

Lost Kingdoms (Rune)

GameCube, 2002

Fromsoftware's catalogue can be divided into two distinct eras: the pre-*Demon's Souls* era and the post-*Demon's Souls* era. From, the modest Japanese developer known for its niche, plodding King's Field games, gained international acclaim from both fans and critics for *Demon's Souls* in 2009, effectively putting them on the AAA map. Hidetaka Miyazaki, who had worked on a few of From's *Armored Core* titles, was placed in the director's chair for *Demon's Souls* and really whipped the developer into shape. *Dark Souls*, its successor, made an even larger splash in 2011 with tight game design, competitive online multiplayer, and esoteric myths for fans to discuss. The From seal of quality was solidified, and it was no surprise that 2015's polished *Bloodborne* had high sales worldwide.

Lost Kingdoms ("Rune" in Japan) is an average action RPG that falls firmly in the middle of the pre-*Demon's Souls* era, in 2002, somewhere after the last *King's Field* game and before *Metal Wolf Chaos* and *Enchanted Arms*. It's one of the handful of GameCube RPGs that left Japan and, like its peer, Monolith Soft's *Baten Kaitos*, is all about card collecting and battling.

Fromsoftware's fantasy RPGs often take place in dreary, isolated pseudo-medieval worlds. *Lost Kingdoms* is no exception. A black fog hangs over the kingdom of Argwyll, consuming people and villages, birthing demons, and generally ruining everyone's day. This plot may sound familiar to fans of *Demon's Souls*, albeit with far less detail or character.

King Feobane, like any good RPG king, takes off into the countryside to solve the mystery of the fog and hopefully heal his kingdom. *Lost Kingdoms* begins with Feobane having been missing for some time. Protagonist Princess Katia, Feobane's daughter and runestone card-battler badass, takes the powerful runestone from her father's castle and goes off into the fog after him.

The plot is light, and the character development is essentially nonexistent. There are a handful of NPCs to liven the world, though:

King Feobane of Alanjeh (Katia's Father):

A nondescript king that shakily holds the plot together. In most missions, players are looking to meet up with the King, only to find out he already passed through the area. When Katia finally catches up to her father, the climax of the plot, nothing really happens or changes.

Gurd:

Katia's guide and the owner of the card shop. Players can visit her between missions and can buy cards, sell cards, upgrade cards, or duplicate cards by spending experience points. Her reasons for helping Katia are shrouded in mystery, and she has some pretty funny dialogue. Talking to her sometimes unlocks one of the game's short sidequest areas.

Alexander:

The other functional NPC players can visit from the world map. This guy is completely obsessed with Red Fairies, and rewards players with rare cards for collecting them in dungeons. Not much else to say, though he has a spiritual double in *Lost Kingdoms II* who is equally as goofy.

Helena:

Helena is in many ways the opposite of Katia and that's about the extent of her character. She's dark and mysterious, uses cards, and summons demons for Katia to fight. She's a red herring villain and probably isn't as sinister as she first seems.

Lost Kingdoms is an adventure that experienced players could easily complete in less than five hours. The difficulty is low overall, with a huge and unfair spike during the final encounter. Each stage is entered by selecting it on the world map, which gives the game a disjointed, mission rhythm rather than feeling like a long journey. There are only a handful of areas in the game, and they cannot be returned to until after the final boss is defeated. This limits the time a player can spend with the game, though there isn't much exploration to be done anyway. Players can grind for experience by repeatedly abandoning missions halfway through.

Every dungeon is extremely linear and features a simple puzzle to get to a boss. Occasionally, a stray NPC, usually dying on the ground, gives Katia some advice or ominous flavor dialogue. None of the levels are long enough to be taxing on the player's resources and can be summed up nicely in one word. There's a desert area, a bridge, a cave, a graveyard, the lava level, etc. *Lost Kingdoms'* levels are either dreary or forgettable, but the overcast, neutralized grays and browns that make up the majority of the game offer a consistent and striking atmosphere.

Battles are semi-random, activated when Katia moves over certain spots on the map. Once a battle starts, the map dissolves into a closed-off battle arena. Combat is in real-time, which is both exhilarating and sort of annoying. Players must keep Katia moving to avoid enemy attacks, a task made difficult if the terrain is tight or she is backed into a corner (often by her own summons). Katia can also be knocked to the ground by certain attacks, momentarily rendered immobile, giving some battles a slow, awkward pacing.

Katia herself cannot attack directly and instead relies on summoning creatures with her cards to deal damage. Each card use costs Magic Stones, and players earn more stones upon successfully landing attacks. It's a system that could feel more rewarding with some polish, and is a similar idea to the risk/reward rally counterattacks in *Bloodborne*. If the player runs out of Magic Stones, the card's begin depleting Katia's HP.

