



## Bulb Boy REVIEW

### The Good:

Intelligent, often rapid and intense gameplay; some genuine scares; quirky, fantastic art; superb animation; adorable hero; well-rounded entertainment.

### The Bad:

Very short; some segments require extensive trial and error to resolve and may frustrate players not too adept with precision mouse control.

### Our Verdict:

The Bulb Boy's brief but brilliant battle to reclaim his home from the hideous monsters of the night underscores the proverbial victory of light over darkness, and quality over quantity.



Scoring System - Editorial Policies

Written by **Shuva Raha** — December 7, 2015

Lighting up a dark, dangerous world is never an easy task, and in *Bulb Boy's* case, it's downright injurious to health. The bright little bulb's idyllic existence with his grandfather – a cranky old oil lamp – and his flying pet Mothdog is interrupted one night when his home is invaded by a battalion of hideous monsters. Bulb Boy wakes from slumber to find the Bulbhouse in shambles and Grandpa gone, and must battle the infestation of these seriously ugly and vicious adversaries to restore order to his world.

The eponymously-titled *Bulb Boy*, developed by Polish indie studio Bulbware, is a sharp and clever 2D point-and-click adventure peppered with mouse-based action sequences. While not difficult, some of

these segments require strategy and practice to get the timing *just right*, but squeaking through life-threatening situations in Bulb Boy's virtual reality is always perversely exhilarating. Evil lurks in shadowy corners of the green- or red-stained screens, and the deceptively simplistic cartoony art uses many little details to illustrate the devastation caused to the otherwise well-kept Bulbhouse by the monsters. The easy and intuitive mechanics, smart puzzle design and tense action keep you hurtling from screen to screen as Bulb Boy seeks a way out of the nightmare. Clocking between one to two hours depending on how often you die (and there are many bloodcurdling ways to bite it), the game is very short but great fun while it lasts.

The story starts in Bulb Boy's living room, on an ordinary evening spent watching TV and chatting with Grandpa. A brief sequence as Bulb Boy retires for the night introduces you to the minimalistic controls: all interaction and movement is done by left-clicking the mouse in various combinations. This is easy to adapt to, and yet requires skill and planning during the more complex interactions which use principles of physics like inertia and momentum for added difficulty. For example, when Bulb Boy has to make his way through a minefield of gnashing teeth, you must time his movements with precise clicks. Other situations require rapid clicking to run away from monsters or resist getting sucked into holes and mouths, scooting around in certain patterns to avoid detection or traps, and organising sets of objects to create makeshift devices or route the movements of other creatures. There are some simple inventory-based puzzles as well, made easier since the mini-quests are limited to three or four objects at a time.

Bulb Boy navigates the monster-infested house one self-contained, scrolling room at a time, including the living room, kitchen, bathroom and the murky sewer system beneath it, by making good use of two peculiarities. The first is that he can detach his oversized head from his tiny, vaguely humanoid body and use the lit bulb to distract monsters; and second, unlike the monsters, he is immune to electrocution. These assets are used in innovative ways to counter the constitutional frailty of having a glass head and subvert his dangerous, but essentially dumb, opponents. Bulb Boy mostly explores alone, but there is a well-knit sequence of tandem play with Mothdog, as well as a short and *creakingly* slow segment where you step into Grandpa's shoes. While progress is highly linear and generally logical, if you do get stuck, there is a hint system to nudge you over the bump.

The plot to save Grandpa from the monsters is straightforward, but it isn't clear where they have come from and why they are attacking the Bulbhouse – or even, at a larger level, if all this is actually happening and isn't merely a lucid nightmare brought on by bedtime stories. We do get some insight into Bulb Boy's daily life via three subconscious sequences – brief, dreamlike playable interludes triggered when he gets knocked out. Free of the oozing corruption, these bright and merry scenarios are a *mélange* of picnics and fishing trips with his beloved Grandpa and pet. They remind us that Bulb Boy is just that – an adorable, innocent child, thrust into a vicious death-match from which there is no retreat if he wants to save those he loves. His evolution from a quivering boy terrified of a little spider-monster in his room, to a determined soldier who stands his ground no matter what heinous challenge is thrown at him by adversaries several times his size, is pretty super-heroic.

