

THE FILMS OF UWE BOLL

VOL. 1: THE VIDEO GAME MOVIES (2003-2014)

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"ENTERTAINING CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF
UWE BOLL'S WORK!" - MARK A. ALTMAN
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INTRODUCTION

Video games have come a long way, baby. What started as an interactive abstract take on ping pong has morphed into a multi-billion dollar a year industry. When certain video game franchises started making oodles and oodles of money, Hollywood came a knockin' to adapt these beloved properties for the silver screen. Street Fighter, Mortal Kombat, and Resident Evil notwithstanding, audiences didn't flock to the cinema to watch their interactive favorites writ large. However, they sell pretty well on DVD and Blu-ray and tend to be made on a meager budget. Thus, video game movies continue to be released.

No director has made more live-action video game feature films than Uwe Boll. Holding a PhD in Literature from The University of Siegen, Dr. Boll has shot nearly a dozen of these pictures. It should be noted his full filmography is quite varied and not just limited to video game adaptations; his other movies are often dramas with political elements and shall be covered in two more forthcoming volumes: The Films of Uwe Boll Vol. 2: The

Early Drama Movies (1992-2008) and The Films of Uwe Boll Vol. 3: The Later Drama Movies (2009-2016).

Boll has adapted games from a variety of genres: survival horror (Alone in the Dark), first-person shooter (Far Cry), and comedy (Postal). Many have noted over the years that it's better to adapt a short story as a film than a novel. It has enough of a germ of an idea to get you started while not being beholden to a boatload of characters and scenarios. Outside of the adventure and RPG genres, video game narratives are often quite slim. Closer to short stories than novels, video games might very well be the perfect form to adapt to the medium of film.

In The Films of Uwe Boll Vol. 1: The Video Game Movies (2003-2014), I'm taking a look at his flicks through the lens of how successful they are as films. From House of the Dead to In The Name Of The King 3: The Last Mission, we'll discover the successes, the failures, and everything in between. Uwe Boll is often unfairly portrayed in the media as incompetent merely because his features are unique and different from run of the mill studio fare. Once you get used to his approach to film, you might be surprised at how much you enjoy his works. The humor is dark and off-kilter, and the plot is always moving forward. Things zig when they normally would zag, often with the briefest of explanations. Pacing is favored above all else, leading to a series of films with reasonable run times. A refreshing tonic to the modern-day three-hour comic book cliffhanger epics, Boll's video game films are punchy, disturbing, and more than a little weird.

Most of Uwe Boll's movies are available in both R-rated and Unrated Director's Cuts. We will be looking at the Unrated Director's Cuts unless otherwise specified. The year of release and the name of the distributors are based off when the movie was released originally in theaters or on DVD in the United States. The tag lines are taken from the movie posters, DVD packaging, or movie trailers when applicable.

So sit back, quaff your favorite adult beverage, and enjoy this look at Uwe Boll's video game movie oeuvre. Whether it's spending time with an old favorite or discovering a new one, I hope you walk away with a greater understanding of what makes Uwe Boll so intriguing.

HOUSE OF THE DEAD

YOU WON'T LAST THE NIGHT!

House of the Dead (Theatrical Cut)

(2003; Artisan Entertainment) Director: Uwe Boll; Producers: Uwe Boll, Wolfgang Herold, Shawn Williamson; Screenplay: Mark A. Altman, Dave Parker; Based on the Video Game by: Sega; Cinematographer: Mathias Neumann; Editor: David M. Richardson; Music: Reinhard Besser; Cast: Jonathan Cherry, Kira Clavell, Ona Grauer, Clint Howard, Euka Okuma, Jurgen Prochnow, Will Sanderson.

Uwe Boll's film House of the Dead takes the central premise of zombies and a house and crafts a prequel to the original video game. Mark A. Altman (Free Enterprise) and Dave Parker's (The Brotherhood 2: Young Warlocks) screenplay goes for a somewhat humorous approach to the material. Instead of following a pair of special agents like the video game, it follows a group of young adults going to a rave. Zaniness and ultra-violence ensues.

Things start off with Curien (Jonathan Cherry) lamenting that all his friends are dead. We then flashback to a group of college kids, none of which include the narrator, trying to get a ride to a rave on an island. The camera freezes on all the characters as we get hasty overly dramatic voice-overs from Curien about his friends' personalities and relationships. This is immediately put at odds with scenes of our heroes goofing on each other. The movie then makes the baffling decision to drop the voice-overs altogether until the end of the story. Is this a drama or a comedy? The movie doesn't seem to know yet.

