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Ghost in the Sheet

Become a ghost wrapped in a dirty sheet and go to work as a "ghostcatcher" in an abandoned, bucket-filled factory

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Genre: Fantasy Adventure
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Platform: PC

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When I was a little kid, I had some strange ideas. Much to my delight, I've recently discovered that at least one of them wasn't too misguided after all. Ghosts -- some of them, anyway -- actually do go around dressed in sheets.

Welcome to *Ghost in the Sheet* (*GitS*), an unconventional ghost story gift-wrapped in a deliciously wicked little game. It was put together in less than a year by just two people: Jan Kavan (*Dark Fall: Lights Out* , *Barrow Hill*) and Lukas Medek, collectively known as Cardboard Box Entertainment (CBE).

I think they've done an amazing job. Among other things, they've actually managed to make death *funny*.

Interestingly, the game was originally shorter (a scant seven screens, in fact), there were no voiceovers, and it was to have been offered as downloadable freeware/shareware. But publishers started expressing interest, the game grew to 65 backgrounds, 20 cutscenes and 14,000 words; voice talent was added, and bam -- Bob's your uncle.

If *GitS* is any indication, you can toss out your ideas concerning a pleasant after-death existence. Playing as the title character ("Ghost"), we depart this mortal coil after having been run down by a truck ("My whole life appeared as a shortcut in my head..."). We soon discover that we must stay wrapped in a dirty sheet to keep our astral remains from flying apart.

Adding insult to mortal injury, we must also work for a nasty, self-proclaimed Boss who runs a "ghostcatching organization" -- sort of a reverse-ghostbusters. He demands that we call him "Sir," threatens to take away our sheet if we don't carry out his orders, and is aided in his nefariousness by an assistant quite fittingly named Oozy. So much for the Great Beyond, eh?

Our first assignment is to solve a mystery in an abandoned, curiously bucket-filled factory called Sector Omega. It seems that people have died here but their souls haven't made it "through the tunnel" where they can be drafted into the Boss's service, much as we were. It's up to us to discover what's causing the backup.

During this process, we meet and interact with other dead (or worse than dead) folks who have taken various forms, all of whom represent people who worked at the factory. One of them isn't even aware of being dead. And oddly, no one seems to know what was being made at Sector Omega.

We also encounter a live (but not for long) human and an honest-to-goodness monster. How could we have been so lucky to land here instead of Paradise?

Seeing as how Ghost has no corporeal self -- and thus, neither do we -- we must acquire various paranormal skills in order to interact with the game's environment. The Boss generously supplies us with telekinesis, with the stern caveat that we have to figure out how to use it ("This isn't a kindergarten!").

We learn other skills along the way, including the ability to command light and wind, make scary sounds, and impart electric shocks (my favorite). I found it refreshing and quite unique to encounter skill-building, traditionally a feature of RPGs, in an adventure game.

I adore black humor, and *GitS* has plenty of it. For instance, when Ghost sees a No Smoking sign, he voices the opinion that a Stop Bleeding sign would have been more appropriate. And after the game's hungry monster agrees not to eat us and Ghost expresses relief, the monster tells us he was only joking.

Subtle references to CBE as well as other assorted witticisms are scattered throughout the game. *GitS* never takes itself too seriously, and while it can be unsettling in spots, it definitely has more laughs than scares.

The game is presented in 1st-person slide-show format. It also offers two features that get my endorsement every time: unlimited save slots (or at least more than I was able to use), and non-linear gameplay.

Although the point-and-click interface is simple enough, a short tutorial is presented at the beginning of the game to insure that everyone understands what to do. I did find some aspects of the navigation initially confusing, however.

After moving to a new location, there were times my POV would show the spot I'd moved to *as seen from afar* (for instance, from across a room) rather than present a display of my new surroundings in 1st-person POV. And often, after moving forward through a door, I'd end up facing where I'd been rather than where I was going, as if I'd turned around.