Katia holds four cards at a time (assigned to the A, B, X, and Y buttons), and when one is used up, another is drawn from her deck. There are three types of cards Katia can wield and players must know when and where these cards will be useful.

Weapon-type cards are multiple-use attacks that come from Katia, like a sword swing or tornado projectile. Most of these attacks have a low Magic Stone cost and can be used several times in

quick succession. The more intricate the attack animation is, the more difficult the card is to time correctly, and new players will often miss against quick or flying foes.

Independent-type cards summon helpful monsters to the field. Katia can summon giant sword-swinging skeletons, plague-spreading rodents, support magic fairies, to name a few. Players can summon up to four monsters at a time, Magic Stones allowing. The best part of these summons is that they not only distract enemies from attacking Katia, but their big, awkward hit-boxes block enemies from getting anywhere near her. These cards are a must for boss battles. They last until they're defeated.

Summon-type cards are like weapon-type cards, except they momentarily take the place of Katia and activate their attack. If weapon-type cards are general attacks, summon-type cards are like magic or special attacks, and are very situational. Many of these cards are expensive to use and difficult to time properly. Some do not cause damage, and can, for instance, restore card uses.

Building Katia's deck is the meat of the game's battle system, and mastering deck building is the key to finishing the game. A deck can hold up to 30 cards of any kind, and can only be edited from the world map. Each card has an element associated with it and these are used to exploit enemy weaknesses.

A card can only be used once per mission, and is then discarded. Running out of cards means having to restart the mission, but players keep any items and experience earned. Managing resources is important, or at least it's supposed to be. Players will quickly learn that running from battles is the best way to get through dungeons painlessly.

Players can flee battles by pushing against the arena edge for a moment, which only sacrifices a single card and always works. Completing battles nets the cards used some experience points, which can be spent to upgrade the card into a better one at Gurd's shop, or spent to duplicate it. Katia can also capture monsters during battle by whittling down their health and throwing any card at them. If the card depletes their health to zero, the monster is captured. Capturing cards is surprisingly easy. There are also objects on the field that can only be destroyed during battle, allowing Katia to access treasure afterward.

There are a few boss battles where Katia must face another card summoner. These battles are highly satisfying and also the most frustrating part of the game. It is challenging to fight an opponent that can summon more monsters to help it, leveling the playing field a bit. These bosses will spam summon-type cards, canceling Katia's attacks and granting them annoying invincibility frames. These fights are the few times in the game where it may be necessary to actually alter one's deck for a new, optimized strategy.

Not through the fault of the camera but due to the nature of the battles, it is difficult to distinguish exactly what is happening during hectic fights. Battles can devolve into a jumble of different colored polygons as up to ten character models are stuck on each other's hit-boxes, casting

spells and spamming attack animations. Summon-type cards that cut away to play a short cutscene only further the disorientation.

What makes *Lost Kingdoms* great, though, is its simplicity and accessibility. It's a game with little affectations, and it is too minimal for hand-holding or huge amounts of text to sit through. The dungeon design and plot are uninspired, but the combat and deck building make up for it. Even with its mediocre presentation, *Lost Kingdoms* exemplifies From's gift of cutting the fat and leaving players only the joyous essentials. It may not have the bombastic quality of *Baten Kaitos*, nor the high sheen of *Tales of Symphonia*, but *Lost Kingdoms* is nonetheless an interesting footnote for both the GameCube and developer From.

With its dreary fantasy setting and calculated action RPG battle system, *Lost Kingdoms* was another step closer for FromSoftware toward developing *Demon's Souls*, the eventual gold standard of dreary action RPGs. *Lost Kingdoms* was published in North America and Europe by Activision and earned relatively positive scores from critics in 2002, with a particularly unimpressed review from IGN. User scores are average across the board, and despite its unique battle system and pedigree, has yet to become a cult classic. Still, there was enough *Lost Kingdoms* love for FromSoftware to release a sequel the next year, with Activision once again bringing it to the rest of the world.

Lost Kingdoms II (RUNE 2 -KORUTEN NO KAGI NO HIMITSU-) GameCube, 2003

Lost Kingdoms II drops the arcade/mission style-RPG rhythm for a more relaxed one, emphasising exploration. Fromsoftware updated the *Lost Kingdoms* format with two major changes: enemies are now visible and fought on the field with no transition and every explorable area is always accessible and must be traversed multiple times to find every secret.

