Plants vs. Zombies: Simply Fun.... for Everyone

Brought to you by the good folks at PopCap games, *Plants vs. Zombies* is an elegantly designed game that keeps things fresh from start to finish. The basic formula of Plants vs. Zombies is similar to other Tower Defense style games. You use a series of weapons to defend a castle from oncoming waves of monsters. In this case you play the role of a home owner with cartoon zombies slowly marching toward your house. Your job is to use a series of sunflowers, pea-pods, walnuts, and other backyard flora to ward off the oncoming horde.

Technically, the graphics are simple, clean, and very attractive. The music is friendly and helps maintain the mood. The sound effects are simple and appropriate. The story is clever and throws in some interesting characters and twists along the way. All of these elements are necessary, but not sufficient, for a game to be good. Without a core of great gameplay it just wouldn't be fun. In the case of *Plants vs. Zombies*, the gameplay delivers.

The pacing is absolutely spot-on, and new game elements are introduced at every level. For me, where it really hits the mark is by *limiting* the number of plants available to use in each round to six. This simple gameplay element represents a maturity in game design that is great to see. The designers have given the player an element of pre-planning and strategizing that takes place before the zombies start their ominous march across your lawn. This makes each level unique and customizable to the players taste. If your first set of plants doesn't work, you can change them and try the level again. Add in the ability to purchase special items, clever new zombies in each level (pole vaulting zombies, armored zombies, floating zombies, dancing zombies, etc...) and you've got a complete game that pulls you in and keeps you there.

Plants vs. Zombies is available for both Windows and Macintosh computers, and features a free demo (download it at PopCap.com). If you've read this far, I encourage you to give the demo a try. I ask a favor of you if you do: install it and play it until the timed demo expires. Don't look at the clock before you start (really don't even glance). When the time expires, guess how long you were playing. Send your guess to me at betrusak@potsdam.edu. I'll compile the results and feature the results in next month's column.

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