Lest we forget, House of the Dead is a video game centered all around shooting zombies in a gothic mansion. By the time the zombies arrive, you'll have forgotten what game this movie is based on. Once the zombies come, we get plenty of action and gore, but it's a hell of a long time coming. The first few scenes of the film jerk the viewer around from mystery (Why are all of Curien's friends dead?) to romance (Who is Cynthia dating again?) to light comedy (How did Greg miss his shot at the beer bottle?). Granted, this is a unique feeling when viewing a film, but not altogether a pleasant one.

After haggling a bit, the crew boards a yacht piloted by Captain Kirk (Jurgen Prochnow). His assistant is Salish (Clint Howard), a scummy man who looks like the Gorton Fisherman's perverted uncle. The movie improves a great deal when the students travel to La Isla de La Muerte. Clint Howard makes the character one of his own with a daring dollop of perversity.

After having one too many beers amidst a bout of seasickness, Greg (Will Sanderson) vomits all over Cynthia's (Sonya Salomaa) top. She removes her top to clean in it the kitchen sink, but Salish walks in to give her a cross necklace that will "ward off evil spirits and keep you and your friends from harm." She rejects it while baring her breasts and straight up calling him a perv. It's a quirky scene that subverts expectations. In any other horror movie, a character would be given a protective token by a priest. In House of the Dead, it's done by a sailor in the middle of a gratuitous titty shot.

In the midst of the yacht hijinks, we crosscut to a scene that mirrors the opening of Jaws. Instead of a beach, we get a lake. A randy heterosexual couple decides to skinny dip, but only the woman goes through with it. Uwe Boll creates a fair amount of suspense by not showing the zombie in the water at all. There are several point of view shots underwater and some growling, making the viewer assuming a rotting arm is going to reach out and pull her under. Instead, an unseen zombie takes out the guy onshore. Since a zombie has not yet revealed itself, we still feel nervous for the woman even as she swims her way safely back to shore.

The girl from the lake puts her clothes back on and continues to search for her partner in the woods. She reaches the titular House of the Dead, a moss-covered shack. Several zombies appear, including one who reaches a hand through her lover's chest. Zombies circle her, going for her throat as she lets out a bloodcurdling scream in the finest of horror movie traditions.

In some ways, this self contained sequence with the couple is a high point of the movie. It flips some genre conventions on its head, delivers on the zombie quotient, and has a nice bit of gore to boot. This movie is going for lean and mean, but the dialogue is often overwritten when it should be neat and crisp.

The yacht arrives onshore at La Isla de la Muerte. Captain Kirk and Salish unload some contraband as our heroes run towards the beach, excited to find the rave. Lights are still strobing on the stage, but nobody's partying. They venture further until they reach the same house the girl from before. A bespectacled nerd tries to strike them with an axe as Curien stops them because he recognizes Alicia (Ona Grauer). A third new character in the house is Liberty (Kira Clavell), a lively girl donning a top bearing the Stars and Stripes. They review footage from the rave of zombies mowing down the party attendees.

It's around this point where House of the Dead grinds to a bit of a halt as it waffles through plot machinations to get this new group of characters reunited with Captain Kirk and company. On their way back to Kirk's yacht, they run into Casper (Ellie Cornell), a Coast Guard officer trying to nail Captain Kirk for drug running. Jurgen Prochnow looks awesome blowing away zombies at close range as they approach the Lazarus V. Seeing their ride home overflowing with zombies, Simon (Tyron Leitso) makes the idiotic decision to dive off the pier and swim towards it. After confirming that there are, in fact, zombies in the water, he changes direction back to the pier as Casper fires several rounds towards the zombies.

Uwe Boll does a clever job of mixing up the zombie combat. Liberty dives in the water to battle a zombie with her knife. Her struggling in the underwater scenes bring a real sense of panic. Even more impressive is Casper firing a few rounds into the water at the zombies. There's a great shot of a bullet zipping underwater in slow-motion through the swimming zombies. Tired from killing a few dozen zombies, the crew rests as they hear "nothing but an old wives' tale" from Kirk.

Banished from Spain hundreds of years ago for conducting unholy experiments, Castillo (David Palffy) is captured and chained in the bowels of the San Cristobal. Tricking the Captain (Jay Brazeau) into coming closer to him, Castillo chokes him to death, kills the crew, and ventures to the nearest island, La Isla de la Muerte. He seduces the natives and continues his experiments onshore.

