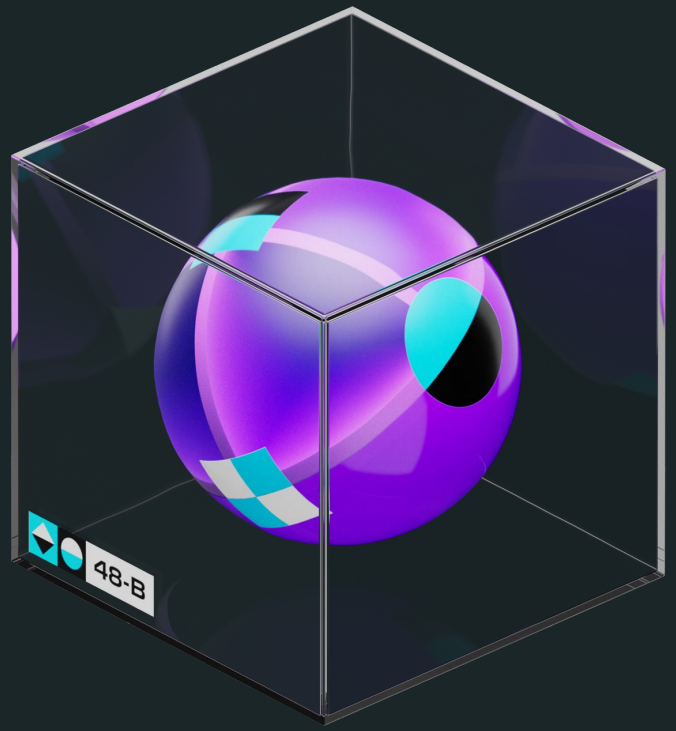
The hybrid strategy behind modern PC game publishing

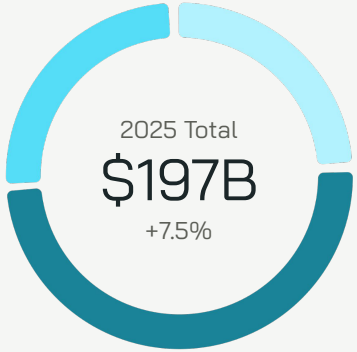


2026

Intro

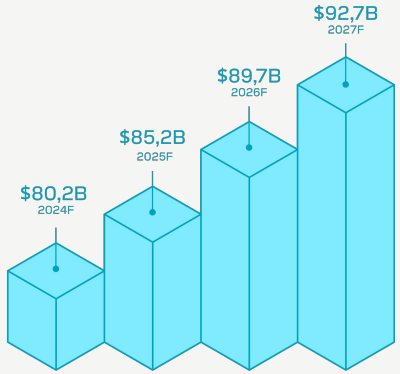
By the end of 2025, the global games industry generated $197 billion, with PC accounting for about $43 billion, up 10.4% year-over-year. More than 936 million people worldwide now play on PC, and a large share of them use Steam. The platform accounts for roughly 60-65% of all global PC game sales and claims a 30% share of every dollar earned.

*Newzoo Global Games Market Report, November 2025



- $43B PC (+10.4% YoY)
- $45B Consoles (+4.2% YoY)
- $108B Mobile (+7.7% YoY)

PC and console software revenues in billion USD Global | 2015-2027F*



Yet, beneath that success, a shift is underway. Developers are rethinking how they sell games, realizing that distribution is not a one-lane road. Selling directly to players through owned websites or launchers is becoming a strategic move in owning the relationship with your audience.

From this document, you'll learn how PC game developers can sell their games outside traditional platforms while respecting platform guidelines — building direct-to-consumer stores that diversify distribution, reduce platform fees, and strengthen audience ownership.

Why selling directly to players matters

Selling your games directly to players isn’t about abandoning traditional platforms.

Many publishers consider this a strategic move. On third-party stores, player engagement belongs to the platform, not your brand. A D2C channel lets you maintain communication, deliver updates, and build loyalty within your own ecosystem — giving developers a direct line to re-engage their community with new content and announcements.

A hybrid model, where Steam provides scale and direct sales provide ownership, is rapidly becoming the future of PC publishing.

For Xsolla partners, shifting even 10% of transactions to a D2C channel can be enough to cover operational costs and start generating returns.

When studios add a direct-to-player channel, they:

- keep up to 25% more of each sale
- gain an ability to launch pre-orders with a clear conversion rate from ads into a purchase
- gain access to new payment methods
- gain full marketing funnel visibility to understand your audience's behavior and which channels convert better

"But what if selling outside Steam hurts our visibility?"

