



The New
Indian Express
Saturday, December 13, 2008
www.expressbuzz.com

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zeitgeist
Your Saturday
Magazine



Game Invader

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The year of Nintendo and mobile games

As the year winds down, let me tell you what caught my attention in 2008.

Gaming comes to India

With Nintendo finally entering the market with the Wii and DS, we can finally buy every console through regular retail channels in India. Game libraries are still thin, however. But things can only get better—let's hope the market continues to mature and grow, and more people realise how much fun gaming actually is.

Coverage gains importance

The XBOX 360 and the PS3 are awesome media devices, and keep getting better. So is the PSP and it's not a half-bad internet device either. The new DSi promises an internet and media experience. Mobile phones become gaming devices. The search is on for one device to rule them all.

XBOX goes social. Sings and Dances

The XBOX 360 was always a great media device, and offered a strong community experience. But the 'New XBOX Experience' firmware upgrade, by putting the social and media features sharply in focus, took a bold step in positioning the XBOX 360 as a social media device that offered much to the non-hard-core crowd. It looks great. You can party with your friends.

The PS3 fixes its mistakes

Sony's console arrived late for the party. But it has decided it's

2008 featured more original games across platforms than any other year in recent memory

time to make some noise. With GTA IV and Metal Gear Solid 4 wooing gamers with a truly next-gen experience, and exciting exclusives like God of War 3 and Heavy Rain on the awail, 2008 looks like a great year for the PlayStation camp.

Whither the Wii?

Oddly, the Wii had the weakest time in terms of line-up. Solid 4 still sells a gazillion more than its competitors. Nintendo had no really rock-star titles this year, except for Super Smash Bros. Brawl. There were great titles like Beaten Box, De Blob and No More Heroes, but nothing like the Phantom Hourglass or Super Mario Galaxy. But thanks to its huge installed base, increasing third-party interest and Nintendo's own hit machine, this is more likely a temporary lull.

The rise of mobile gaming

The quality of mobile games continues to surprise. With N-gage and the iPhone at the helm, the mobile phone is now a platform that developers and publishers need to look at very seriously. Innovation is widespread.

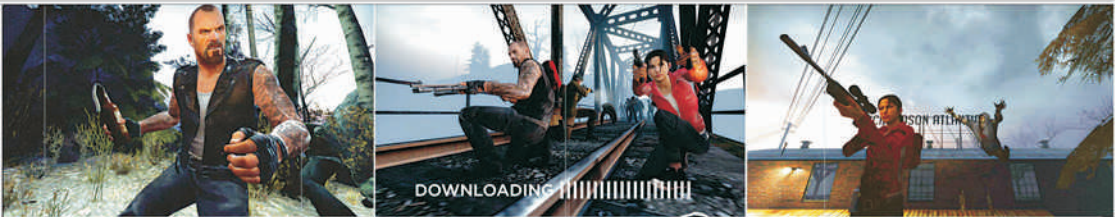
2008 featured more original games across platforms than any other year in recent memory

Spore, Braid, Little Big Planet, Mirror's Edge, Reset Generation, Boom Blox, World of Goo. Gamers, try every single one of these.

Casual gamers call the shots

Whatever the hard core may like to think, it's the casual and borderline gamers who are driving market growth. The continued success of the Wii and DS (a very large percentage of whose base is first-time console owners), and Microsoft and Sony's focus on social and casual arcade gaming experiences all vouch for this. Selling to the hard core is like preaching to the converted.

Overall, it's been an extremely interesting year, even if less spectacular than 2007 in terms of heavy hitters. But 2008 looks to be another blockbuster year in the making. So, hold on tight for another 12 months of incredible gaming. Have a great new year.



Zombie apocalypse

Left 4 Dead is the definitive co-op multiplayer experience, says Videep Vijay Kumar

cased in the way each of them respond to a situation. Hundreds of lines have been recorded for this purpose, so there's no question of monotony or repetition. Context-sensitive responses also ensure that things are kept believable and relevant, almost making the game feel like a Hollywood film at times.

No mercy

In L4D, your objectives are simple: Get from one safe room to another, fighting off a million zombies along the way, with the ultimate aim of making a getaway in one of four ways depending on the campaign you're playing. The game has four 'campaigns', each with a different setting, varying environments and a different getaway vehicle. They don't take very long to finish in the easier difficulty settings,



Left 4 Dead

Genre: First-person shooter/
Survival horror
Platform: PC, XBOX 360
Developer: Valve Corporation
Distributor: Valve Corporation
MRP: Rs 999 (PC)

a strong focus on cooperative play each player's interaction with the other, be it laying down cover fire, healing team mates, giving items, etc in itself tells a fantastic story.