This chunk of backstory explains the motivation of the villain. It's a shame it comes in halfway through the film as we see precious little of the main bad guy until late in the third act. Aside from a few close-ups of his scarred face here and there in the woods, we don't learn much about what he's doing or why he's doing it before too much time has passed to care. In some ways, not having a leader of the zombies could have made more sense. If you're going to shoehorn in a villain's motivation in a shallow scene or two, why have one at all? That's more time that can be used for juicy zombie action!

The good guys arm themselves a plenty much like John J. Rambo in Sylvester Stallone's acclaimed films. Captain Kirk busts open a chest of Cuban cigars to reveal a bevy of

weapons underneath: a Mossberg 500 pump-action shotgun with incendiary shells, a machete, a Desert Eagle, flares, and grenades. They form a plan to retreat to the titular House of the Dead until help arrives. In House of the Dead, it's gratifying to see characters powering themselves up with goodies from a box. This scene transitions to the next with a quick clip from the arcade game, furthering the connection between video game and film.

What follows is the most gonzo zombie scene ever committed to celluloid. For a nutty 10 minutes, a wave of zombies storms our heroes as they approach the house. Zombies are dispatched en masse at close-range, from a distance, and everywhere inbetween. The whole sequence being scored to the rap number "Fury (House of the Dead)" from Black Tiger is the hilarious icing on the rotted cake.

Venturing deeper into the house, Curien discovers a laboratory crammed with rotting heads, hands, and feet. He looks through a vintage microscope at mutated blood, helpfully adding "It's completely unnatural... It's fucking genius!" Poor recovering Captain Kirk sees his dear friend Salish as a zombie and chooses to gun him down lest he suffer more. Knowing he's already doomed from an earlier zombie bite, Kirk sets off a stick of dynamite as the zombies encircle ever closer. It's a fun end to a fun character. Of all the actors in the movie, only Jurgen Prochnow and Clint Howard manage to find the right wavelength to play their parts. They are edging on the right side of humorous.

Zombies assault our heroes in the lab, but they find some convenient nearby barrels of gunpowder to stockpile by the door. Everyone except Simon escapes through a trapdoor as

the gunpowder explodes, wiping out even more zombies. The resulting explosion is a great effect, ravaging the house in flame. The good guys delve further beneath the hose to find a torture chamber and Castillo and his army of zombies. Castillo orders his zombie flunkies to tie down Curien.

In a memorable exchange, Curien challenges Castillo on his zombie experiments with, "You created it all to be immortal. Why?" Castillo grins and replies, "To live forever." It's one of those scenes that goes from stupid to dumb to brilliant and back again in mere seconds. Curien kicks himself free as Castillo and his zombies give chase. Castillo survives a few grenades, and challenges Alicia and Curien to a duel with a sword. After all the gunplay leading up to this point, the swordplay is a nice change of pace.

Alicia gets gutted by Castillo, but there's no time for mourning as Curien cuts off his head in retribution. The headless Castillo gets up and strangles Curien. A mortally wounded Alicia stumbles over to Castillo and stomps on his head, squishing it into a fun goopy mess. Castillo's lack of character development robs this final fight of the gravitas it deserves.

A helicopter with two FBI agents lands to rescue the group, but Curien is the only survivor. As he reveals his last name as "Curien" to the agents (lest we forget, the same last name as the bad guy from the original House of the Dead video game), we get another mopey voice-over much like in the beginning that betrays the loosey-goosey tone of the film while setting up a sequel.

If you thought House of the Dead was crazy, it's worth tracking down the rare House of the Dead: Director's Cut

(Funny Version). Featuring enough changes to put other Director's Cuts to shame, this take on The House of the Dead features alternate spoof takes of scenes (Salish offers a topless Cynthia a tea kettle instead of a cross), pop-up commentary including a Man-O-Meter rating the characters' macho behavior, and a more fitting up-tempo music score. Watching the original Theatrical Cut before checking out the Director's Cut is advised.

House of the Dead is goofy and violent zombie fun. Some the characters come off as lame or shallow, but the zombie action is delivered in spades to a ludicrous degree. The tie-in to the video game is slight by any stretch of the imagination, but solid supporting performances from Clint Howard and Jurgen Prochnow make this a fun watch.

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