

Video Game Feature: The 10 Best Video Games of 2011

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 11, 2012 - 2:20pm

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CHICAGO – We may already be planning our 2012 gaming experience (and watch for a piece next week on HC's most-anticipated games), but there's still time (before "Mass Effect 3" takes over our lives) to look back at the year that was and ask the key questions — Was 2011 a good year for gamers? What were the highlights? Let us guide the way with our ten favorite games of last year (and ten runner-ups).

First, a very, very brief commentary on the year in video games overall — meh. There were a few spectacular titles in 2011, but the overall feeling I get, when looking back over the past twelve months of video game reviews, is that this past year doesn't compare to the one before. It almost feels like the form was treading water. Part of that comes from the fact that my top six games (and eight out of the top ten overall and an AMAZING 17 out of 20, if you include the runner-ups) were sequels. Now, a lot of them were great sequels, all of the top six improved on the game in the franchise before it, but where are the new, breakthrough ideas? We all know what to expect (or at least hope for) from games like "Arkham City," "Skyrim," and "Drake's Deception." Wouldn't it have been nice to have something come completely out of left field in 2011? A total shock to the gaming system? Let's hope we get a few of those in 2012.

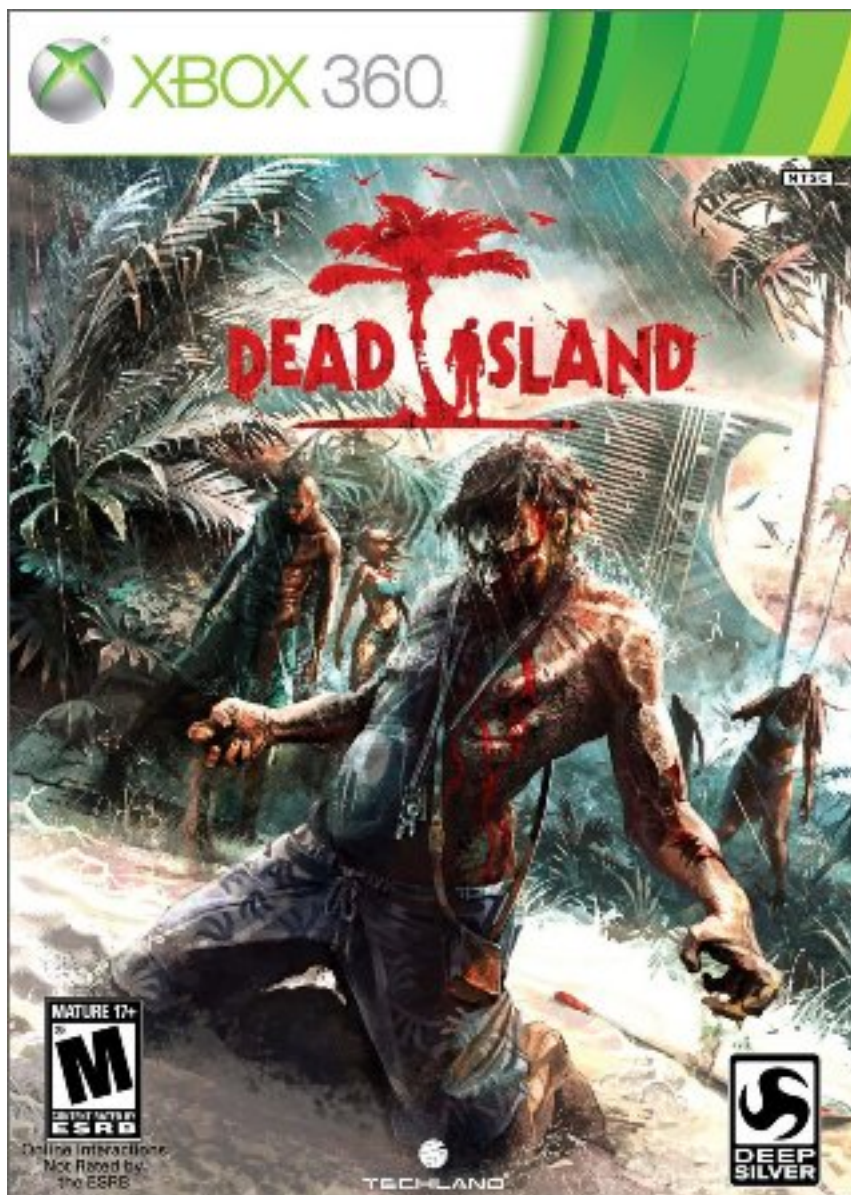
Runner-ups: "Deus Ex: Human Revolution," "Gears of War 3," "Infamous 2," "Killzone 3," "Little Big Planet 2," "NBA 2K12," "Professor Layton and the Last Specter," "Rage," "Resistance 3," and "Super Mario 3D Land."