Lost Kingdoms II, despite losing random encounters, feels much more like a traditional JRPG. FromSoftware built a very solid experience here, and the game rarely feels limited like its predecessor. Another difference is the inclusion of a good-sized explorable hub town, complete with dozens of weird, wooden NPCs that update their dialogue throughout the game, a card shop, and a fairy collector.

Immediately noticeable is that From ditched the dreary, European fairy tale vibe for a more generic, nondescript fantasy JRPG one. The overall color palette is vibrant and cheery, though the atmosphere isn't necessarily a cheerful one. If anything, the bright colors only serve to neutralize the tone of the game. There's a much higher cutscene count this time around and the plot is a bit more fleshed out.

Lost Kingdoms II takes place 200 years after its predecessor. Argwyll has enjoyed generations of peace after Katia, now a queen of legend, saved the kingdom. But trouble is brewing as the scientists of neighboring Kendaria are learning how to manufacture runestones to wage war and cause mischief.

Enter Tara Grimface, a young woman with no past who has recently joined the Band of the Scorpion, a group of thieves, to make some quick cash. Tara possesses a true runestone for mysterious reasons, making her feared and respected by the thieves, and also a target for villains. The Band of the Scorpion and Tara quickly get entangled in the Kendaria mess when by-the-numbers bad guy Leod VIII sees the true runestone during their first encounter and decides to go after her.

Tara Grimface

It's often difficult to tell whether Tara is acting out her silent protagonist role or is being the curt, distrustful character she is made up to be. She has very few lines in the game. There's an outsider, almost punk quality to her, and one of the funniest moments in the game is when the player is given the option to have her tell an NPC to "Get bent." Tara is edgier than Katia, and the parallels between the two are interesting and add some meaning to the series. She also matches her nail polish to her crop top, which is rad. There is more to Tara's past that is revealed over the course of the game (obviously).

Sol

One of the members of the Band of the Scorpions who is named and therefore important. Many cutscenes involve him and the game seems to push toward him being a love interest for Tara, though this is never explored in any depth. Sol also goes out of his way to save Tara a few times, which feels like a betrayal of her character as a completely capable heroine. Depending on how thorough players are with sidequests, Sol is linked to the difference between the "bad" and "good" endings. Also wears a crop top, which is cool.

Leod VIII

Leod VIII is on a quest for runestone power. He drives the manufacturing of runestones and, upon learning of Tara's true runestone, becomes something of an antagonist. Wherever Leod goes, he leaves a trail of destruction and mechanical foes behind. He seems to represent the disparity between nature and machine, truth and illusion. Leod is a good indicator of the narrative's overall quality, and, when contrasted with comparable characters, like *Final Fantasy XII*'s Doctor Cid, reveals just how thin the narrative is.

Unlike in the first game, which seemed to take place in a void, players have more agency in *Lost Kingdoms II*'s world. NPC dialogue changes throughout the adventure, for instance, and the mentions of Katia's adventure are a nice touch. Seeing the Katia statue in the hub town gives the series some perspective. In one of the more memorable moments in the game, Tara visits a grim cathedral where NPCs are hiding out after Leod destroyed their village. To say that the plot has urgency would be an overstatement, but these are nice touches.

The combat and deck building system remain largely the same, making up the bulk of the game's intrigue. There are over 200 cards this time, allowing players to form a variety of strategies for the diverse challenges ahead.

There are new transform-type cards that add a slight Metroidvania complexity to each area. Transforming Tara into a roadblock-destroying golem or werewolf with jumping abilities opens access to side areas and secrets in each level, adding some replayability. Unlike the first game, where exploration was limited, *Lost Kingdoms II* rewards players for exploring fully and thoughtfully. Players are encouraged to return to areas whenever a new transformation is unlocked.

Tara earns experience points along with her cards and levels up. Players can endlessly shuffle their decks now, making it a cinch to pull out the right cards. There's also a very rough "z-targeting" system, but it doesn't lock Tara into facing her target, which makes it almost useless.

Since there are no random encounters, enemies can be simply ran past, making most areas a mad dash to quickly solve the puzzle and reach the boss at the end of the level. Upgrading cards is less of a focus now as opposed to just finding better cards, and there's always an abundance of useful cards to try out. In making the normal battles completely avoidable and unnecessary, *From made Lost Kingdoms II* more accessible but also too slight of an experience. More aggressive enemies in larger droves would be a plus.

A new card element, mechanical, is introduced, which is impressively tied to the narrative in that Leod's army solely uses mechanical cards. The only real negative update to the combat system is the revamped element system. As Tara uses and raises her affinity with one element, the opposing element's affinity slowly decreases. If an element's affinity decreases too much, a card of that element's Magic Stone cost increases dramatically, making the card worthless. This is a minor annoyance, and on a normal playthrough might not even be noticed. It could result in needless element grinding, though.