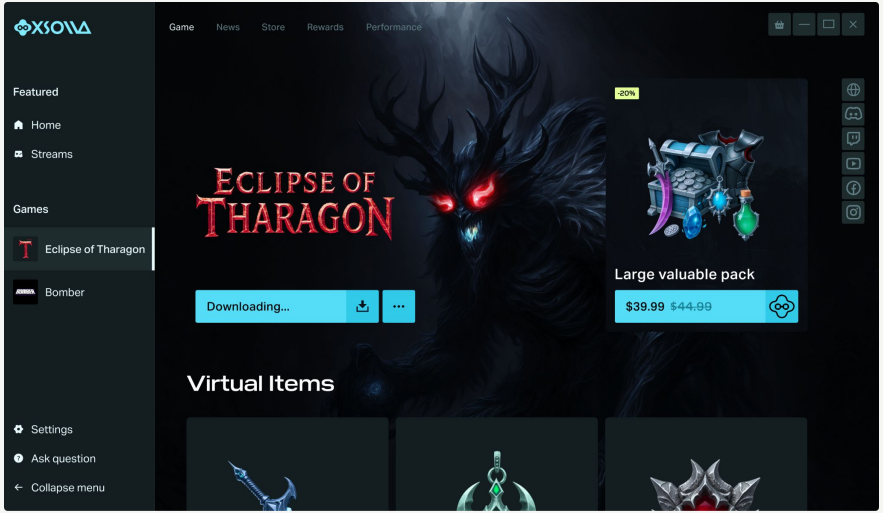
This digest is intended for general informational purposes only. It provides a summary of publicly available Steam documentation, supplemented by insights from Xsolla partners' experience. Xsolla is not affiliated with or endorsed by Valve Corporation or Steam.

Myth: “Selling a game directly might penalize it on Steam”

Many developers hesitate to sell directly because of misconceptions about Steam’s rules. It is reasonable to assume that Valve designed its policies to protect fairness, not to block external commerce. First, we'll review some general platform "do's and don'ts".

Selling outside Steam is common practice, and Steam's own documentation supports it. Developers can request keys and sell them through external stores, bundles, or retail editions. The key principles are fairness and transparency. Keep your prices consistent, distribute keys responsibly, and deliver them only after official release. When done right, direct sales and Steam can coexist smoothly.

Now, let's clarify the most common Steam myths and what they truly mean in practice.



Check the official Steam guidelines on key sales for more details.

Myth: “Selling a game directly might penalize it on Steam”

What you’re allowed to do

- Sell Steam keys on your own D2C store
- Sell Steam keys through trusted partners
- Sell DRM-free versions of the game directly
- Offer pre-orders or bundles that include Steam keys
- Provide limited free keys for press, influencers, etc. (⩽ 100)
- Sell via retail or physical editions

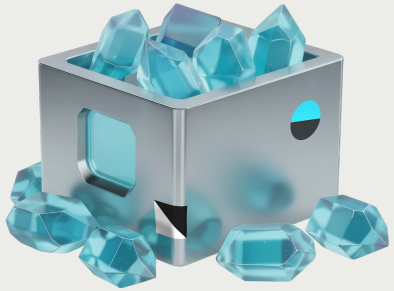
What’s not allowed

- You cannot consistently price a game lower or run deeper/more frequent discounts than you do on Steam.
- Don’t offer special items or DLC in Steam keys that aren’t available on Steam.
- Don’t sell keys to resellers or grey-market sites.
- Deliver or activate Steam keys before the official Steam release date.

The truth → **selling your game outside Steam is allowed, and plenty of developers already do it** (source)

Market-observed practices:

- Keep pricing fair and transparent.
- Deliver Steam keys only on release day across all distribution channels.
- Notify Steam about drop-offs and large discounts before you start.

