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7.5	Gameplay	7	Graphics	7
	Sound	8	Value	8

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Publisher: Feral Interactive | **Genre:** Action
Mac OS X: 10.1.3 | **Mac OS Classic:** Mac OS 9.2.2
CPU: G3 @ 700 MHz | **RAM:** 128 MB | **Hard Disk:** 600 MB | **Graphics:** 16 MB VRAM

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Ghost Master

November 14, 2003 | Ectal Greenhaw

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You are one of the evil undead, and the Haunting Committee has given you your big break. Lead your own team of ghosts, ghouls, and monsters into the mortal-infested town of Gravenville. Send the gibbering fools screaming into the night. Prove yourself to be an effective manager of the things that go bump in the night.

Along the way, empty a house of sorority girls by filling it with spectral spiders, torment a not-quite-mad scientist until he finally goes over the edge, rescue lost souls, and fill a police station with walls of fire. Are you fiend enough to put fear into the heart of every human who crosses your path? Then this genre-mixing puzzle/strategy/sim should be on your shopping list.

Ghost Master, developed by Sick Puppies, ported by Zonic, and distributed by Feral, is a game that borrows from many movies, television shows, and video games but still manages to come off as fresh and exciting. Its influences may be obvious, but the pieces are put together in some original ways. And how many games have a headless horseman?

Playing this hauntingly charming game, a veteran gamer can't help but think of the great games from the now-deceased Bullfrog. Ghost Master is a game that has elements of Populus, Theme Park, Theme Hospital, and especially Dungeon Keeper. With Bullfrog's Dungeon Keeper, the twist was that, instead of being a hero killing monsters and purloining treasure from an evil dungeon, you managed an evil dungeon filled with monsters and killed heroes before they could steal your treasure. Ghost Master employs a similar "genre inversion" but pokes fun at movies more than video games, unless you choose to see it as a light-hearted jab at the survival horror genre. Perhaps something more like Dungeon Keeper meets Resident Evil would have made a better game.

Ghost Master almost makes one feel as if Bullfrog has come back from the dead, but the game has a certain roughness around the edges that you wouldn't have seen from Molyneux and Co. back in their day. And maybe this game would look a little better if it weren't obviously following Bullfrog's style of turning conventional game play on its ear.

Ghost Master also borrows heavily from the Sims — the humans speak in a language suspiciously similar to Simlish — and has references to more movies and cartoons than I can keep track of. There are ghosts that come straight out of Casper, Ghostbusters, Scooby Doo and countless black and white horror flicks. Playing on movie titles, the levels have names like Deadfellas, Calamityville Horror, Weird Séance, and Poultrygeist. Many of these play off of the plots of popular movies. The best reference has got to be the level modeled after *Evil Dead.*

Game play

When you first fire up Ghost Master, you are greeted by playful ghost movie music, very reminiscent of a Danny Elfman score. After an impressive opening movie, the player is prompted by some mortals seated around a Ouija board, "Spirit, what is your name?" Controlling the planchette, you enter your name. The foolish mortals look adequately spooked. Then you find yourself looking at the main menu, the mood a little broken.

Now to get to work for the Haunting Committee. You, the haunter, have been hired to lead a team of ghosts to terrify the residents of a little town called Gravenville. I suppose that's just what evil undead civil servants are supposed to do (not too different from ordinary civil servants, really). The first level functions as a simple tutorial, and in about 10 minutes, you should have the basics of game play down.

In order to deploy your haunters, you attach them to "fetters" which fall into categories like "electrical", "emotional", and "corpse". The gremlin-like Cogjammer must be tied to appliances, and

the banshee Weatherwitch must be placed on thoroughfares, such as hallways and sidewalks. Much of the strategy game involves finding well-traveled rooms where your ghosts can be moved. Occasionally, you find yourself frantically searching every object in the house to find the one that will gain your favorite ghast entry into the material world. Fortunately, there are a few ghosts who can just be placed in any room.

