



Looking Ahead

By M. Brandon Robbins

Last year was a good year for gaming: some of the best games of the past decade (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*; *Metal Gear Solid V*) were released, independent studios continued to shine with such titles as *Undertale*, and games such as *Splatoon* and *Rocket League* injected new game-play ideas into familiar formulas.

Yet in the world of games and gaming, there's little time to reflect on the past, as the future is already right around the corner. More than any other entertainment industry, games and gaming evolve so quickly that it can be difficult to keep up with innovations in hardware and game development. The only way to be aware of what's fresh and new is to keep an eye on the horizon.

Through the looking glass

In the 1990s, virtual reality (VR) was heralded as the wave of the future; the idea of inhabiting a digital environment for recreation and education was both exciting and frightening. Since then, virtual reality has been used mostly for scientific experiments, but as technology has become more efficient and less reliant on physical hardware, developers are revisiting VR as a way to experience games and entertainment.

On March 28, 2016, Oculus VR will release the Rift (pictured), a head-mounted display that serves as a consumer-grade, Windows-compatible VR machine. Sony will also be releasing its own platform, and more sophisticated setups for both machines will allow for fully immersive experiences that track player movement and tie it to in-game actions.

It's all very exciting, but the innovation isn't without its risks—or costs. The Rift retails for \$599, pricing it out of many consumers' (and probably your library's) budgets. It was initially successfully crowdfunded through Kickstarter, though, and that history of consumer interest means there's hope for future commercial success.

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So how will virtual reality change the games that make it to market? Will VR drive game development, with developers crafting their work to maximize the virtual experience? That kind of shift has happened before. As online gaming spread to consoles and became accessible to the entire gaming public, game development shifted from a focus on rich single-player participation to games that were designed primarily for group play.

If VR becomes popular, that trend could reverse itself, leading to more first-person games at the expense of some third-person action and sports programs. Will designers concentrate more on intricate interior environments that provide detailed levels and maps, or will players' desire for ease of movement lead to more open and airy virtual places? And how will VR affect the social aspect of gaming, now that players can have what amounts to an actual conversation with another avatar?

VR may be more of a long-term goal for your library's initiatives, but in the meantime, keep an eye on how it develops and how—or if—it alters the medium.

One world, one platform

The industry is taking the first steps toward a single universal platform for play-

ing video games; we're on the cusp of a future in which all games are playable on all consoles, the way that all Blu-ray discs work with any Blu-ray player on the market. Nintendo will be releasing games for smartphones and tablets in 2016. Also, for the first time, its games will be available on hardware that Nintendo did not develop.

This past year, Valve released the Steam Link—a device that connects PCs with televisions, allowing for streaming games. It also introduced computers that were designed as console/gaming PC hybrids, with a spotlight on compact size and component connectivity, providing a realistic option for players desiring the raw power of gaming PCs while wanting to play comfortably from their couch. In truth, within a decade, I think we'll see the big three—Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo—shift their development energies from hardware to software.

All of this is, of course, wild speculation, but if Valve's hardware and Nintendo's mobile games sell well, we could see some big changes even by the end of the year.

Of course, the games!

This is going to be another big year for the games themselves, with new titles connected to the beloved franchises "Doom," "Mass Effect," "Uncharted," and "Legend of Zelda." We can also look forward to the medieval sword-play combat epic *Age of Honor* and a third "Dark Souls" entry, plus expected full releases of such Early Access titles as *ARK: Survival Evolved* and *Star Citizen*.

Far Cry Primal is a first-person shooter in which players take control of a prehistoric human who uses crude tools and weapons to fight and survive in a harsh world; its modern analog is the postapocalyptic *Tom Clancy's The Division*. *No Man's Sky* aims to take exploration game play to new heights, opening up the cosmos for participants to discover and examine new environments, and old-school brawling will make yet another comeback with *Street Fighter V*.

Until next time, keep telling yourself: just one more level!



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