

STUFF OF LEGENDS

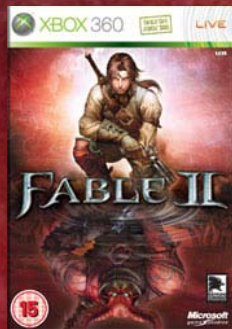
FABLE II

Decisions: life's full of them. Do you like the look of the girl standing in the corner giving you an unnerving amount of eye contact? Maybe you prefer the look of the guy next to her? Do you fancy a bit *more*? How about moving in with each other, settling down and having kids? Or has it finally reached the point where they've pushed you over the edge one too many times, leaving you no choice but to slaughter them and your fellow villagers in one night of bloody murder? At times *Fable II* pushes dangerously close to being more a Ye Olde sim than it does an action RPG - but that's only if you want it to be...

You see, *Fable II* is all about choice. For good or for bad, for better or worse. That's nothing new you may think. Indeed games like *Mass Effect*, *BioShock* and to an extent *GTA IV* largely relied on moral choices to set them apart. But unlike those that merely attempted to offer an element of decision-making, it isn't just a branching storyline or ending cinematic that's affected by your actions in *Fable II*, but the entire world. Every action you take - no matter how insignificant you may think it is at the time - shapes Albion, its inhabitants' destinies, your character, and with it, your entire playing experience. Give missing arrest warrants to a sheriff and you'll find a town transformed into a socio-economic hotspot as he puts the unruly behind bars. Give them to a criminal and the bandit infestation will cause economic turmoil as house prices tumble and traders go out of business.

But that's just one side to *Fable*, and even that single, seemingly simple task leads to further moral choices. Do you capitalise on the fallen house prices and rebuild a better city, taking the law into your own hands and removing the bandits yourself before renting out each property to the influx of new citizens? Or do you simply buy out the local pub, playing on your residents' penchant for booze, safe in the knowledge that your bankroll is increasing every five minutes - even when you're not playing. It's a truly unique situation to find yourself in and a wonderful one at that, finally delivering on the promises of *'Project Ego'* that Peter Molyneux made all those years ago.

However, much like its predecessor, *Fable II* will undoubtedly still be subject to its fair share of naysayers. The original, though fairly ground-breaking at the time, was frowned upon for its basic combat mechanics, relatively short story and point to point objectives. And in that respect not that much has changed. The combat system, though much refined, often tends to fall back on the over-reliance of mashing X than the more tactical measures you would expect to find in an RPG.



FORMAT

Xbox 360

PUBLISHER

Microsoft Game Studios

DEVELOPER

Lionhead Studios



“AN ENDEARING TALE OF COURAGE & RESPONSIBILITY”

Character interaction is still relatively poor with significant story scenes made up of drab character monologues, while your hero's communication is reduced to a handful of eccentric poses rather than anything even vaguely representative of reality. Duplicated NPC models can also often lead to confusion, something made even more annoying when you pull off a lewd act in front of an audience, unaware that one onlooker is a key character. And the much vaunted pet dog is never really expanded upon past the point of being a useful tool with which to sniff out the odd piece of treasure, rather than anything of any real emotional worth.

But much to *Fable's* merit, none of it ultimately detracts from the overall experience. The world of Albion and each of the regions within it are large, sprawling and unrestricted, a far cry to the enclosed one-track environments of the original, while the unfolding personalisation adds an element of sentiment to the game world unlike any other. The game's core quests (should you even decide to follow them through) are varied and manage to hold your interest for hours at a time, even in spite of the obligatory dungeon trawling and troll-thwacking that pops up throughout. Even gameplay elements that fans of the genre would usually curse, like the death-free combat (players are revived on the spot at the cost

of physical scarring and experience points) or glowing waypoint marker add more to the experience and allure than they do detract.

And that breadth of appeal is perhaps what's most striking about *Fable II*. An RPG with widespread appeal? Mr Molyneux must be off his trolley. But apparently not. Accompanying our copy of the game was a letter from Peter begging us to put *Fable II* into the hands of a non-gamer - and so we did. Pulling in an unsuspecting 19 year old female more familiar with a copy of *Cosmopolitan* in her hands than a controller, we set our guest the task of a toe-dipping two hour play session. Four hours later and our bubbly teen is thoroughly besotted, stuck to the spot as she sends her tarted up heroine on a sacrilegious venture of promiscuity and corruption. It opened our eyes to a side of *Fable* that we hadn't yet seen, nor were ever likely to; the world of Albion seemingly turned on its head as a once inspirational leader, dungeon trawler and trophy hunter is reduced to nothing but a self-indulgent whore, choosing to live a life of unprotected sex and villager extortion.

It highlighted just how deep Lionhead's system goes over every other title that's attempted something similar in the past, and how accomplishing it feels when you do save villagers from the forces of evil, or indeed bed that barmaid you've been longing for. The sheer accessibility also reinforced the point that RPGs don't need to be packed with stats or headache-inducing menus to work effectively; the simplicity of *Fable's* interface shining throughout.

It's clichéd but in this instance completely true: you'll get out of *Fable II* whatever you're prepared to put in. Whether you choose to play like our Cosmo girl and live a life of sin amongst the townsfolk, or set out on a gallant quest to rid the world of evil is completely down to you. But one thing that's guaranteed from every standpoint is an endearing tale of courage and responsibility, and one of the most delightful titles you'll find on Xbox 360.



PLAY ▶

PAUSE ||

STOP ■

VERDICT ★★★★★