10. "Dead Island"

Company: Deep Silver

Release Date: September 6th, 2011

Platform(s): Xbox 360, PS3, PC

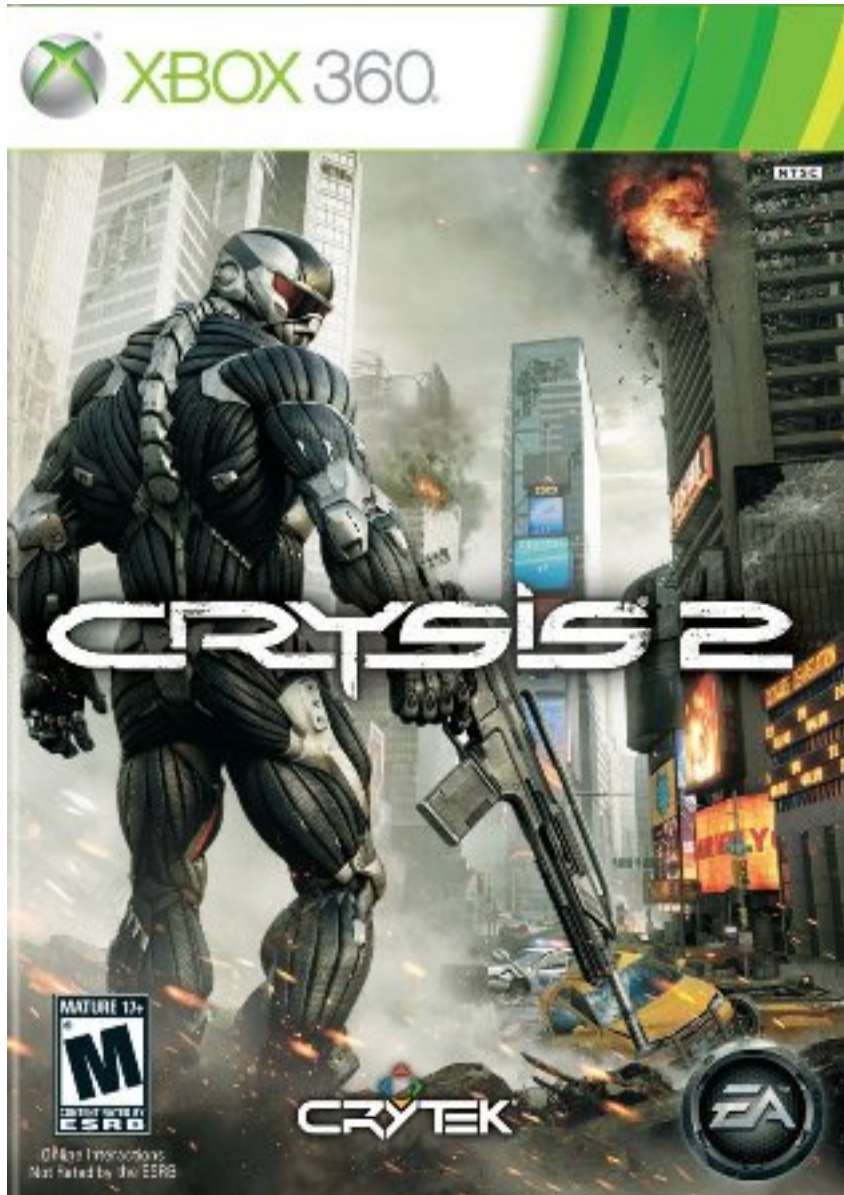


Dead Island

Photo credit: Deep Silver

I have a soft, mushy, bloody spot in my heart for zombie games, but I'll admit that the genre (much like it is in film) is over-saturated. Which is why I was so pleasantly surprised to get such a giddy kick out of this clever, increasingly-fun game, a title with some notable flaws that become much easier to ignore when the developers offer so much adrenalin-pumping, brain-smashing, visceral entertainment. Game critics like to pick things apart and I wish some elements of "Dead Island" had been more refined, but that wasn't really on my mind while I was finding new items with which to crunch against undead skulls. Like so many games, much of the genius here was in the concept — a resort island overrun by brain-eating maniacs, not unlike what you saw in Danny Boyle's "28 Days Later." Imagine a Sandals resort in which the staff and tourists are closer to George A. Romero creations than what you'd see on one of those posters at a travel agent's office. There are pacing issues and some of the RPG/customization elements don't work, but that all falls away in favor of the most important judgment when it comes to a zombie game — this one is FUN. It calls to you and begs you to keep playing in the middle of the night. I wish I could say the same about more games in 2011.

9. "Crysis 2"

Company: Electronic Arts**Release Date:** March 22nd, 2011**Platform(s):** Xbox 360, PS3, PC

