Loren The Amazon Princess - PC, Android, Linux, Mac OS (2012)

Quick Info:

Developer: Winter Wolves

Publisher: Winter Wolves

Genre: RPG: Western, Visual Novel  
Themes: Erotic Content, Fantasy: Sword & Sorcery, Independent / Doujin

You probably know about Japanese visual novels and maybe the odd English one, but you may be surprised that an Italian designer has thrown his hat into the genre as well. Riva Celso is an indie developer whom has been making games since 2003, and his Winter Wolves group works mainly within the realms of visual novels. The group is somewhat infamous for their high output with wildly varying quality, but today's subject is definitely one of their better releases. In 2012, they released a game simply known as Loren The Amazon Princess, with an expansion just a few months later. The game is a cross between visual novel and RPG, and it manages quite the tale, even if it doesn't stray too far from the classic fantasy formula ...at least at first. With the expansion, The Castle of N'mar, the game becomes somewhat subversive to what the plain version says and implies.

The game is set in the land of Aravorn, where the princess of the Amazons, Loren, finds that her mother has gone missing. From here, you journey alongside her as a slave, either the male human Saren, or the female elf Elenor, gifted with powerful healing magic and your choice of warrior or thief class. The starting goal is to find Loren's mother, but the story quickly becomes more complicated as it is revealed that demons being lead by a mysterious man in armor named Fost are trying to start a war between humans and the elves. Loren finds a sacred blade during the first chapter and becomes the hero that will save the world ...or she would if she fully realized the importance of the blade from the start.

The yarn told is basic fantasy fair. Evil is rising, different people of the land have to unite to survive, a bunch of strangers of different lands become close allies, and so forth. The interesting thing is that Loren, by all accounts the central character, is not the main character. Instead, your player character is the real star and decides how everything plays out. As far as visual novels go, Loren has limited choices that are relatively easy to read (up until a series of tests during the final area of the game). You mainly branch out into different scenarios that wind back around into the main story, while having the ability to romance other party members through one of the most simplistic systems ever found in a VN.

At certain points during discussions in camp or during the story, you can choose how you reply to a character in either a joking manner, a friendly manner, or a forceful manner. There's also a forth option that occasionally appears simply called "Romance," and it's exactly what you think it is. If you can get affection with a character to five before chapter four and see the proper cutscenes that trigger in camp, you can end up in a relationship with them, or even trigger a special scene if you've been romancing several characters. There's no complexity to it, the only interesting part comes from being able to affect your character's personality, which impacts the game's mood significantly. A friendly character is completely different from a snarky joker (there's even a point where a wizard will turn you to stone for annoying him).

The one really notable thing with the romance system is that the game only has two truly straight characters (with three in gray areas). Everyone else is bisexual or gay, something of a rarity in games like this. The end result is that the player character, no matter which is chosen, has a romantic path with a given party member, with gender changing the dynamic. Loren's path is a good example, as Saren's version adds in some different context and a new scene based around the established role of men within Amazon society.

The story is more interesting with the Castle of N'mar expansion, which adds three former minor characters as possible party members (plus one unexpected new member), new events, and a new series of quests in chapter three that can radically change the game's ending. The material added here challenges the main story's idea that demons are inherently evil beings, showing more complex third parties that aren't necessarily good nor evil. Among the new party members, one has demonic powers, another practices dark magic, and the third is a repenting monk, not to mention the surprise of the last party member. The conversations that play out among these now fleshed out characters gives a bit more complexity to the otherwise simple story, plus creates a true ending that is meant to set up a sequel sometime in the future. It also expands on the ideas of clashing cultures through added character quests, exploring societies like the barbarians and the lizardmen. Said quests are also heavily recommended because they add a ton of depth and back story to most every party member.

While the visual novel elements are incredible bare bones and only saved by the strong personalities of the characters and the lively dialog, the battle mechanics are another story entirely. Unlike most RPGs, Loren puts heavy focus on status effects, buffs and debuffs. As the game continues, more characters gain more skills that add aliments or affect stats, and these can all stack on each other. Yes, someone can both be frozen and burned. I know, it’s nuts. On top of that, some of the most powerful skills can only be done while enemies have the proper aliment attached to them, especially with thief class skills. Enemies play by the same rules as well, as several will focus on slowing down your party through different status effects of their own.

This results in a surprisingly complex system that becomes addicting with the leveling system. You can customize character stats and skills manually to best fit your battle style, meaning characters can be completely different from playthrough to playthrough. For example, the dwarf thief Dora can gain powerful attacks from her thief skill branches that require other status aliments to be used to cause more, or you can focus on her personal skill tree to gain more blunt damage dealing moves, like an area of effect rain of arrows. You can also give most the mages their own powerful personal spells, or throw in mage class skills that are useful for support, like healing aliments or supplying skill points to other party members. The game even lets you play in two different modes, one that offers steady progression, and another that slows progression, but gives every character a ton of skills at start to play with.

The game was definitely made to the best of the team's ability within the given limitations. Minus two strange moments (including one pitiful battle with a dragon), the character portraits all look wonderful, especially with the updated outfits that tone down the skin showing. Backgrounds do get recycled, especially in expansion material, but they're all used in the proper place. The music is wonderful and makes great use of an orchestrated style, with a strong mix of fitting themes for every moment. The grand and epic pieces really stand out, but so do the more reserved themes, such as the game's main theme. It's all sweeping and engaging stuff, while battle voices that trigger while using skills or fighting sounds surprisingly well acted (if you adjust the volume so you can actually hear them, that is).

The battles have a very simple look to them, going more function than style. Characters are placed out in two by three boards on each side of the screen in square or circle borders, and you simply click over one of the borders and select an option from the titles that appear on the side. Information is given further at the bottom, and character order is on the right, changing based on moves selected. The left offers individual character stat and resistance information, including a bar that shows how far a character is from staggering or how close an enemy is to becoming angry and aggressive, making it easier to plan out moves. With so many numbers at play in the battle system, this is greatly appreciated. Text boxes all look perfectly fitting with the setting, while checking character information and changing equipment can almost always be done by just clicking a little icon on the top right of the screen during any point of the game outside battle. You can also save at any time at all with a ton of open save spots, which is something most every game can benefit from.

That battle system mixed with the witty and fun writing on display makes for a surprisingly addictive game and a jewel within Winter Wolves' library. It's definitely something that needs to be tried for any fan of western role-play games or visual novels, and something a ton of other RPGs could take a few ideas from. Making status aliments crucial to battle strategy was a stroke of brilliance.