Lost Kingdoms II features a slew of interesting boss encounters that require a fair amount of skill and knowledge. The timing and invincibility frames of card attacks and the telegraphing of enemy moves are more important than ever. The opponent card summoners are back, and still make up the most interesting encounters in the game. They seem less likely to spam summon cards, but they still use them with a high frequency, making some of the later battles frustrating rather than challenging.

The higher emphasis on puzzle solving gives each area a complexity not felt in the first game. The old "finding keys and hitting levers" makes a comeback, but a number of new puzzle situations are introduced. One level in particular, at the Bridge of Sarvan, requires Tara to summon monsters onto activation pads throughout the area to bring down a drawbridge. Spawning enemies can quickly destroy Tara's summons, though, forcing players to figure out the timing and which cards to use. Overall, the dungeon design features some interesting spatial relationships and are a joy to explore, but they're all way too short to be memorable. Like with its predecessor, there is a huge difficulty spike during the final boss encounter, though here it is more manageable and feels like a fair challenge.

One minor annoyance occurs when pressing the A button to open a chest and accidentally using a card, as Tara's battle cards are always active. This seems like it wouldn't happen often, but the space where treasure chests can be opened, for instance, is finicky, and players may accidentally use up a valuable card.

Lost Kingdoms II bolsters its value by featuring an array of sidequests, with the most lengthy one involving collecting runestones throughout the game from hunky, snake-like cultists to get the "good" ending. There's a battle arena for players to endlessly tinker with the game's cards and an easter egg allusion to the first game that allows players to transfer save data to unlock cards.

Lost Kingdoms II is a much fuller package than its predecessor, but isn't necessarily a better game. In gaining gameplay content, the game sacrifices simplicity and atmosphere. Despite featuring more named NPCs and cutscenes, the narrative isn't any more striking. Still, there's a charm to how goofy and melodramatic everything is, and *Lost Kingdoms II* seems to never take itself completely seriously. In terms of combat and card variety, *Lost Kingdoms II* is an entertaining action RPG that lasts about ten hours for players willing to give it a chance and a worthy addition to the GameCube library.

Final Thoughts

There is a track that appears in both games, "Plains of Rohwahl," that is immensely relaxing. This song is not indicative of the complete soundtrack, composed by talented From staple Kota Hoshino, but it exemplifies how *chill* *Lost Kingdoms II* is. Solving light puzzles amidst hordes of docile foes and collecting fairies while "Plains of Rohwahl" hums quietly under a blinding sunset may be the most innocuous moment in any From fantasy RPG.

Not to say that either game is too easy, or not demanding of one's complete attention, but both games are far removed from the macabre vileness of *King's Field* and the visceral hellscape of the *Souls* games that From has become known for. The *Lost Kingdoms* games are sort of dark, full of spooky skeletons, and feature diseased kingdoms, but they're pretty lax in the "Prepare to Die" sense. *Lost Kingdoms II* in particular is full of lush, spring colors, and the very JRPGness of its structure gives the game a familiar quality of ease and safety.

The series is a decidedly female narrative, with two strong protagonists that are rarely compromised because of their gender. Katia and Tara may not be as notable or well-written as Heather Mason or Jade from *Beyond Good and Evil*, but they are nonetheless capable female protagonists of the era.

Both games also feature a limited but interesting two-player mode that feels like a distant precursor to *Souls* online player-versus-player, if players can actually find someone else to play it with.

After the RPG drought on the N64, the GameCube made up for it with a handful of truly great ones. *Lost Kingdoms* and its sequel aren't the most epic or the most charming adventures on the console, but they're solid and worthwhile, a fascinating pair of footnotes for any fan of From's other work. *Lost Kingdoms* is more *Folklore* than *Culdcept* or *Baten Kaitos*, an average, short action RPG that will satisfy players looking for unique battle systems.

Lost Kingdoms sold well enough to justify a sequel, but sales of *Lost Kingdoms II* were poor and a third game never surfaced. FromSoftware would move into the 2000s with more iterations of its *Armored Core* series, *Another Century's Episode*, and the average *Enchanted Arms*, their last RPG before *Demon's Souls* was released in 2009. The disparity in quality between *Lost Kingdoms II*, a decent game and valiant effort, and *Demon's Souls*, a veritable masterpiece, is astonishing. One must wonder how much auteur Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Demon's Souls*' director-turned-president of Fromsoftware, turned the company around to produce a slew of truly great RPGs.