The infected

L4D's protagonists' lives are made a lot harder by 'The infected', which is the affectionate term collectively given to the game's zombie horde. There are several types of 'infected', and some of them are playable in the game's 'versus' mode. They include the 'Boomer', a huge wandering mass of a monster whose vomit attracts the attention of the 'hordes', then we have the 'Smoker', which is kind of a stealth unit that is very effective from concealed areas, the 'Hunter', a close-range unit with a fierce pounce/attack ability, and the 'Tank', a huge mutated mass of muscle, which can fling concrete or pound a hapless survivor into the ground.

When playing the 'versus' campaign, each group of four players plays each chapter of the campaign as both Survivors and Infected, changing sides once per level.

At the end of each level, the team playing the Survivors earns points based on how well they performed.

AI director and source engine

When a lot of game developers are out there ripping each other off and relying on tried-and-tested formulae to deprive gamers

of their hard earned money, Valve is out there coming up with genuinely original and innovative ideas. Know that 'Portal' is going to be hard to surpass in this respect, but L4D is innovative nonetheless.

The game has an 'AI director', which dynamically alters the game's pacing, difficulty and dramatics based on a lot of factors, including positioning of players, their health and even the amount of remaining ammunition in the clip. This ensures that each play-through is a new and unique experience, and the AI director adds a lot of flavour to something, that, on the surface, might seem like a formulaic and monotonous FPS experience. Only last year, a lot of gamers (myself included) were convinced that the source engine would soon become outdated. But with L4D, Valve has shown the world what it's capable of. The game looks great, but it's the game's performance that really takes the cake. Smooth as silk—I'm yet to experience a single frame-rate related issue with everything max-ed out. According to the game's website, it should run just fine even on a GeForce 6600 with 128MB RAM. Top that, Crytek. Of course, it's the audiovisual experience that makes L4D so special.

The game sports fantastic sound, with everything from the weapons to the trademark 'boss' zombie sounds sounding spectacular. I've always maintained that Half Life 2's machine gun was the best sounding video game weapon, but I think L4D's auto-shotgun is a close contender now. The AI director cues in the 'theme' music for each of the boss monsters, and the creepiness of this is difficult to describe in words.

Verdict

Left 4 Dead is the definitive co-op multiplayer experience. It's really simple—buy L4D and convince those of your buddies to pick it up as well and play the game's campaigns. It will be worth it. Trust me.

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Everyone's dead

Yep, that's right. There's some unknown virus that's just turned the populace of the game's city into mindless zombies. There are just four survivors who are supposedly immune to the effects of the virus, and the game lets you play as any one of them. The playable characters include Louis, an IT professional, Francis, who is your typical tattoo-covered American badass, Zoey, a college student and horror movie freak and Bill, a Vietnam veteran. When playing the game's single player mode, players can choose whom to play as, and this choice is made available to them even in multiplayer, but only if the character slot is available. For example, you can't have two players playing as Bill. The difference between the characters is purely cosmetic and playing each of them is identical from a game-play perspective. They don't have any special abilities either, but there's something about each of them that gives the player a sense of attachment, and I often found myself sticking to one character during each online session.

Valve has done a great job of giving each character a unique personality, which is show-



but if you're playing in 'advanced' or 'expert', be prepared to die a lot and play through a lot of the game's sections repeatedly.

The storytelling in L4D is virtually identical to a Hollywood zombie film, only with a Valve twist. There are no cutscenes in the game other than the opening cinematic and brief non-interactive 'mission accomplished' get-way bits. The game's story is told through the eyes of the four characters, and since L4D has

Extremely oversold game titles



Super

Have you ever noticed? You never see movies or books throw 'Super' in front of any of these sequels. Historically, only games, water pistols and 1950's vacuum cleaners do this prefix onto new products with this kind of reckless abandon. But you can't really blame the Super Nintendo, since most companies adopted the practice voluntarily as an act of kingly fealty.



Chronicle

If game titles are to be believed, anything with a dash of plot or protagonist should be considered a 'chronicle.' But since just about every game besides Tetris contain both, it's redundant. Technically, one could get away with a title like 'The Chronicles of Gears of War' or 'Katamari Chronicles.' But why bother? And what exactly is wrong with a name like 'Sonic: The Dark Brotherhood' especially if that's how most people are going to refer to it anyway.

Unleashed

The equivalent of saying, "Yeah, we know our series is stale as mummy shit, but this sequel is gonna kick your face into flames." Not true. How could it be if they couldn't even bother to pick a more original name than unleashed?



Ultimate

This one's just a flat out fib. In almost every case, games emblazoned with the word 'Ultimate' have every intention of being sequenced faster than you can trade them in for something better. And that's only if it's not a repackaging of existing content you already own. Some of the games that have ultimate in their titles include the Ultimate II, Ultimate Shooting Collection, Marvel Ultimate Alliance and Ultimate I Spz.



Extreme

Extreme/Xtreme has been gang banged by the gaming community for so long we can't even use it in casual conversation anymore. In general, the word gets tacked on to budget titles or sub-sequels that offer little more than new playable rings or arenas jiggling at a volleysait.



—Source: gamesradar.com