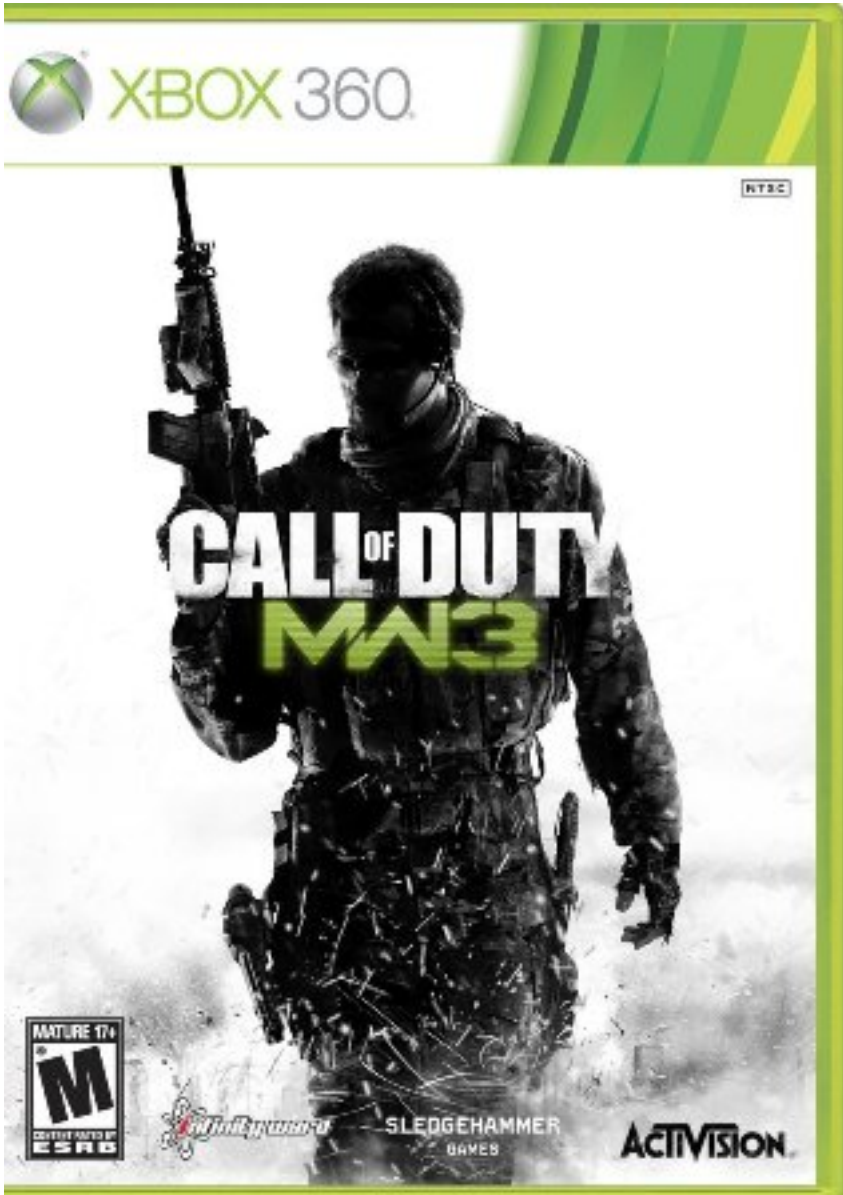
Crysis 2

Photo credit: EA

I thought for sure that "Crysis 2" would take off as the next-big multiplayer game, but it never gained any traction on consoles (at least not according to online play figures released by Microsoft). I think most of the hardcore players stuck with PC, which I get, but it allowed this title to fall too far under the radar for many people who I am convinced could have a blast with this beautiful, well-designed, enjoyable shooter. If you did miss it, you missed one of the most visually striking games of 2011 for any platform. Much of the game focuses on a combat armor known as the Nanosuit, an incredibly powerful weapon and gameplay system that's also intuitive, especially in the revolutionary multiplayer, in which it adds a layer of strategy previously unseen in shooters. The suit turns what could have been a generic shooter into more of a strategic experience. It's an amazingly varied gameplay dynamic that allows the title to be different for everyone. Should you take cover, toss grenades, and unleash Hell? Or mark your targets and stealthily take out enemies in cloaked form? Or just run? The decisions rarely feel predetermined, adding to that sensation that only the best games share, which is that you, the player, are actually authoring the experience.

8. "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3"

Company: Activision**Release Date:** November 8th, 2011**Platform(s):** Xbox 360, PS3, PC, Nintendo Wii, Nintendo DS



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

Photo credit: Activision

One of the most divisive games of the year is also the most-played. Honestly, the number of message board complaints about the “CoD” franchise is remarkable given the online play stats and sales statistics for this series. It reminds me of the old theory about Howard Stern presented in his movie “Private Parts” — that those listeners who didn’t like him actually listened more often than normal listeners just to hear what he’d do next. At LEAST half of the people