2008's top tech trends

January 8 2009, By Troy Wolverton

It would have been hard for even the most innovative product to stand out last year in such a lousy economy. But even had the economy been good, the tech industry wouldn't have earned many headlines. In short, there was nothing comparable to the debut of the iPhone or even Windows Vista.

That said, 2008 wasn't exactly boring. Although many developments were more incremental than world-shattering, they may yet change how we interact with technology in important ways.

Here are some highlights:

-- Cameras learn new tricks.

The only things digital camera manufacturers seemed to focus on in recent years were how many megapixels they could cram into their sensors or what bright new colors they could dream up for camera cases.

But last year, camera makers came out with several bona fide innovations.

Casio introduced several of them with its Exilim EX-F1, the company's first SLR camera. It built in a superfast sensor, which allows it to take slow-motion video and better capture action shots than other cameras.

It also designed the camera to begin taking images as soon as the user depresses the shutter button halfway. This allows the user to capture the

perfect "moment" even if late in fully pressing the button.

Digital photography leaders Nikon and Canon introduced the other camera innovation last year: an interchangeable-lens camera that takes videos.

Most digital cameras have long been able to take videos, of course. But adding the feature to professional and semiprofessional cameras is a big advance, because such cameras generally take the highest-quality pictures and, with their multiple lenses, can capture a wide range of shots.

-- Girls carve out a niche in gaming.

The stereotypical gamer has been a twentysomething male. And into guy things like sports or blowing stuff up.

In 2008 it became clear that the stereotype just doesn't square with reality. Increasingly girls - and women - are gaming.

Nintendo's Wii became the top-selling console in the United States last year in large part by appealing to women. More than half of active Wii users are female, according to Parks Associates.

The trend goes beyond the Wii. One of the fastest-growing segments in recent years has been so-called "casual" games, the card and puzzle games that can be played quickly and easily on a computer. The market for casual titles has grown to more than $2 billion, and women comprise three-quarters of the consumers who purchase the games.

-- Streaming into the living room.

The digital living room, which is supposed to bring all the video and

music available on the Internet to consumers' entertainment centers, has never lived up to its hype. But hope for the category was renewed last year.

Some of it came from Netflix, which teamed up with device manufacturers to bring its streaming video service into the living room. By the end of the year, you could get the streaming service on everything from the Xbox 360 to the latest TiVo DVRs to a $99 box from a startup called Roku.

The Netflix service, which offers about 12,000 different videos, has some big advantages over competing movie rental or download offerings: Consumers don't have to pay a la carte for each video and they can watch them almost instantly.

Meanwhile, Sling Media, the folks behind the Slingbox, came out with a device called the SlingCatcher to increase the digital content consumers can watch on their TVs. The SlingCatcher allows users to project anything on their PCs onto their big-screen TVs.

TV shows, Web pages, stock quotes and photo galleries all can be viewed on TVs - as long as there's a PC nearby.

-- Smart phones get smarter and more appealing.

Before Apple's App store, finding and installing phone applications was difficult, involving a search of multiple Web sites or navigating through phone menus.

But with the App store it launched in June, Apple made it simple to install new programs. The result is that consumers have downloaded millions of applications and the iPhone has quickly evolved from a phone that's able to do some data functions and access the Web to almost

a miniature PC.

Others are following Apple's lead. Google, for instance, launched its own marketplace to collect applications for new Android phones.

-- Everyone joins a social network.

This was the year social networking grew beyond tech geeks and teenagers.

Most emblematic of the change was Facebook, whose active members swelled from less than 60 million at the end of 2007 to more than 140 million by the end of 2008, propelling it to become the largest social-networking site.

But perhaps more important was social networking's success in the political sphere. Barack Obama used his My.BarackObama.com site to attract and organize thousands of volunteers and first-time campaign contributors, a big part of his successful run for president.

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