Also, to advance further into an area it was often necessary to click the bottom of the screen, which made it seem as though I were backing in (and once again turning around). Other times, clicking the bottom of the screen would simply cause me to make a 180-degree turn, and there would be nothing readily discernible in what I then saw to indicate that I was still in the same spot, just facing in the opposite direction.

I found all of these things rather counter-intuitive, and they proved confusing until I became accustomed to the game's conventions for moving around. After awhile, I was actually able to discern a kind of logic to it all, and I had no problem getting from one place to another.

I also discovered that a screen can't be exited when a paranormal skill is active. In such a situation, one can click on an exit repeatedly and nothing will happen, nor will there be any indication of what the problem is. Realizing what I'd been doing wrong was worth a definite forehead-smack.

Moving through the factory's innards can be challenging at first, particularly for folks whose sense of direction leaves something to be desired, as mine does. Fortunately, I found a map of the factory's layout early on, which really helped. Further, all exits in any location can be displayed by pressing the Tab key. This also helped.

There is no inventory system in *GitS*, which only stands to reason. I mean, where's a Ghost in a Sheet gonna put stuff?

Instead, players rely on the aforementioned paranormal skills to solve the game's puzzles, which vary in complexity. Most are logical and well-integrated, consisting of such things as turning on and operating machinery, and unlocking doors. One of the puzzles involves sound, but I didn't find it inordinately difficult.

There are also a couple of mini-games that require completion before one can advance in the game. In order to unlock a door, for example, you must rid an area of rats. But the developers are quite considerate and have made it possible for anyone who doesn't care for the mini-games to bypass them entirely and still reap their rewards simply by pressing the Backspace key.

I did get stuck on a puzzle toward the end of the game that requires math calculations, and solving it took me awhile. Okay, it took more than awhile -- but I happen to royally stink at math. I doubt it will be such a high hurdle for everyone.

The good news is that there are no mazes, timed sequences or slider puzzles, and you can't die -- you're already dead. Heh. Life (or in this case, death) is good.

The game's clever dialog runs the gamut from relatively serious to laugh-out-loud funny. The character of Ghost is portrayed by German voice-over artist Klemens Koehring, who has also appeared in *Delaware St. John Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*, *Rhem 3*, and *Anacapri the Dream*. For me, he was the perfect choice. His distinctive accent and deadpan delivery greatly enhance the proceedings. Overall, the game's other voice acting, although a trifle stiff at times, is also nicely done.

GitS was created in the Czech language and later translated into English, making the dialog understandably -- and forgivably -- bumpy in spots. (Check out the instructions for using the Tube Post and you'll see that they're still in Czech.) But none of this interfered with my enjoyment of the game.

Unfortunately, I did find some of the dialog trees a little confusing. For instance, I could exhaust a particular line of conversation and its choice would remain visible and clickable. And sometimes -- not always -- I had to go back through previously spoken dialog in order to access new choices that were triggered by something said in the interim.

Also, dialogs sometimes ended without an exchange having being completed, and I had to click on the character with whom I'd been speaking in order to finish the conversation. There was one instance where spoken dialog differed from the dialog text displayed in the game's non-optional subtitles. It appeared as though the text may have represented a question to which the spoken dialog was the answer. But this minor detail took nothing away from the gameplay or overall story.

I do, however, have a definite "take heed" for you. I believe this is the first game I've ever played that doesn't include an "Are you sure?" dialog after one clicks on Exit to leave the game. I've clicked Exit buttons without meaning to in other games, and I've always been happy to see a confirmation screen where I can say "oops" and resume the game.

In *GitS*, when you click Exit, you *exit*. Unless you've just saved your game, all progress since your last save is lost.

Similarly, if for some reason you decide to start a new game while already in the midst of one -- which is something I did during the course of writing this review -- you won't be asked if you want to save the game in progress first. This is another instance in which it's possible to lose everything since your last save.

The graphics in *GitS* are nicely rendered and convey the factory's grimy and slightly sinister atmosphere very effectively. The factory's inhabitants -- two of them in particular -- are realized with impressive originality.

