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Ghost Master

Posted by Bill Stiteler on 12/16 at 07:44 AM

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Genre: Strategy Sim

Format: CD

Developer: Skinny Puppies

Publisher: Empire Interactive

Mac Port: Zonic

Mac Publisher: Feral Interactive

Minimum System Requirements: 700MHz G3/G4, Mac OS 9.1 or Mac OS X v10.1.3, 256MB RAM (320MB RAM for OS X), 750MB hard disk space, 16MB graphics card

Test System: 800MHz iMac, 256MB RAM, GeForce 2 MX, Mac OS X v10.2.8

Network Feature: No

3D Support: Required

Price: \$50

ESRB Rating: 7+ (Spider, which I assume means "scary." Even the European rating site, www.pegi.info, doesn't explain it)

Availability: Out now

Official Website: www.ghostmaster.com

What if you could make the Sims even more twisted? Oh, sure, you can starve them to death, set them on fire, sink them into suicidal depression, and with the expansions, cause Death itself to show up.

But, let's say that's not enough. Why not just leave the living Sims behind, and raise the dead to torment them? Ladies and gentlemen? Ghost Master.

Ghost Master isn't from Maxis, the creator of the Sims, but from the appropriately-named Sick Puppies, who understand what children understand: scaring people is fun, especially if they can't beat you up later. In GM, you take the role of a commander of the spirit world, sent on missions to terrify



the living, and cause them to run screaming into the night...or at least off the playing field.



You start by choosing your assignment and learning what your goal is. In most cases, it's to scare the bejeezus out of people, but a few have different goals: leading students of the occult to a tome of black magic (so you can acquire the demon they summon) or scaring people just enough so that they'll call the police who'll discover the bodies hidden in the attic. Yeesh.

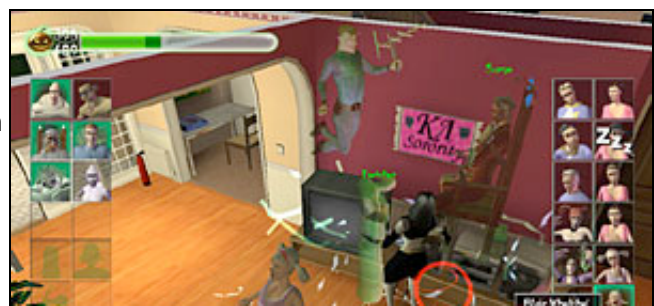
You start off with your team of spooks, each with its own set of powers. You can take the recommended ghosts or choose your own. You assign ghosts to zones within the playing field based on their "fetish;" Some ghosts will only haunt outdoors or indoors, while others are even more specific. Crabjammer, a gremlin, can inhabit electrical appliances and use his power to make them go haywire, but can't enter a room without them. Other ghosts need items that have a strong emotional attachment (a mounted deer head embodies violence), or one of the four elemental forces. Luckily, all potential zones are marked by a dull green border, and when you mouse over them, they explain what fetish they represent. Check out everything. Some may have more than you may expect (a boiler represents fire, water, and electrical), and some may appear where you least expect; planters on the desktop patio can allow you to place an earth elemental that normally would be tied to the ground.



And you'll need every edge you can get, because haunting is no walk in the cemetery. Your ghosts have a wide array of powers, but their use of them is limited by your supply of plasm, or spirit energy. You gain more plasm by scaring the living, and if you can terrify them so much that they flee, you gain the plasm permanently till the end of the level. So you start off with small things, rattling chains, lowering the temperature of the room, and as you unsettle the inhabitants of the house more, move on to apparitions which have no rational explanation: objects flying around the room, people sinking into the earth, and full-blow ghostly appearances.

The humans don't make things any easier. They each possess three stats: Terror (how scared they are right now, and have to become before they flee), Belief (how quickly they become affected by Terror), and Madness (how strong their minds are. Drive a mortal mad and it counts as a flee). Each mortal also has a bio where you can check to see if he/she's afraid of anything in particular. You can also choose to view the house from the point of view of the mortals, letting you know what they're seeing and how they're reacting to it. In one of many throw-away jokes in the game, most of the humans are named after characters from TV or movies. When you begin your tutorial of scaring schoolgirls, they all have names from *The Facts of Life*. In a later mission versus some smug frat boys, they're named after the hated Alpha Betas from *Revenge of the Nerds*.