proclaiming “MW3” as a massive disappointment are probably still playing it right now as you read this. Is it flawed? Sure. The campaign, while being significantly better than some in this series, gets a bit repetitive and the multi-player maps are a bit disappointing in that they don’t feel like much more than DLC from the last chapter... but what AMAZING DLC. And the additions of “Kill Confirmed” along with smoother upgrades and gameplay and a promising new concept in Elite all make for one of the most addictive titles of the year. Yes, it would be nice to see this franchise take some risks with the next installment, but can you really blame them for not doing so when they’re making so much money? Do you remember New Coke? Why fix what so many people love? Especially when even the people who hate it seem to love doing so?

7. “L.A. Noire”

Company: Rockstar

Release Date: May 17th, 2011

Platform(s): Xbox 360, PS3, PC



L.A. Noire

Photo credit: Rockstar

It may not have been the slam-dunk we were hoping for, but there was no more ambitious game and no better original IP than Rockstar's daring attempt at merging noir storytelling with modern gameplay. The developers of "L.A. Noire" were trying nothing less than revolutionizing what we should expect from a puzzle-solving game. What if there was a game that valued intuition over marksmanship? What if there was a game where storytelling was more important than action? With cut scenes that aren't merely there so the game can load the next gameplay level, the best acting in the history of video games, and a deep, complex world that feels vitally alive, it's easy to see why one would compare the title to films like "L.A. Confidential" or "The Black Dahlia." This is the "Heavy Rain" of 2011 (although not quite as successful creatively as that increasingly-impressive, already-classic title). Any complaint I could levy at "L.A. Noire" falls away at the pure, unadulterated ambition of the title. It may not be the best game of 2011, but it would a better gaming world if it was the most influential.