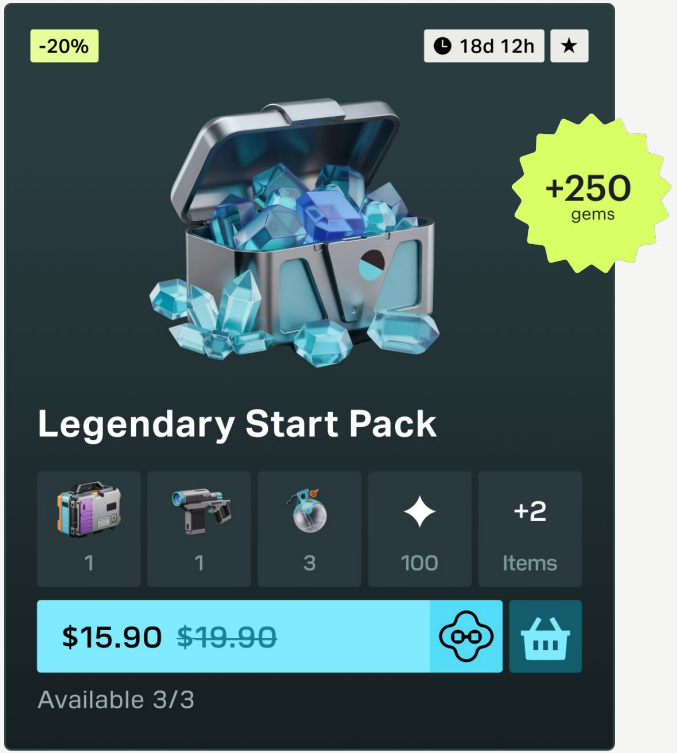


Price parity — the key to balancing game sales across platforms

Price parity matters, but flexibility also exists. It is reasonable to assume that Steam's focus is on fair pricing, not blocking short-term promos or value-added offers. Pre-launch discounts or web-exclusive bundles are common in the market, as long as comparable deals appear on Steam later.

A lower-risk approach based on publicly available guidelines: **add value rather than cut prices.**

Many publishers include soundtracks, artbooks, or loyalty rewards that don't affect gameplay balance. It's also common to bundle games with DLCs, other games, or game upgrades.



Check the official Steam guidelines for more details.

What you're allowed to do

- Run off-Steam discounts or promotions if you mirror them on Steam within a reasonable time.
- Many publishers offer exclusive bonuses like soundtracks, artbooks or free cosmetics or comics — as long as they don't create gameplay advantages.
- Sell game bundles — considering price and material parity
- Use regional or timed offers consistent with Valve's regional pricing tiers.

What's not allowed

- Don't sell your game less expensively on your site long-term without matching the discount on Steam.
- Don't offer gameplay advantages or exclusive in-game items unavailable to Steam players.
- Don't include external payment links or "buy here" buttons in your Steam build.
- Don't manipulate pricing with constant "sales", as Steam tracks fairness and may limit visibility or key requests.

The truth → **There's no indication Steam penalizes developers for offering discounts, bundles, or exclusive value outside their store, as long as pricing stays aligned.**

Market-observed practices:

- Add value through bundles, bonus content or cosmetics instead of lowering prices.
- Run short D2C discounts ahead of Steam campaigns to test pricing and messaging — but ensure any identical discounts are reflected on Steam when campaigns go live.
- Be transparent with players about where they're buying and what they're getting.

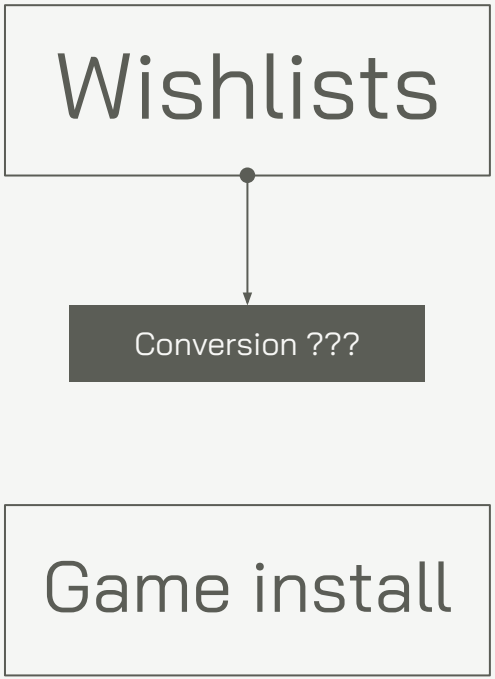
Check the official Steam guidelines for more details.

The wishlist myth

Many developers fear that pre-sales will cannibalize their wishlists and hurt visibility on Steam — but the data suggests this fear is overstated.

Conversion from wishlists to sales is not a stable or universal metric; it depends on a game price, brand strength, release timing, quality of marketing campaigns, virality, seasonality, and competing releases within the same window.

According to GameDiscoverCo's "State of Steam Wishlist Conversions", the ratio of wishlists at launch to week-one sales varies by 10-20×, not by 10-20%. And since week-one sales include both wishlist and organic purchases, the true conversion impact is impossible to isolate — making wishlists a weak predictor of real sales performance.



Do pre-orders outside Steam hurt wishlist counts and visibility?

Wishlists are often seen as the main barrier to early key sales, but that’s misleading.

The top wishlist charts require massive numbers, so even a few (tens of) thousand direct pre-orders are unlikely to move the needle on Steam's charts.