The game is defined as much by the monsters as its hero, and there are some awful ones, including but in no way limited to: a skinned, headless chicken that tromps about with crunching, mechanical steps; a gigantic poop-monster wearing a disquieting geisha mask; creepy, colourless worms that swarm the sewer drains and can instantly snuff the light out of Bulb Boy; glowing-eyed, fast-moving spiders; and a truly outlandish mega-villain that defies description. It isn't always possible for Bulb Boy to defeat these fiends, so he needs to plan and time his movements to bypass them. This usually involves trial and error, and missteps lead to spine-chillingly inventive deaths for our hero. Bulb Boy can die often depending on your

dexterity (or lack thereof), but resurrects immediately, with the efficient auto-save mechanism allowing you to resume from the start of the fatal sequence. Though his deaths make you cringe *every single time*, they also amplify your determination to succeed, making each mini-win a triumph to savour (very briefly) before the next calamity ensues.

Not everyone is an adversary, though. Mothdog is a loyal and useful pet that can fly, perform basic functions like picking up things, and get into spaces too small for his master. And along the way Bulb Boy finds love, an electric connection that saves his skull on several occasions. Bulb Boy and his pals speak in cutesy gibberish which is translated via thought bubbles containing an image or two to define the objective. The lack of conversation isn't a deterrent to progress, as the events are self-explanatory and the image-clues are easy to interpret. There is some offbeat humour as well, mostly involving various bodily emissions, including an entire section based on a giant and violent pile of poop.

A huge repository of sound effects compensate for the absence of dialogue. A steady background hum is created by the buzz of insect wings or trickling water or Grandpa's raucous snoring. Over that and the funky pop-electronica music that plays continually in the background, we have the business side of things: assorted shrieks and cries, the Terminator-esque footsteps of the headless chicken, flushing toilets, crashing glass, exploding monsters, gurgling digestive juices, and the aforementioned bodily emissions. One painfully memorable sound is the delicate crunch of Bulb Boy's head getting crushed when assaulted, its quietness a grim reminder of his fragility in the face of overwhelming odds.

The other half of Bulb Boy's intense audiovisual experience comes courtesy of the simple but quirky art that packs in far more minutiae per screen than you might realise at a cursory glance, be it the items on shelves and tabletops, or in the detailing of the monsters. The screens are two dimensional and monochromatic, tinted either green or red, but clever use of light and shadow delivers an illusion of depth and lurking horror. Most of the Bulbhouse is couched in darkness after the attack, lit only in swathes by the light from Bulb Boy's head. The illumination arc moves as he turns his head or walks about, adding drama to even the most ordinary rooms, and is also used as a plot device on occasion. The game boasts a *lot* of top-notch animation: the creatures move with amazing realism, some darting dangerously while other lurch about, and Bulb Boy's smooth, sprightly actions are superbly executed. Ambient animation like idly waving silhouettes of branches outside windows, or various creatures going about their lives in the background of the raging war add to the atmosphere.

*Bulb Boy* is an all-too-brief but riveting rollercoaster ride of alternating horror and hope. Physically fragile but heroic nevertheless, Bulb Boy is an endearing lead, and the awful odds stacked against him invest you in ensuring his success. The intelligent, frequently action-oriented game design maintains palpable urgency without ever being too physically demanding, and the repulsive, brutal monsters keep you entrenched deep in the nightmare. The stylistic choice of using monochromatic screens and cartoony art works fabulously due to the detailing and adept animation, and combined with the music and sound effects delivers an immersive sensory experience. Bulb Boy's innocence and love for his family amid the mayhem is the crux of this story, a tale of good versus evil, the power of light against encroaching darkness. *Bulb Boy* is quite evidently as much a labour of love for its developers as the adventure is for its hero, and is easily one of those awesome games that leave you yearning for more.