6. "Battlefield 3"

Company: Electronic Arts

Release Date: October 25th, 2011

Platform(s): Xbox 360, PS3, PC



Battlefield 3

Photo credit: EA

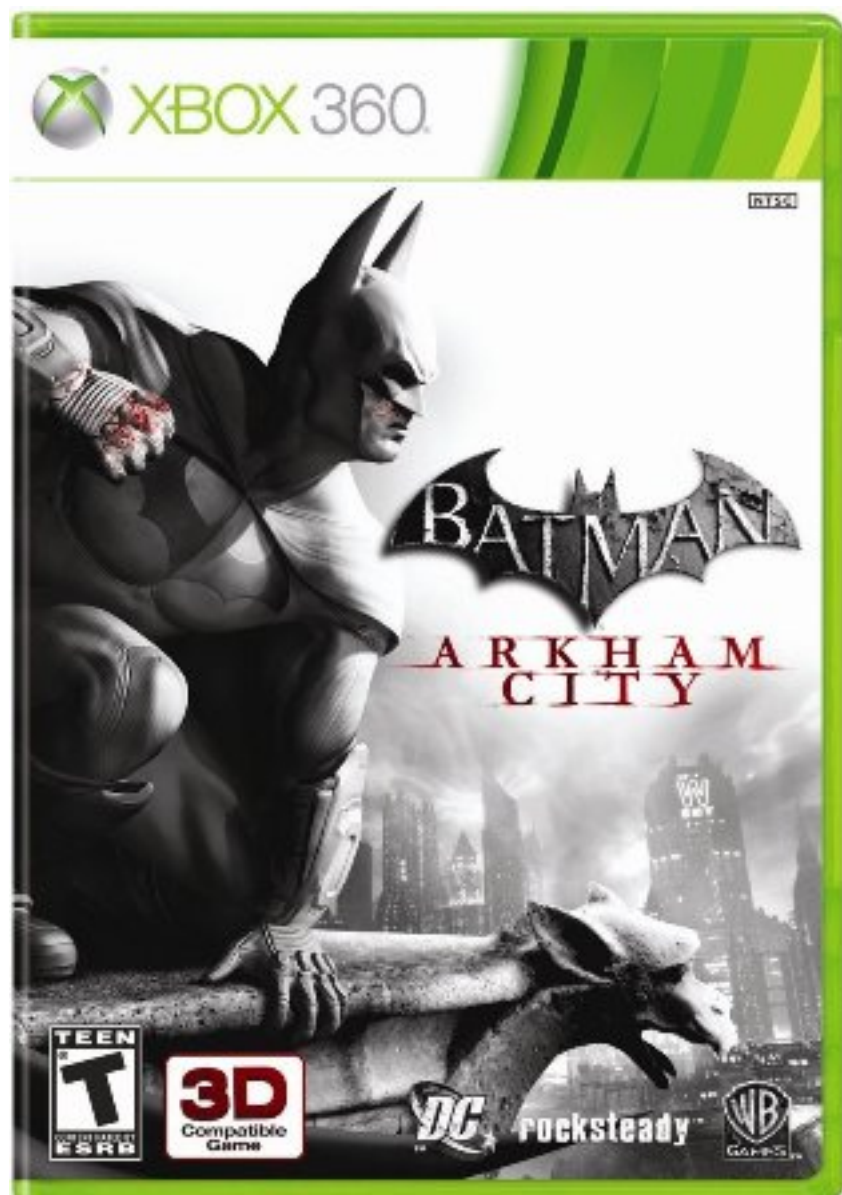
While I haven't been out there in the sh*t as much as I would like, the accomplishments of the development team of the multiplayer portion of this incredible game can't go unrecognized. It's chaos. Running, explosions, buildings breaking, planes crashing, more running — in the moment, the multiplayer of "Battlefield 3" is such an adrenalin rush that it can be difficult to truly assess it critically. You're too busy trying to not to get killed again. You have to step back and consider the elements that have gone into this adrenalin rush — map design, engine response, upgrade system, player customization, etc. — and realize that this should be the model for future shooting games. It is flawless multiplayer. In fact, if the single-player campaign was anything more than totally annoying, it might top this list. Weak storytelling, horrendous enemy A.I., poor level design — it's a tragic experience. But the multiplayer is SO good. Maybe next time they'll get both halves right.

