

King Arthur: Knights Tale

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King Arthur wows with an exciting cinematic intro. The arrogant Mordred faces off against his arch-rival, the pompous King Arthur against a backdrop of fantastical warring knights and monsters. In their desperate battle they manage to slay each other. As starting points go, beginning with both the main Hero and Villain dead is a confident opener.

However for reasons so far unknown the Lady Of The Lake decided to raise you, Mordred, rather than King Arthur from the dead. Tasking you to find him and put an end to the chaos now ravaging the Land. It's a intriguing premise, with a lot of potential. Potential that currently Knights Tale comes no where close to realising.

For this iteration of NeocoreGames King Arthur series they are taking from Xcom playbook, rather than the Total War style of the past titles. It's the first in the series to be released in Early Access after a hugely successful Kickstarter project. However even for an Early Access title there is not a lot to do. Just two main missions, the first being mostly a tutorial. Once they are finished after just a few hours you are left with just a handful of optional battles to try.

Lets get the impossible to ignore Xcom comparison out of the way: the medieval fantasy setting where people are mostly whacking each other with big swords does not translate effectively to the Xcom battle system. Where in Xcom, positioning, cover, and the type of ranged weapon matters; here you're best served lining your knights in an armoured row and having a Archer or two shoot from behind. There is a cover system, but in all my time of play I never found a meaningful use for it. Characters may have different abilities but they mostly boil down to either slightly preventing or causing more damage. The battles do get slightly more interesting when fighting the undead, who show up towards the end. As they utilize some AOE attacks, but the punishment for splitting from the armoured huddle is nearly always worse than just taking the group damage. From the time I got my first party member till the last battle available I never found a strategy more effective then the very basic one I started with.

Outside of combat everyone returns to Camelot to relax, although as aspects like the Tavern are currently not in the game I hope they all brought a good book. They can however level up and equip any spoils they found during past missions. Spoils that have noticeable spelling errors and typos. My favourite being a charm that reads "Every time a Hero is it, gain 5% damage". Bringing to mind knights giggling in the Camelot playground playing 'tag'. As most of the buildings are not yet in the game I guess they have to blow of steam somehow. I assume however they meant 'hit'. Camelot itself can be upgraded although currently only in a very limited way, mostly just unlocking the ability to sell or buy items, or heal up your Heroes. Your Heroes will need healing, a lot, it's one of the games main failings.

Health loss is permanent between missions, and if a character dies then they are gone for good, even named 'Hero' characters can be lost. This mortality is compacted with there being no way to save when visiting a location. These locations give the world a coherence that's lacking in most turn-based strategies, but they are large. Most having at least 4 separate battles within them. It can take up to 40 minutes to finish, and you can't retreat from a location let alone an individual battle encounter. This does make things tense, but the price of failure is so high, that the tension is coming from knowing that 30 minutes in, you may have to load up an old save and play it all again. As losing powerful characters will just send you into a fail spiral, as the training ground for new recruits just like the Tavern is not currently available.

I at no point ever felt attached to my party, often struggling to identify which bulbous helmeted portrait was the corresponding hero on the field. As the 4 person group wonder the rather drab and repetitive locations they will give the same voice bark again and again. I not sure which knight it was, so I shall call him Steve. But Steve was constantly amazed and confused by seeing a campfire, (where you can heal slightly mid mission). Proclaiming "What's this" every single time the party gets near one. What part of this core concept of fiery wood are you still not understanding Steve? You're lucky you have the biggest sword.

The campaign map layer gives you options of what battles to fight, but without any information on what you are going into you're never sure whether it's an opportunity too level up some new recruits, (spoiler- it almost never is), or bring your mightiest until it's far to late into the mission. There are also interesting aspects of loyalty within the party. Occasionally you may be asked to make a binary decision, to be the noble knight or a villainous despot. In theory this can effect the loyalty of your party. But it never seemed to make a difference. In addition you get unlocks for being evil or saintly, along with deciding to follow the old gods or embrace Christianity. Some of these unlocks seem rather powerful. Yet the way it's structured means you have to commit fully to a rather cartoonish all or nothing role. There is no place for a moderatist here, this is an aspect of game design I thought we had finally seen the end of.

King Arthur: Knights Tale is currently a shallow muddy lake where some sparkling fish are flapping about, gasping for air. But there's time. There's time for them to dig, to clean, and add water features. There's time for them to make a fantastic home for the beautiful fish, and possibly even the Lady of the Lake herself.

But for now I would not recommend dipping your toe into its waters.

Early Access score as of 2nd February 2021

5/10