

Video Game Review: 'Sacred Citadel' is a Retro Refuge

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on April 29, 2013 - 11:10am

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CHICAGO – I like to think most everyone fondly remembers the golden age (roughly 1987 - 1991) of arcade-y side-scrolling beat em' ups. "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles", "The Simpsons", "X-Men", "Golden Axe", "Double Dragon", "Streets of Rage", "Maximum Carnage", and about a half dozen other games had the nation's youth punching, kicking, jumping, and special attacking through quarter after quarter in the arcade, and continue after continue on their home consoles. As game technology blossomed (and "Street Fighter II" came out), these games eventually became fondly reflected-upon relics. But, unless you're, say, seven again, or in an actual arcade, generally speaking side scrolling beat em' ups aren't particularly...good. The XBLA port of "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" was lackluster at best. Missing was both the challenge of seeing how far you could get on your limited, parent funded quarter supply and the magic of discovering the world of videogames, one harrowing boss battle at a time. But, as I was soon to learn, there is always hope; This past Friday I booted up the relatively under-the-radar beat em' up "Sacred Citadel" after haranguing my buddy Mary into playing it with me, literally minutes after the capture of the second marathon Bomber. And call me schmaltzy, but there couldn't have been a more perfect time for some big, dumb, mindless, cathartic, fantasy-inspired cartoony violence.



"Sacred Citadel" makes a great first impression, especially in the A/V department. The menu music is addicting and up-tempo, the thumping bass line is completely different from the kind of thing you'd expect in a fantasy game, and there's an interesting water-color-esque aesthetic that's colorful and unique and harkens back to that golden age I was talking about before where bright colorful graphics reigned supreme. There are a few options like a brightness/volume adjustment slider, and the ability to turn blood on and off, but unfortunately you can't re-bind the controls and there doesn't appear to be multiple difficulty settings, either. Once the game begins proper (after selecting a character class: Mage, Shaman, Warrior, Ranger) you're treated to a fully narrated introduction that kicks in some of that epic "Lord of The Rings" esque music that the menu smartly avoided. The narration is well acted, and while probably a bit of overkill for a silly beat-em-up game, I appreciated the effort SouthEnd studios devoted to immersing players in a world they normally wouldn't have thought twice about.



Sacred Citadel

Photo credit: Deep Silver

The gameplay has heavy roots in the "Golden Axe" franchise, including the ability to ride mounts, drink potions, and activate special abilities to turn the tide against your foes that run the standard fantasy gambit from ogres to goblins to minotaurs and giant angry mutant boars.

Combinations of X and Y will lead to several special attacks like uppercuts, bow strikes, and some class specific skills, as well, to add some depth to the button mashing. The real treat here is the inclusion of some quality RPG elements and a D&D subtext -you have a "character sheet" and everything.



Sacred Citadel
Photo credit: Deep Silver

When I reviewed the pretty terrible "Capcom Arcade Cabinet" I mentioned the best game in that collection was "Black Tiger" which took standard platforming tropes and added RPG elements like loot, mana, and a few other goodies to turn that game in a pretty unique experience. Similar features are present in "Sacred Citadel". You earn both XP and gold from enemies, and they also occasionally drop weapons as well. Leveling up grants you new combos, while new weapons, armor, and secondary attacks become available for purchase as the game goes on. There's also the ability to "enter town" after a level to purchase supplies, and an elemental, uh, element, exists where weapons can either freeze enemies, electrocute, or set them on fire. There's a surprising, and quite frankly welcome amount of depth to "Sacred Citadel" and it's those sort of elements that can make the beat em up' genre relevant again.

But it kind of sucks that the game is equal parts easy and frustrating sometimes. In my research for the game I realized that I was having such success at it simply because whenever you hit an enemy, they become "stun locked" and can't attack until you decide to stop mashing the X button or one of the other dozen enemies on screen get up in your face and damage you. Meanwhile, the boss fights are exercises in horrible frustration, and you'll find yourself dying time and time again until you're finally able to kill one. There are a few other hiccups, sometimes you'll have a hard time figuring out if you're on the correct plane to attack a bad-guy properly, there's no friendly fire, and the lack of a modifiable difficulty setting is disappointing to say the least.



Sacred Citadel
Photo credit: Deep Silver

But, hoo-boy is this game *fun*. Fun in the old-school way, too. Fun in the "We almost got him! His health is halfway gone!", "Quick! run away from him! Distract him!" sort of way, too I had brief subconscious notion to dig a quarter out of my pocket ahead of time just in case I ran out of lives. There's a ton of levels spread across five acts, tons of weapons, tons of spells, tons of enemies, and, well, tons of fun. I know saying a game "makes you feel young again" is a silly thing to say when you're only 27 years old and still can't grow a proper beard, but it does. "Sacred Citadel" manages to evoke nostalgia by ignoring it - taking itself and it's universe fairly seriously, and isn't afraid to play around with the formula in order to keep things compelling for gamers who may never have stepped in an arcade in the first place (speaking of feeling old...). Me and my friend played it for quite a while, kicking the crap out of ogres, checking out FB jokes about the captured bomber while giggling like school children who heard about a guy from nantucket for the first time.

For 1600 Microsoft points, or 80ish quarters, "Sacred Citadel" is absolutely a quality piece of software, especially if you have a friend or two (Up to three people can play ad-hoc on an Xbox) - and while your milage may vary, you could even rediscover a bit of that there beat em' up magic that was all but lost when that arcade you loved (you know the one) closed down.



“Sacred Citadel” was released by Deep Silver on April 16, 2013. The version reviewed was for the Xbox 360 but the game is also available for the PS3 and PC.

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