5. "Batman: Arkham City"

Company: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

Release Date: October 18th, 2011

Platform(s): Xbox 360, PS3, PC



Batman: Arkham City

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

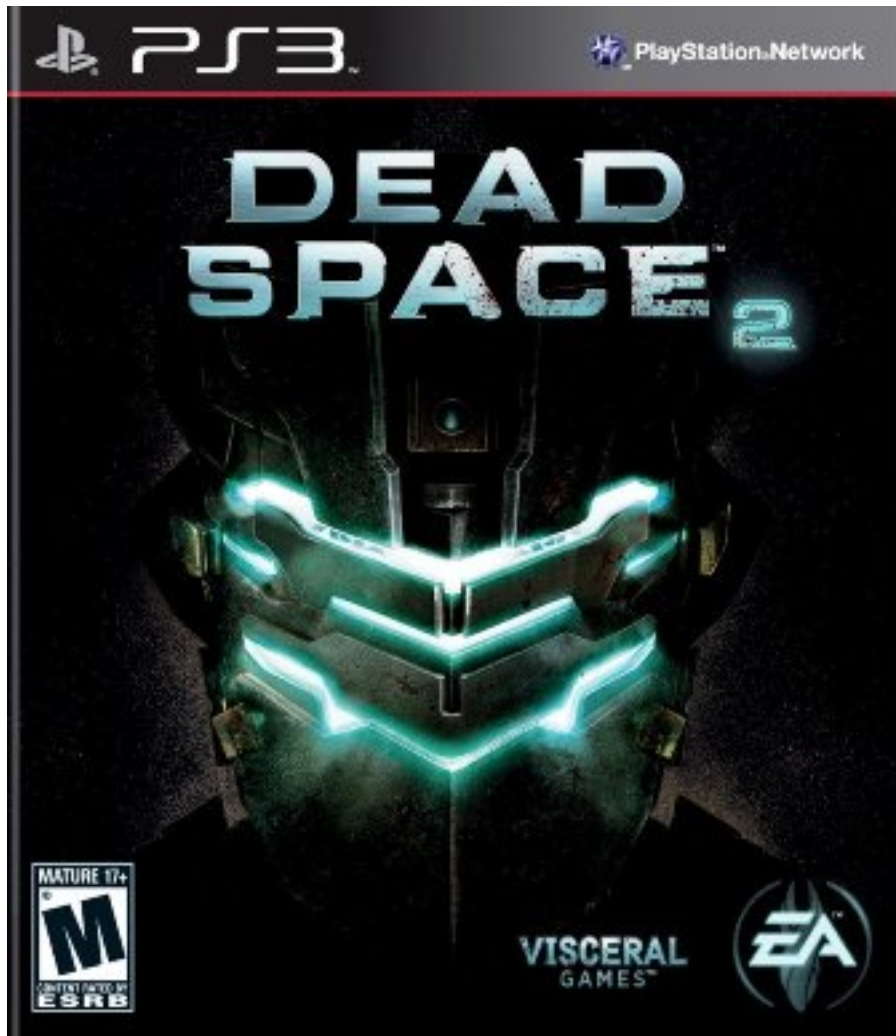
This game was higher on my list, but I fell victim to one of the most INSANE glitches of all time, which occurred when an update patch deleted hundreds, maybe thousands, of saved games, including mine. Not only did I want to go back to finish a couple side missions, play some challenges, and do some Riddler trophy hunting, but I played a majority of the games on this list again even if just for a bit to reassess their place on the year. And I can't deny that my thinking about this title will now be forever damaged by one of the worst gaming glitches in history (for more, check out [this 21-PAGE thread](#) [16]). Before that disastrous day, "Arkham City" was easily one of my favorite games of the year, a dense, remarkable, incredible experience that has to rank near the top of any superhero game list ever made. This game puts you in the bat shoes of the Dark Knight, taking what worked about the first game and making it deeper, more challenging, and more entertaining. There's not a single element of the solo gameplay in which the developers did not exceed expectations. Never repetitive, never dull, never even remotely disappointing... until your saved file disappears.

4. "Dead Space 2"

Company: Electronic Arts

Release Date: January 25th, 2011

Platform(s): Xbox 360, PS3, PC



Dead Space 2

Photo credit: EA

The most unjustly-forgotten game on most best of '11 lists was also the most terrifying. Perhaps it was the early release date that allowed some gamers to forget about it or perhaps they've blocked out the experience like someone with P.T.S.D. would do. I know I have nightmares about that damn elevator sequence. Could the multi-player have been better? Undeniably. But this is a franchise that I'm not sure could ever support anything more than solo play. It's a concept designed around being alone. Well, alone except for the moving nightmares coming to rip you to shreds and eat your innards. This is easily one of the most accomplished, mesmerizing, and enjoyable video game experiences of the year with some of its best set-pieces. I wanted a little more variety to the campaign, a little less linear storytelling to allow for exploration, but these are minor complaints. This is a game that I know I'm going to go back to and play again. And I'll still be just as scared when I get to that damn day care from Hell.