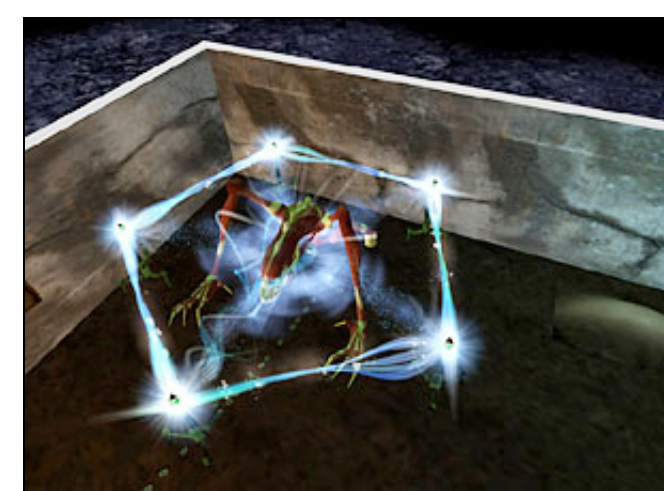
Finally, there are spirits in the house that would join your team, but they're bound to something or someone in the house. If you can figure out how to break the binding, you get them for the rest of the mission, and can select them on later mission. You can also use their powers while they're bound, but can't move them until they're free.



Ghost Master has a surprisingly intuitive interface that allows you move your point of view along all three axis and up and down the stories of multiple-floor houses. You can use the keys to control the tilt and angle of your POV, and mousing to the edges of the screen moves you in that direction. If you have a two-button mouse, it's even simpler: simply select the right button, and the camera angle swerves in whatever direction you choose. The big problem comes when you're trying to select a ghost (on the left side of the screen) or a human (on the right). The cursor will often cause the screen to scroll to the right or the left, screwing up your view.



But now to the meat of the game: the hauntings themselves. You begin with one or two ghosts from your team and start with small powers such as the sound of rattling chains, or mysterious leaks. Things that could be explained away, but that become unsettling as they continue. Once you've got your hooks into the fraidycats of the house, you can bring in more ghosts with greater powers, possessions or spider invasions. Once that happens, make sure you keep after them, as humans will try to find a "safe" place to hide.



The hauntings are easy enough to do if all you want to do is drive people out. Just keep your ghosts in the same area as the humans, and you'll have no problem. The real puzzle of the levels is how to free the ghosts trapped in the house, or how to lead the humans to secondary goals. The game also suffers from a problem common to Sims; if you let it, it'll play itself. More than once I was focusing on an area of the house when one of my ghosts, left to his own devices, was running off the humans. I was missing the game! Once I slowed down, didn't focus on doing the haunting as quickly as possible, and used the mortals' POV feature, the game was a lot more fun. You can also take advantage of the ability to revisit any scenario, trying different techniques, using new team members, or freeing ghosts you missed before. The better a job of haunting you do, the more bonus points you score, which can be spent to improve your team's powers.

The game's graphics are solid, on par with or perhaps even a bit better than the Sims...at least in terms of the special effects. In terms of tone, Ghost Master usually stays within the area of goofy, only rarely straying into the realm of scary. When a deranged professor shows up to stop a summoning, any ability to terrify he has is undercut by his enormous, Bride of Frankenstein-esque afro. Some of the specters have disturbing features, but none of them go beyond what you'd see in any Spencer Gifts around Halloween.

In the end, Ghost Master is a game that, like the Sims, isn't a game to be enjoyed by scoring points or achieving goals. It's about the fun of scaring people out of their wits without really harming them. Strangely, this makes a game about raising and controlling the undead a lot *less* twisted than the Sims.

Applelinks Rating



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