

Stubbs The Zombie

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In the midst of a futuristic city, a rotting, green-skinned zombie in a fedora hat and ruined suit shambles across the landscape. Spotting a lone citizen, he quietly creeps up, grabs his prey and begins to chew through the skull, miniature geysers of blood spurting as the victim thrashes and screams. The zombie throws the victim aside and moves on. Strangely enough, he's the good guy.

Welcome to Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse, one of the most innovative, gory and controversial video-game titles available this holiday season. Developed by Wideload Games and recently released for the Macintosh and Windows operating systems as well as the Xbox video-game console, Stubbs allows players to take on the role of a brain-eating zombie attempting to rediscover his past after being awoken from the dead.

Built on a modified version of the game engine used for Bungie's best-selling Halo series, Stubbs functions as a third-person action/strategy title with a new angle. Players must fight through the game's levels using not the abilities granted to most video-game characters (such as near-indestructibility and an almost unlimited arsenal), but with those that might be available to the undead.

Here, your character must fight using the weapons available to an animated rotting corpse: his body parts. Players can stun enemies with unholy flatulence, hurl "gut grenades," which function as remotely detonated explosives, and detach one of their hands to possess enemies. If none of these options is available, players can always go hand to hand

with enemies, killing them to bring them back as controllable undead allies. Attach a second controller to the Mac, PC or Xbox console and a split screen co-op mode becomes available wherein two players assist each other throughout the game.

Like many action titles, strategy serves as a central point in *Stubbs the Zombie*. The character, which isn't that durable, must make the best decision at any given time. Superior numbers can be overcome through the clever use of abilities or tactics such as transforming nearby citizens into zombies to create a mob capable of overrunning an enemy position. Health and ability points can be regained through devouring the brains of enemies, but the key is to survive and formulate a plan to forge ahead.

Not without a sense of humor, the game pokes fun at itself via an over-the-top 1950s Americana setting, complete with comic-book style buildings, robots and Truman-era stereotypes that seem to have stepped out of an episode of "Leave It To Beaver." Players quickly learn the basics of the game (such as how to devour brains and use special abilities) at the hands of Guide Bot, a robot aid who mistakes Stubbs for a new citizen of the city and never seems to notice the horrible violence he inflicts upon those around him.

Stubbs the Zombie highlights the idea of an anti-hero within a video game. Here, the conventional mores of a generically good central character that accompany video games are thrown aside. The player must buy into the idea that they are an animated, undead corpse and must find a greater goal after clawing their way to the surface in the futuristic city of Punchbowl, Pa., on its opening day and being set loose to wreak havoc upon the populace.

On the negative side, *Stubbs the Zombie*, which has received a "Mature" rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board for content and is considered appropriate only to players 17 years or older, has drawn its

share of criticism. The National Institute on Media and the Family, a non-profit organization centered around media and its effects on children and families, has included the title among the 12 games to avoid purchasing for children and teens in its 2005 MediaWise Report Card Buying Guide.

Backed by Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., who has been quoted as calling the game "the worst kind of message to kids," a spokesperson from the group illustrated the idea that cannibalism and violence were presented in a joking, cartoonish way that left room for parental confusion as to what the title's content might be.

"Games have been getting a lot more attention since they're viewed as children's entertainment and there are now more adult gamers," said Matt Scates, lead quality assurance analyst for Aspyr Media, the publisher of the Stubbs the Zombie game. "We're a mature title and we get attention for that.

"This was expected," said Scates. "We got attention for the technology it was built on, a title in which you could play as a zombie and the comedy/goriness of it too."

Stubbs the Zombie may not be for everyone, albeit a creative, original and fun game that offers new ideas as to what a game can be. Here lies an action game, a strategy title and a strange love story all rolled into one. Whether it's appropriate for everyone remains to be seen.

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