3. "Portal 2"

Company: Electronic Arts

Release Date: April 19th, 2011

Platform(s): Xbox 360, PS3, PC



Portal 2

Photo credit: EA

So original, so clever, so inventive, so unique — this game is an amazing achievement in gamer expectations. Critics are so accustomed to what to expect from most games that, when one throws them such a curveball, it can be a powerful experience. And “Portal 2” is the “Empire Strikes Back” of video games, taking the concepts, ingenuity, humor, and clever gameplay from the first, highly-acclaimed title and infinitely expanding on them. On one level, “Portal 2” is a puzzle game, but like none you’ve ever played. The game builds perfectly (thanks in no small part to great voice work by Stephen Merchant and J.K. Simmons), getting the player involved emotionally as well as intellectually. It’s one of the most well-paced storytelling experiences in gaming history. Yes, it’s a bit short, but every minute of it is fantastic. It has a feeling of depth, a fully-realized world with characters human and otherwise, and it’s easily the most original game of the year. Most of the games on this list have something to compare them to — “Battlefield” people bicker with “CoD” fans, “L.A. Noire” was compared to “Red Dead,” etc. But there is no parallel for “Portal 2” other than “Portal 1.” This is a franchise that stands alone, something increasingly unique in the world’s ever-cluttered gaming market.

2. “Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim”

Company: Bethesda

Release Date: November 11th, 2011

Platform(s): Xbox 360, PS3, PC



Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

Photo credit: Bethesda

Skyrim is one of the most fully-realized and remarkable gaming worlds in the history of the video game. It is a place that feels alive with activity, not just beyond the horizon, but WAY beyond it, into towns, camps, homes, caves, and places where pure evil is merely waiting for you and your silly spells. There be dragons out there. This is easily one of the best RPGs of all time, a title that allows for pure, incredible customization. It is very likely that no one reading this has had the exact same “Skyrim” experience as I have. There may be similar arcs, but there are subtle, important differences to skill sets, alchemy, items carried or dropped, side missions, etc. And there can even be major differences. Two people can have vastly different journeys through Skyrim. When’s the last time a game scared you into finding a place to sleep? When’s the last game a world was so believable that you felt the time of day and the rest level of your character mattered? It’s incredibly rare, even in the most acclaimed modern RPGs, to find levels of detail that add up in a more impressive way than they do in “The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim.” It’s the little things like the perfectly-rendered clouds, the animals on the path in front of you, or the sound of something stirring in the woods that add up to what is too often missing from the world of gaming — realism.

1. “Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception”

Company: Sony

Release Date: November 1st, 2011

Platform(s): PS3



Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
Photo credit: Sony

The A-list blockbuster of the year happened to be a video game. The ship sequence, falling from a plane, escaping a burning building — if “Drake’s Deception” was a movie, Spielberg would wet his pants in admiration. Rarely has a game been as intensely driven and well-paced as “Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception,” an absolute masterpiece of a game. In fact, the Hollywood blockbuster comparison doesn’t hold because this game is the kind of action-adventure storytelling that’s too often missing from summer movie hits. I was more engaged in the story of “Drake’s Deception” and its intense action, multiple twists, and satisfying ending than I was in nearly any of the recent Marvel films, the last “Pirates” movie, or nearly any other summer Hollywood CGI extravaganza. As much as I love games like “Red Dead Redemption” and even “Mass Effect 2” (my top two of last year and two games that revolutionized authorship in gaming), the type of gameplay challenge and the settings for them remained similar. “Red Dead” is a Western and “Mass Effect 2” is a sci-fi adventure. “Uncharted 3” is several games in one, but always in pursuit of the same incredible story. It is a rollercoaster with perfectly paced peaks and valleys. Strap in and enjoy the ride.



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