GameDiscoverCo analyses from 2023-2025 show that games hitting Steam’s “Popular Upcoming” tab often have 30k-50k wishlists, while Top 10 “Most Wishlisted” titles are usually in the hundreds of thousands range.

Since there’s no reliable benchmark for wishlist conversion, consider prioritizing early sales from your core audience while using wishlist campaigns to reach new players.

#	Name	%	Price	Rating	Release	Follows	7d Gain
1.	Subnautica 2		—	—	2026	234,869	+1,410
2.	Deadlock		—	—	TBA	322,987	+1,097
3.	Light No Fire		—	—	TBA	205,847	+1,270
4.	Resident Evil Requiem		$69.99	—	Feb 2026	86,420	+1,327
5.	Kingmakers		—	—	Soon	92,049	+260
6.	Slay the Spire 2		—	—	Mar 2026	68,333	+274
7.	Blight: Survival		—	—	TBA	123,179	+336
8.	ARK 2		—	—	TBA	141,009	+49
9.	Unrecord		—	—	TBA	132,293	+147
10.	Half Sword		—	—	2025	76,736	+970
11.	Heroes of Might and Magic: Olden Era		—	—	2026	120,172	+875
12.	Witchbrook		—	—	2026	87,627	+448
13.	Quarantine Zone: The Last Check		—	—	2025	55,036	+397

Xsolla x Techland study: Dying Light 2 pre-sale

Request

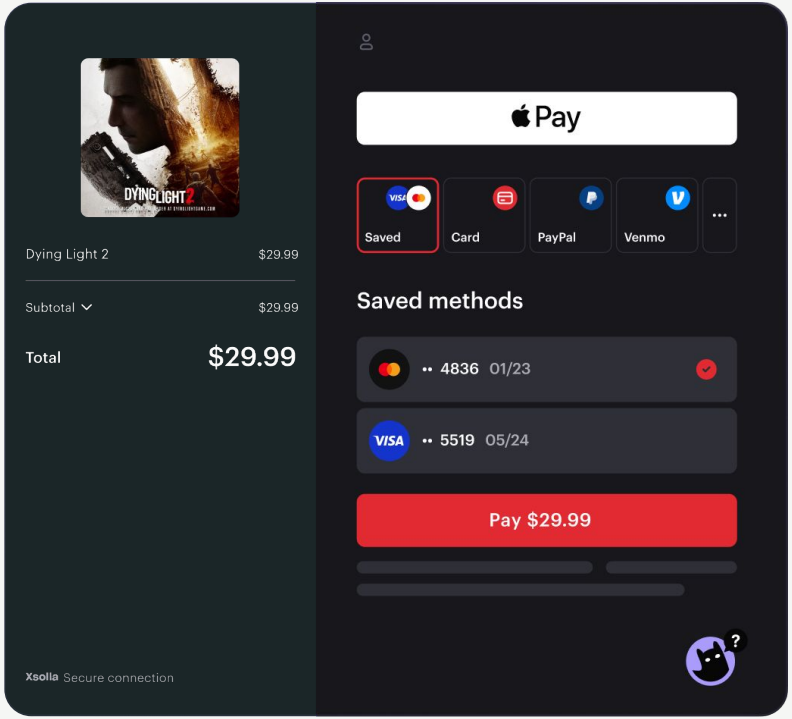
Techland wanted to sell games and pre-orders directly to their players.

Solution

Xsolla built a custom-branded online web store with multiple features.

Result

The website pre-order campaign for Dying Light 2 generated 6% of overall sales, with a conversion rate of 11.8%.



This success was due in part to the availability of localized payment methods at checkout unavailable on Steam.

Myth: “Selling directly will cannibalize my Steam sales”

For medium-sized and large publishers, data shows the opposite. Games that combine Steam and direct-to-player activity see higher total revenue and stronger community engagement.

Games with pre-orders advertised across Steam and external platforms saw 177% average sales growth vs. 38.5% for Steam-only campaigns*. In many cases, a direct sales presence complement rather than divide your reach. Steam remains the marketplace for discovery; your store becomes the home for loyal players.

If you’re an indie developer without an established community, launching your first title, and lacking resources to distribute across multiple stores, focusing on Steam as your main platform is a solid approach.

According to 2024 Data40 research, games marketed across both Steam and external platforms saw significantly higher first-week sales growth than those promoted exclusively on Steam.