Most of the cutscenes are presented comic book-style, reminiscent of those used in *Return to Mysterious Island*. The ones in *GitS* are a little more crudely drawn, but I found them clever and appealing.

The game's music is spot-on. Much of it is either ominous -- some with slightly sinister wordless vocalizations -- or has a carnival flavor. Some of it reminded me of the music in *Still Life*, which is definitely not a bad thing. And what game with "Ghost" in the title would be complete without JS Bach's *Toccata in D Minor*? (Think *Phantom of the Opera*...)

GitS is also full of unsettling noises such as a squeaky door hinges, coughing, whistling, whooshing, sighing, and decidedly creepy moaning. I discovered even more of these when, via the Options screen, I decreased the volume of the Music and Speech and cranked up the Sound option. At one point, I heard something that sounded like a car alarm and initially thought I was hearing it for real through one of my open windows. Much to my relief, at no time did I think I was hearing shrieking coming from my bedroom...

The vast assortment of background noises in *GitS* had my mind conjuring up all sorts of ghastly things. Way to go, CBE. Hitchcock would have been proud.

Overall, I had a rollicking good time with *GitS*. It's a game with many subtle nuances to be savored, and as it's relatively short (maybe 6-8 hours unless you hit some really big snags), I suggest taking your time and checking out everything. Otherwise, you might miss some very amusing quips.

Despite its rough spots, *GitS* is a solid first outing for Cardboard Box Entertainment. By turns, it's quirky,

funny, imaginative, macabre, silly (in a good way) and creepy, with a great showdown at the end. I mean, who could ask for anything more?

Final Grade: B

If you liked this game, then
Play: *Grim Fandango*, *Scratches*
Watch: *The Others*, *Ghostbusters*, A butt-kicking rendition of *JS Bach's Toccata & Fugue in D Minor* on YouTube
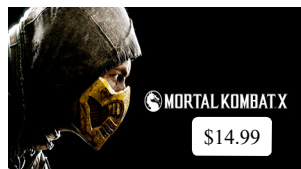Read: *The Mangler* by Stephen King

System Requirements:

Windows 2000, XP or Vista
GHZ+ CPU
256 MB RAM
300 MB Disk space
CD-ROM drive
DirectX-compatible Graphic Adapter capable of displaying 1024x768x32
DirectX-compatible sound card
Mouse
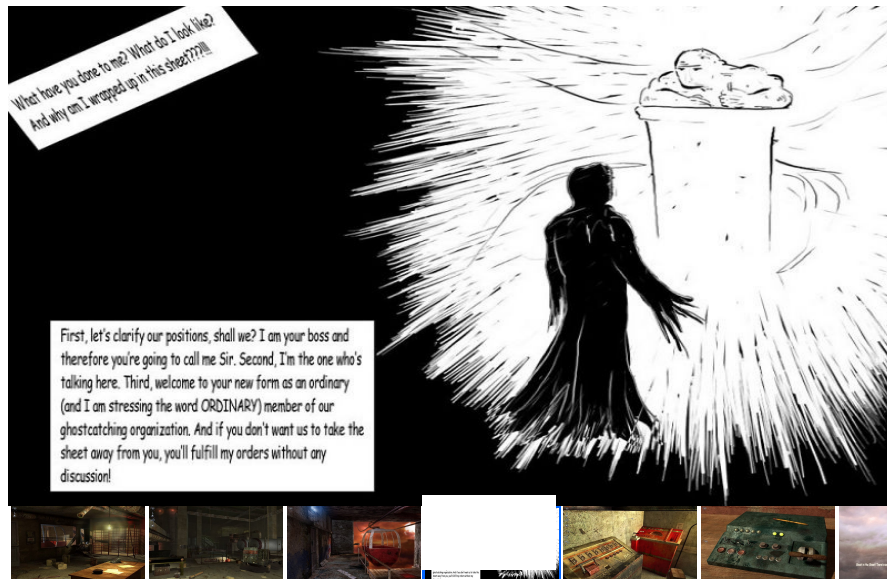
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