The resource system for the game is as unusual. There is one resource, called Plasm. You need a certain amount to deploy ghosts, and a little extra to use more powerful haunting abilities. The more people you scare, the more Plasm you're awarded. The more ghosts you have deployed and the scarier you are, the more Plasm you're using. It's a refreshingly simple system.

Once placed, the ghosts can use a number of abilities. How scary you want them to be is up to you, what goals you're trying to achieve, and how much Plasm you have available. For those who want to micromanage, you can give orders to ghosts, telling them to limit what powers they use or to only chase certain mortals. Adding a tiny bit of RPG flavor, the ghosts gain experience each time you use them.

At the end of a level, you are awarded points for how quickly and how well you achieved your goals. You can use these points to choose new abilities for your haunters, adding another touch of RPG play to the game.

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Before each level, keeping in mind the talents and fetters of your haunters, you assemble a team of ghosts to accomplish your goals. Each level has a default team that insures you can meet the primary goals of the level. The levels themselves are, for the most part, well designed. It is chillingly easy to understand the goals and once you get the hang of the game, you can usually puzzle out what's expected of you. And not all of the goals involve simply clearing out all the pesky mortals from a house. You'll find yourself convincing a mob boss that ghosts exist, helping students summon an evil spirit, and freeing trapped ghosts. In fact, you'll do a lot of freeing trapped ghosts. That's where the puzzle design gets hauntingly wonky. Some of these puzzles involve a lot of fiendish sitting around waiting for the right person to wander into the right room, and it's often not clear which person or how to get them there.

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One also has to wonder why you can't save in the middle of a mission. It ends up not being too big of a hassle, since most scenarios can be finished in about 15 minutes, but I really don't understand why a feature like saving during a level is left out. It doesn't add to the game, and you may find yourself haunted by the spirit of annoyance if you suddenly have to stop playing.

Overall, the game play is solid. It's easy to get into it quickly, and you seldom find yourself frustrated. This is not a game that will have you pounding the keyboard. You just smile a little and pass a few comfortable moments. It's actually quite relaxing.

Graphics

The graphics are adequate. Some of the effects for the haunting abilities are nice to look at, the levels themselves look good and have realistically laid out buildings, the characters are all very well designed, everything's in its right place.

But something just seems to be missing. For one thing, it's all a little blocky. The art style is great, but the quality of the graphics could have been a little crisper. It sort of reminds me of the days when labeling a game "With 3D Graphics!" was a novelty, the sort of thing publishers would print on the box in giant letters. The upside to the less-than-stellar graphics is that you can expect the game to run smoothly on any fairly recent machine.

Sound

The sounds are excellent. The faint moaning and the rattling chains that attract the curious mortal, the creepy footsteps following one victim around the house, the sudden crack of thunder … If the game weren't so playful and goofy, you might get chills.

The music is great, even if it's not the most original. I'm sure they would have hired Danny Elfman if they could have, and they've done a good (and respectful) job of mimicking his style. This is the kind of music you hear when you walk up the steps of the haunted house at the carnival crossed with the soundtrack to *Beetlejuice* or *The Nightmare Before Christmas.*

Value

This game offers something you don't see in many computer games: short gaming sessions. You can sit down and enjoy the game for 20 or 30 minutes and not get sucked in for the whole night. It's a light, non-taxing game with a decent amount of replayability. Assuming you like this kind of game at all, your entertainment dollar is well spent here.

Conclusion

Ghost Master is a game that tries to get by on its premise alone, and it succeeds, despite a few minor flaws. It's unusual and a nice break from the average sim game. It's an amusing game that's easy to get pulled into, and it doesn't demand too much of the player. It's just fun. The easiest way to sum it up is to say: If you like the premise, you'll almost certainly like the game.

10 Reader Reviews submitted. Average Rating: **8.5**

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