*Data40, "Review of Steam algorithms connected with sales outside of Steam," November 2024

“Selling in-game items or currency outside Steam breaks the rules.”	Valve’s rule is simple: transactions inside the Steam client must use Steam Wallet. Purchases made elsewhere can use any payment system you choose. According to current documentation, developers may offer items, downloadable content, or currency when selling directly to your community, as long as Steam users are not redirected outside the client to pay. Many major games like Path of Exile, Warframe, and Genshin Impact already do this successfully, maintaining compliance while expanding revenue.
“Pre-orders or early access outside Steam are forbidden.”	Pre-orders through your own site or a trusted partner are standard practice. The only limitation is timing: you may not deliver or activate Steam keys before the official release. Distribute keys only on launch day.
“Cross-platform accounts violate Steam’s terms.”	Valve allows shared accounts, cross-progression, and synced inventories across devices. You simply need to ensure that pricing and access are fair across platforms and process Steam purchases through the Steam Wallet when applicable. Cross-platform play and progression are now standard industry practice and widely supported.
“Valve will punish me for advertising my direct-to-player store.”	Steam's restrictions apply inside its own ecosystem. You cannot add purchase links to your Steam build or store page. Outside of Steam, on your website, socials, or newsletters, you may promote your own store, campaigns, and bundles. In fact, smart external marketing often helps Steam's visibility by driving buzz and wishlist growth.

Your own D2C web store: do's and don'ts*

Selling games outside Steam through your own website.	✔	Must follow pricing and fairness rules.
Running early access or pre-order campaigns on your own store before Steam	✔	Allowed when a comparable Steam campaign follows soon after launch.
Running temporary discounts outside Steam if mirrored on Steam soon after.	✔	Allowed if part of a coordinated or time-aligned campaign.
Offer lower prices for the same product outside Steam.	✖	Considered undercutting may lead to penalties or loss of key access.
Offer purchases outside Steam for Steam players (e.g., upsells, DLC, currency).	✖	Violates Steam ToS; all purchases for Steam users must go through Steam.
Implement alternative payment methods inside the Steam version.	✖	Violates Steam ToS; all purchases for Steam users must go through Steam.
Release different or exclusive content updates that influences gameplay outside Steam.	✖	Content must be consistent across sales channels.

*Based on our reading of Steam's public docs as of early 2026. Policies can change, so check Steamworks for the latest.

Building a sustainable hybrid model

A solid publishing strategy positions your own store and Steam as complementary channels, not competing ones. Steam's reach provides credibility and massive audience exposure. Your direct channel builds independence, data, and recurring value. Together, they form a balanced ecosystem.

Maximize reach and discovery

Steam anchors your public visibility, while your direct-to-player store converts attention from influencers, media, and social ads into first-party relationships.

Retain more revenue

Each sale on your store can save up to 25% of potential revenue. Over time, that differential becomes a substantial increase in margin.

Reduce risk

Platform algorithms and policies change overnight. Owning your player data and relationship keeps you connected and protected.

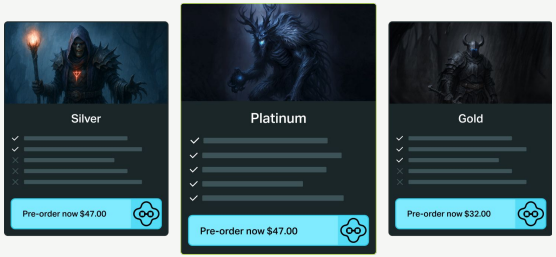
D2C as your marketing sandbox

Use your own store to test and optimize ad creatives, traffic sources, and pricing efficiency, since it allows you to measure the full conversion funnel end to end. Apply those validated insights to improve performance and ROI in your Steam campaigns.

Xsolla Publishing Suite provides the tools to →

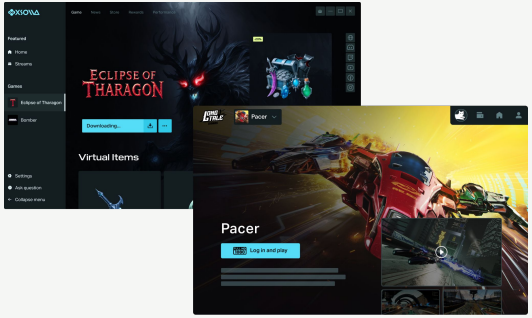
Build and manage multi-game stores

Generate a branded store for a single game in minutes, or build a fully-customized storefront to sell multiple games, DLCs, and more.



