

'Dishonored' Tops Diverse Year In Video Games

BY LOU KESTEN Associated Press

The video game universe in 2012 is a study in extremes.

At one end, you have the old guard striving to produce mass-appeal blockbusters. At the other end, you have a thriving community of independent game developers scrambling to find an audience for their idiosyncratic visions. Can't we all just get along?

Turns out, we can. For while some industry leaders are worried (and not without cause) about "disruptive" trends — social-media games, free-to-play models, the switch from disc-based media to digital delivery — video games are blossoming creatively. This fall, during the height of the pre-holiday game release calendar, I found myself bouncing among games as diverse as the bombastic "Halo 4," the artsy "The Unfinished Swan" and the quick-hit trivia game "SongPop."

Some of my favorite games this year have benefited from both sides working together. The smaller studios get exposure on huge platforms like Xbox Live or the PlayStation Network. The big publishers seem more willing to invite a little quirkiness into their big-budget behemoths. Gamers win.

1. "Dishonored" (Bethesda Softworks, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC): Arkane Studios' revenge drama combined a witty plot, crisp gameplay and an uncommonly distinctive milieu, setting a supernaturally gifted assassin loose in a gloriously decadent, steampunk-influenced city.

2. "Mass Effect 3" (Electronic Arts, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii U, PC): No 2012 game was more ambitious than BioWare's sweeping space opera. Yes, the ending was a little dumpty, but the fearless Commander Shepard's last journey across the cosmos provided dozens of thrilling moments.

3. "The Walking Dead" (Telltale Games, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC, iOS): This moving adaptation of Robert Kirkman's comics dodged the predictable zombie blood-bath in favor of a finely tuned character study of two survivors: Lee, an escaped convict, and Clementine, the 8-year-old girl he's committed to protect.

4. "Journey" (Thatgamecompany, for the PlayStation 3): A nameless figure trudges across a desert toward a glowing light. Simple enough, but gorgeous visuals, haunting music and the need to communicate, wordlessly, with companions you meet along the way translate into something that's almost profound.

5. "Borderlands 2" (2K Games, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC): Gearbox Software's gleeful mash-up of first-person shooting, role-playing and loot-collecting conventions gets bigger and badder, but what stuck with me most were the often hilarious encounters with the damaged citizens of the godforsaken planet Pandora.

6. "XCOM: Enemy Unknown" (2K Games, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC): A strategy classic returns, as the forces of Earth fight back against an extraterrestrial invasion. It's a battle of wits rather than reflexes, a stimulating change of pace from the typical alien gorefest.

7. "Fez" (Polytron, for the Xbox 360): A two-dimensional dude named Gomez finds his world has suddenly burst into a third dimension in this gem from indie developer Phil Fish. As Gomez explores, the world of "Fez" continually deepens, opening up mysteries that only the most dedicated players will be able to solve.

8. "Spec Ops: The Line" (2K Games, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC): This harrowing tale from German studio Yager Development transplants "Apocalypse Now" to a war-torn Dubai. It's a bracing critique, not just of war but of the rah-rah jingoism of contemporary military shooters.

9. "Assassin's Creed III" (Ubisoft, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii U, PC): A centuries-old conspiracy takes root in Colonial America in this beautifully realized, refreshingly irrelevant installment of Ubisoft's alternate history franchise.

10. "ZombiU" (Ubisoft, for the Wii U): The best launch game for Nintendo's new console turns the Wii U's GamePad into an effective tool for finding and hunting down the undead.

Runners-up: "Call of Duty: Black Ops II," "Darksiders II," "Dust: An Elysian Tail," "Far Cry 3," "Halo 4," "Mark of the Ninja," "Need for Speed: Most Wanted," "Paper Mario: Sticker Star," "Papo & Yo," "The Unfinished Swan."

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Day several years ago, so I have an official proclamation from them," Zany stated.

What should audiences expect at the show? Funny, according to Zany. "I'm old school in the sense that I'm there to entertain and make them laugh," he said.

"Zan Vs. Zany" will be performed at Minervas at 7:30 p.m. and 10 p.m. Monday. Call (605) 664-2244 for ticket information.

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