

Video Game Review: ‘Vandal Hearts: Flames of Judgment’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on February 11, 2010 - 12:26pm

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CHICAGO – The critical phrase that kept surfacing during my playing time of the mini-RPG “Vandal Hearts: Flames of Judgment” was “good for a downloadable game”. The game is flawed but its low purchase price might make it worth a look for fans of old-fashioned role-playing games but most modern gamers will be disappointed.



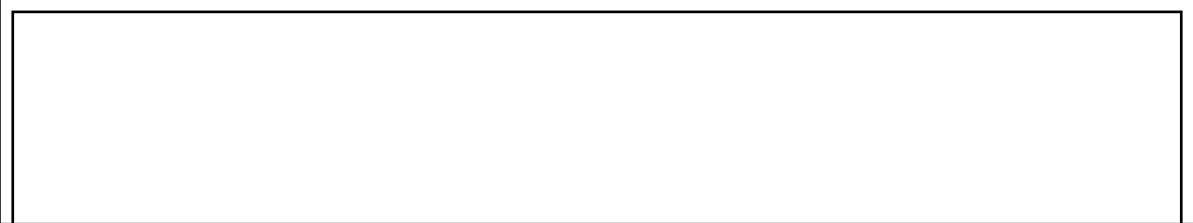
The question is should we lower our expectations when it’s “just a downloadable game”? As anyone who has spent hours with “Flower,” “Braid,” “Battlefield 1943,” or even “Zen Pinball” will tell you the answer is that many of the most entertaining titles of the last few years have not come on a shiny disc and that the bar for games bought on the Playstation Network has been raised in 2010. “Vandal Hearts: Flames of Judgment” starts promisingly but ultimately falls below that bar.



Vandal Hearts: Flames of Judgment
Photo credit: Konami

In the role-playing genre, the simple structure of the turn-based RPG game has understandably been replaced by more expansive experiences like the recently beloved “Dragon Age: Origins,” so it would seem a natural fit to turn the sub-genre into nostalgia, a regular feature of downloadable games.

The original “Vandal Hearts” was released for the first PlayStation back in 1997 but the franchise has been dead for years. The new game includes much of the original’s turn-based and strategy-heavy gameplay but it too often feels like a throwback in more than just gameplay with aesthetic decisions that are a bit baffling and some frustrating flaws that can often deflate the experience just as it’s getting interesting.





Vandal Hearts: Flames of Judgment
Photo credit: Konami

"Flames of Judgment" is an origin story. It feels like a Saturday morning cartoon in nearly every way from its visual style to the fact that you play a young hero tasked with saving the kingdom with a group of fellow adolescent warriors. "Vandal Hearts" features an odd blend of very cartoon-ish graphics with brutal violence - characters spurt blood when killed but look goofy most of the time. Weird.

"Vandal Hearts: Flames of Judgment" is a very basic turn-based strategy game that uses a grid structure. Move a member of your party and issue a basic command like "Attack," "Magic," "Item," etc. The strategy is simple but relatively rewarding in that you'll quickly figure out which characters to give the best weapons and how to use them in conjunction with the more spell-heavy members of your party.

Every time one of your characters does something well, they will gain skill points. For example, kill a wolf with your bow and arrow and it will improve your ability the next time you try to do so. Consequently, the game rewards consistency. Use a character in your group as a more magic-centric one and their magic skills will rise, making them easy to use again.

The problems with "Vandal Heart: Flames of Judgment" are largely inherent in the structure of most turn-based games. Spending half an hour moving animated characters around a battlefield only to have the wrong one die and send you back to your last saved game can be monumentally frustrating. In other words, pick the wrong battle strategy and you will have wasted a LOT of time. In today's gaming world, that much time lost from so many other great games on the market can lead one to delete a downloadable title. You really need to like turn-based strategy games to be patient enough for this title and that alone means it's probably not going to reinvigorate the sub-genre.

The game also has a few graphic and gameplay glitches in that some sections feel visually incomplete. The audio is a bit off at times and, as mentioned, the design choice when it comes to the characters was just bizarre. The turn-based structure was a fun throwback at first but the look of the game deflates that fun after awhile.

And that's the thing about "Vandal Hearts: Flames of Judgment" - all praise is tempered with an "if". It's fun IF you like turn-based RPGs. It's entertaining IF you consider the low purchase price. Most players (especially ones old enough to be familiar with the original) could spend some time with "Vandal Hearts" and not regret the experience or the purchase IF they don't think about it too hard.

'Vandal Hearts: Flames of Judgment' was released by Konami and developed by Hijinx Studioa. It is rated T (Teen). The version reviewed was for the PS3, but the title is also available for download on the XBox 360. It was released on January 21st, 2010.



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