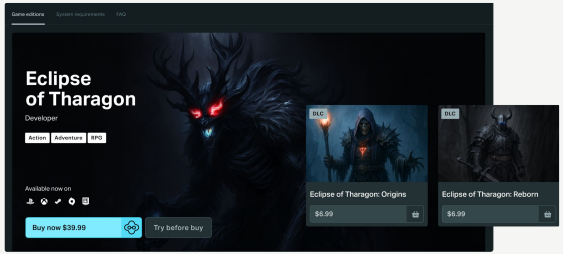
Distribute games with Launcher

Use your own Launcher to deliver games, DLC, and updates directly to your audience. Host closed betas to test builds or offer early access as a pre-order incentive. And track conversion all the way to install.



Sell bundles with DLCs or multiple games

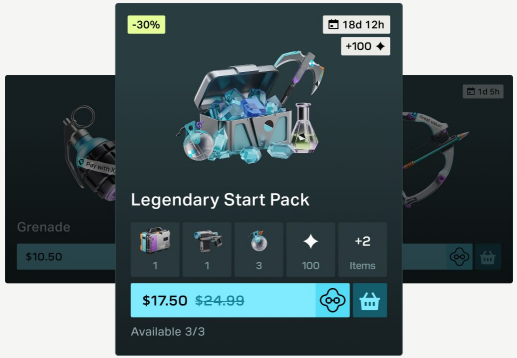
Publishers often create value-added bundles by including artbooks, comics, or soundtracks. Price parity applies only to identical SKUs, so you can combine multiple games and design unique offers. Material parity obligations may apply.



Special capabilities for F2P games

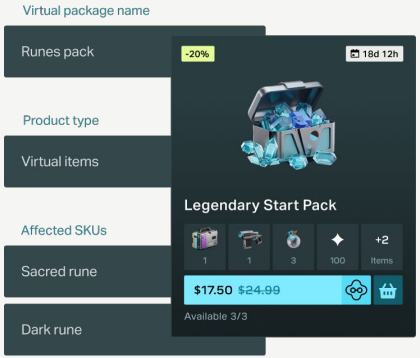
Retain more revenue on all in-game sales

Create in-game shops with custom catalogs and item packs, keeping up to 25% more revenue.



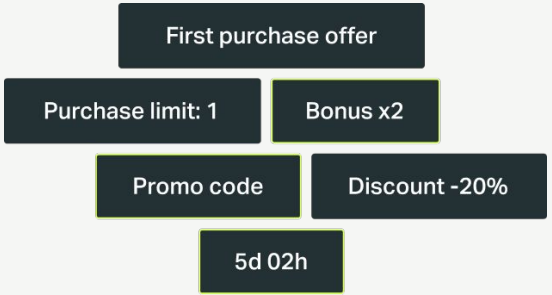
Extend your offer by selling in-game items on the web

Easily build your game's store and use ready-made tools for offers, bundles, and battle-passes to improve monetization.



Upsell players with dynamic monetization features

Launch a wide range of promotions, from discounts and bonuses to time-limited offers and more.



Lessons from developers who went direct

Direct sales give studios full ownership of their community and a direct relationship with their most dedicated players. They create a reliable channel for monetizing diehard fans gathered on Discord or forums, reducing dependence on third-party platforms and their shifting rules.

Developers who integrate a direct store typically report:

- From our observations, between 10% and 45% of total sales are shifting to D2C sales within the first year.
- Higher retention and LTV per player thanks to loyalty programs and personalized offers.
- There is greater flexibility to test bundles, regional pricing, and limited editions.

“

Our own store brings most of the revenue. That’s why we’ve worked with Xsolla for years.

– A leading game developer's Head of Monetization

Community-driven studios use independent publishing as a hub for cross-promotion and player engagement. Discord integration, newsletters, and cross-game portals enable unified communication, boosting retention across multiple titles.

“

Community is our biggest channel; players trust it more than ads.

— Gaming industry Marketing Director

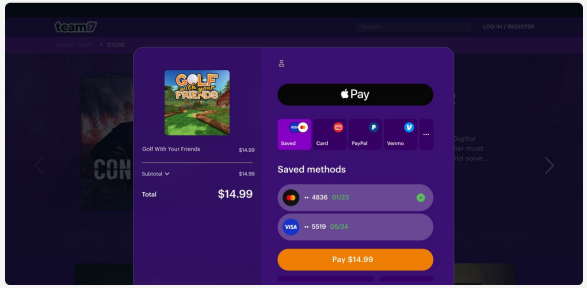
Team 17's store powered by Xsolla Publishing Suite

