

BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

GENRE(S): Action-adventure, J-RPG

AVAILABLE ON: Android, iOS, Nintendo Switch, [PlayStation 4](#), Windows, Xbox One

DEVELOPED BY: ArtPlay, Inti Creates, WayForward Technologies, Disruptive Games, Neo Future Labs, DICO

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When Koji Igarashi (a.k.a. IGA) left Konami in 2014 and began his career as an independent video game producer, he headed straight for what he and his loyal followers wanted most: a new 2D Metroidvania-style action-adventure game in the vein of all the critically acclaimed *Castlevania* games he produced back in the day. There were two problems here: funding, and making a game as close to *Castlevania* as possible, without breaking the slightest trade rule. Just before his departure from Konami, IGA had learned of the Kickstarter program, and fellow producer Keiji Inafune's great success with *Mighty No. 9*, which he had pitched as a spiritual successor to the *Mega Man* series. IGA announced *Bloodstained* on Kickstarter as a spiritual successor to *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*; its base goal was fulfilled in just a few hours into its announcement. That's exactly how much people love these games even today, and IGA was left but with one challenge: make the game as good as people expect it to be.

Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night is obviously a spiritual successor to IGA's line of *Castlevania* games, especially *Symphony of the Night*, even to the point it sometimes feels like a complete reimagining of that particular game. The structure of the Hellhold castle is very similar to that of Dracula's castle in "the original". Miriam's ability upgrades are very akin to those of Alucard, some old secrets are featured as easter eggs, and Robert Belgrade – the original voice actor of Alucard – voices a certain NPC who bears more than a passing resemblance to *Symphony of the Night*'s beloved antihero. The core gameplay, thankfully, is closer to the *Sorrow* saga, and the preliminary user interface from those two games is adapted and modified in accordance to whatever system you're playing the game on. It's not just *Castlevania* on a pedestal here; IGA also pays tribute to a lot of historical favourites that inspired his

career at Konami, as well as indie titles that inspired him to strike out on his own, including (but definitely not limited to) *Final Fantasy* and *Shovel Knight*. It all comes together quite beautifully in this flawed, but marvellous little-big game.

The story of the game is set in a mixed and twisted version of 18th century England, where the Industrial Revolution has set the Alchemists' Guild's services aside. Fearing and ultimately suffering the loss of their wealthy patrons, the Guild deliberately summons a horde of demons to Earth, and experiments on ordinary humans to create a group of "heroes" attuned to demonic powers - called Shardbinders - to save mankind from these "invaders". Their "brilliant plan" fails miserably, and the demon outbreak destroys most of England before the church is finally able to banish them back where they came from. The Guild is disbanded, and only two Shardbinders survive: youngsters Gebel and Miriam. Hounded by the church for their dangerous abilities, Gebel is taken into hiding, while Miriam falls into a deep coma which renders her completely harmless, and is therefore spared the church's wrath.

Ten years later, Gebel takes lordship of Hellhold, a dark castle located on the outskirts of a rural village, from where he commands a new army of demons allegedly summoned by him to take over England - and the world - once and for all. Around the same time, Miriam finally awakens from her coma. Accompanied and guided by one of the surviving Alchemists who has managed to make a win-win deal with the church, Miriam heads to Hellhold to confront her best friend and seek the truth behind his sudden urge for world domination.

Although the story shrugs away most elements of *Castlevania* - except for the strong involvement of the church - you wouldn't know any better by looking at and listening to the game. Visually, the game is the next natural thing from any *Castlevania* game released during the last 20+ years. As said, the UI is virtually identical to that of *Aria of Sorrow* on the Game Boy Advance and *Dawn of Sorrow* on the Nintendo DS - therefore the game spells instant access to anyone who ever played those games, perhaps even moreso if you're playing it on the Switch. The soundtrack is a step back to the glorious time when

constant diversity and intensity of music were truly integral parts of the *Castlevania* experience; since 2002's *Harmony of Dissonance* they really weren't. IGA has admitted that for the longest time, he had to cut corners with the production schedule he was given back in the day, and decided the soundtrack was such a corner. Here he made the right call when he decided not to cut such corners anymore, and made sure that the game sounds like *Castlevania* used to. Long-time *Castlevania* composer Michiru Yamane, of course, is credited for most of the soundtrack, and this might well be one of her best collections.

As in all Metroidvania games, Miriam starts off as a basically capable combatant – just her range is wider than usual. You can equip anything from just good old kicking shoes to different-sized blades to dastardly firearms, and of course, whips – whatever you find lying around to test out – I'm betting that once you find a preference, you'll go with it 'til the end, and luckily, each weapon type has a hefty amount of upgrades available throughout the game. Enemies randomly yield shards – the same as souls in the *Sorrow* saga – which allow the use of their abilities as secondary attacks, sometimes even as new and exciting tools for navigation. Boss shards, naturally, provide Miriam with key particles to proceed to the next "level" of Hellhold. A prime example of such particle is Invert, which allows you to flip the playfield upside down at your convenience, as a nod to *Symphony of the Night*'s final act.

Just as Soma had his backup team in both *Sorrow* games, Miriam has hers stationed at a rundown village near the castle. Your BFF Johannes can cook up just about any food from ingredients you find lying around – yes, even monster parts – and also, use all types of loot and scrap to build you new weapons and equipment of numerous types. Before long, you will need to use those custom-made weapons to build new ones, so you should definitely think before you go selling any excess stuff. Speaking of selling, the shop is right next to Johannes' makeshift abode, run by priestess Dominique and her child assistant. In addition to standard stock of everyday items and basic ingredients for food, you can buy anything you've had Johannes craft at least once, as well as some rare items for understandably ridiculous prices. In addition to all of this, the village is home to a few people in desperate need of some hired help. One has you take revenge on groups of specific enemies, one has you tracking down rare items, one – my personal

"favourite" - has an endless appetite for gourmet meals no one in this era should've even heard of, made from ingredients impossible to find without some serious digging, armed with health boosts that would most assuredly save you from just about any pickle. Naturally, this selfish asshole presents herself in the form of an endearing old lady you can't be mad at. Anyway, all of the sidequests are a very crucial part of the whole experience and yield fine rewards, some of which you can't find anywhere else. If you're a smarter and more patient player than me, you can probably nail these on the first time around with no need to do any of them on the New Game+ round(s).

It's easy for true *Castlevania* fanatics to criticize *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* for its "short" length, set against the 200% investigation of the castle some of the games in the series require to yield the best possible ending. In *Bloodstained*, you don't really need to do more than pay attention at one key scene of the game to branch off into the right direction, towards the one true ending. New Game+ is there to compensate; it's basically the same game all over again, there are no changes to the progression, but playing at least one round of New Game+ is practically mandatory to reach the 100% mark of the whole game, not just the map. It takes roughly two and a half games to nail all the system-specific achievements, maybe less if you know exactly what you're doing at all times before even starting the game for the first time... which, I believe is impossible in any Metroidvania game.

I find it very hard to criticize *Bloodstained* for anything, since there are no major flaws. The sense of familiarity is not always positive, the storyline leaves a lot to be hoped for (and we're talking about a successor to the original *Castlevania* arc, which was never the most poetic one), there are a few stupidities you are required to take part in on every single playthrough, and lots of small nuisances that grow bigger with time, but the base magic never goes away until you've done absolutely everything in the game. It might never become one of those games you must play once every couple of years – such as *Super Metroid* – but for fans of the genre, both young and old, it's a must-have experience with all the base attributes of millennial *Castlevania* firmly intact. A sequel would be more than welcome.

