's sweet spot.

"This year we have been doing a lot more things with YouTubers across our YouTube channel," Young said. "We have a lot of followers in that area so we brought in a lot of those folks."

The introduction of fans might change a longstanding tradition on the last day of the convention. That's when attendees like Vorhaus have handed out their badges to young fans waiting outside the event, hoping to get in.

"We always did it with a wink and a nod," Vorhaus said.

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