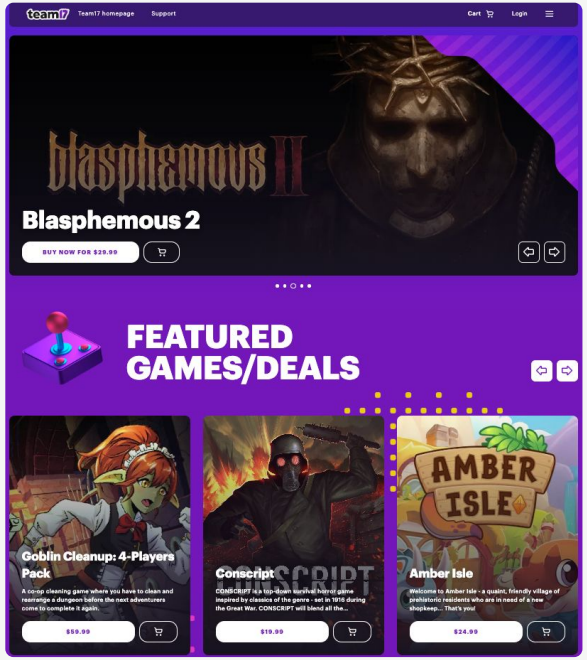
Request

Team17, known for the Worms and Overcooked franchises, needed a custom store to boost game sales. They sought to cut high transaction fees, offer bundles, and gain player insights.

Solution

Xsolla created a unique Team17 Games Store with custom branding for an authentic look and feel.





What’s possible with your own Game Store during the pre-release stage

Pre-registrations

- Build a landing page for pre-registrations with Xsolla Store Builder.
- Start collecting email addresses from your loyal community to build interest in the later stages.

Closed and open beta testing

- Build a fully branded launcher to deliver closed and open betas, game updates, news, and feedback forms.
- Collect performance data and player feedback.

Pre-order and wishlist campaign

- Redirect part of your wishlist-campaign traffic to a pre-order page in your game store.
- Collect Day 1 revenue from your most loyal early supporters.

Global launch in your Game Store

- Create additional value offers and bundles to drive interest to your own store.
- Release a game everywhere simultaneously, applying price parity.

We handle the tech, you drive the traffic

Xsolla

- Build web pages for pre-registration, pre-orders and events.
- Build fully-branded Game Store for game sales.
- Build fully-branded Launcher to help manage closed and open beta testing, game installation, and builds.
- Provide mechanisms to launch and pre-launch influencer campaigns via Xsolla Partner Network.

PC developer or publisher

- Promote pre-registration on your platforms to acquire players.
- Promote your Game Store prior to and at launch.
- Manage news and updates for your community directly in Launcher.
- Coordinate community and influencer campaigns to drive traffic to your Game Store.

Integration scenario, step-by-step

Creating your own store no longer requires heavy engineering. If you need to move fast, you can use a pre-designed template and launch in a day. Custom multi-game stores only require development effort on our side.

Stage 1

Pick a setup for direct sales

1. Buy button with quick checkout on your site.
2. Custom landing page with an integrated store for a single game.
3. Portfolio-level multi-game store.

Stage 2

Add the payment solution

Xsolla Payments supports over 1,000 payment methods for 200+ regions and 130+ currencies.

It protects games from fraud, manages chargebacks and refunds, and helps manage tax compliance.

Stage 3

Build a fully-branded launcher

A fully-branded Xsolla Launcher enables platform-free game distribution.

It allows you to run a closed beta, keep player data in your hands, and use advanced player analytics.

Stage 4

Launch pre-orders and sell game keys globally

You can deliver a fully operational Xsolla Publishing Suite MVP setup in < 30 days with minimal internal dev dependencies.

It works for premium, free-to-play, and cross-platform games.

How to drive traffic to your own store

Launching a D2C channel is easy. Driving awareness takes intention. Players won’t automatically know where to find your shop or why it matters.

1 Integrate D2C store with your official website. Players visiting for patch notes or lore are already engaged. Add a clear “BUY GAMES” or “OFFICIAL STORE” button in the navigation and mention it naturally in blog posts and updates.

2 Optimize search and discovery. Ensure yourstore appears alongside your Steam page in search results. Use simple keywords such as “Official (Game Name) Store” and accurate meta descriptions.

3 In performance campaigns, send part of your traffic to the D2C store — paid and retargeting ads expand reach beyond Steam and drive efficient conversions.

How to drive traffic to your own store

“

In most cases, including direct channels into the standard marketing flow is enough. For example, adding direct-to-purchase links to the official game website or Discord channel takes the same effort but up to 25% more in revenue.

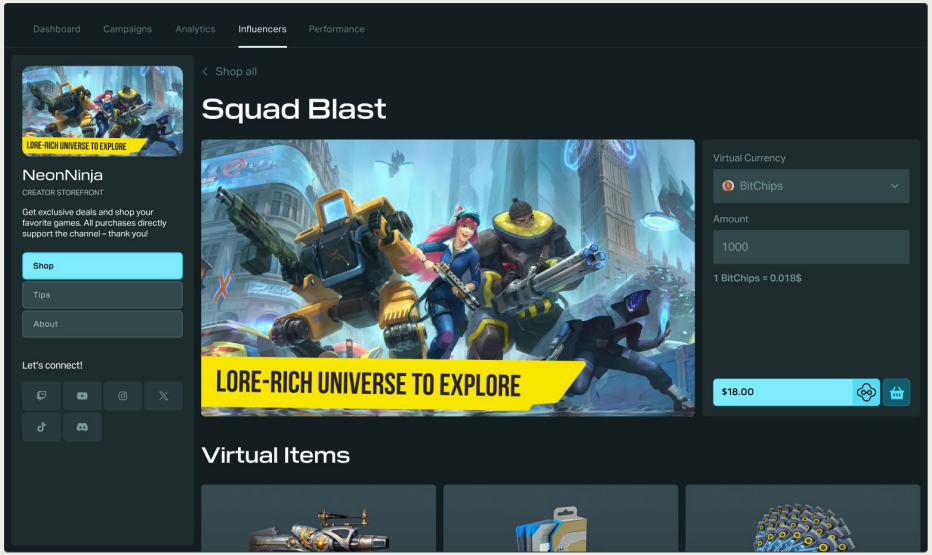
– Gaming industry Marketing Director, mid-sized game publisher

4 Leverage your social channels. Regular posts about new bundles or loyalty rewards keep your community engaged. Pin key messages and maintain visual consistency across Twitter, Discord, and Reddit.

5 Optimize search and discovery. Ensure your store appears alongside your Steam page in search results. Use simple keywords such as “Official (Game Name) Store” and accurate meta descriptions.

6 Empower creators. Influencers and streamers can spotlight your web store with affiliate links. Their authenticity builds trust faster than ads.

Empower influencers to promote your offers through their own storefronts



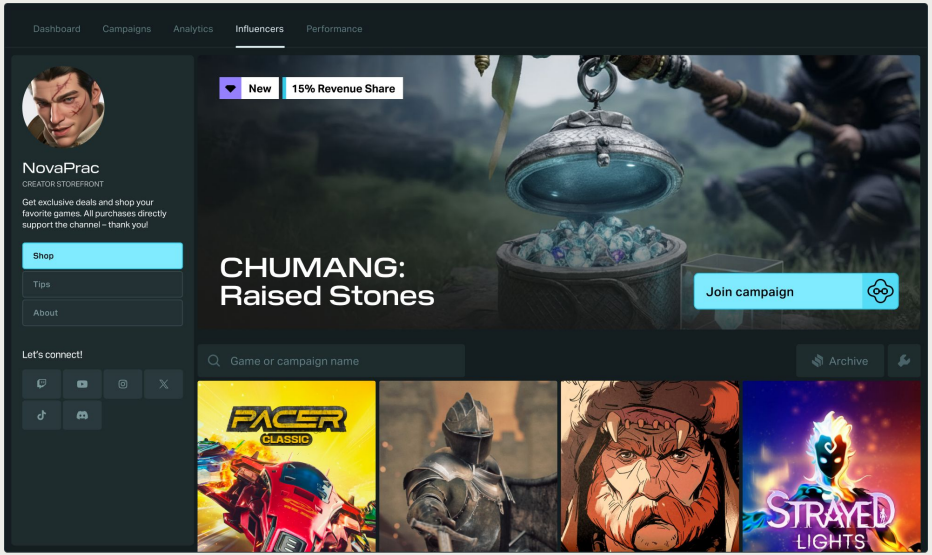
With Xsolla tools, developers can guide their community toward their own direct sales channels. One of these tools is Creator Storefronts.

This solution extends the reach of your store through creators' own storefronts, driving qualified traffic, tracked sales, and revenue growth — right where fans are already watching and engaging.

Turn creator engagement into measurable sales and revenue

by connecting your game with their audience

- Empower creators to promote your Game Store offers directly to their audiences.
- With Creator Storefronts any influencer can create automated landing pages and mirror everything you sell in your Game Store.
- It features your game offers directly into livestreams, overlays, and channels, leveraging influencer engagement into conversion-ready experiences.



Start building a direct sales strategy that puts you in control — we’re here to help you make the most of it.

Build your own Game Store with Xsolla Publishing Suite.

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Steam's internal policies and interpretations may evolve over time, and platform representatives may respond differently to publisher activities depending on the specific circumstances.

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