

Review of Fable III

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In 2012 I traded in an old phone at one of my local GameStop stores and used the credits to buy an Xbox 360. The console came in a bundle with Lionhead Studios' (requiescat in pace) *Fable III* (2010). I was new to the *Fable* franchise, having almost exclusively played *007: Nightfire* and *Blinx: The Time Sweeper* on my original Xbox. When I got home and plugged in the console, still jazzed up about a new game system like when I was a kid despite being 21 at the time, I fell in love with this game. The game's ear teasing music (by Russell Shaw, which is sadly no longer available to stream), and soft-focus landscape pulled me in hook, line, and sinker. After all, I'm a fantasy RPG enthusiast and found ample bait in *Fable III*. Admittedly, this game captured my interest so much a decade ago that I wrote my undergraduate English thesis on how it "queered the hero's quest."

I recently sat down and played through the reverse capable version of the Xbox 360 *Fable III* on my Xbox One. Despite some understandable glitches, the gameplay experience holds up in terms of audiovisual aesthetics. The cast is studded with stars like Naomie Harris, Ben Kingsley, Stephen Fry, John Cleese, and Nicholas Hoult and oftentimes gameplay feels more like a cinematic experience than a gamic one. It's incredibly easy to lose hours hacking away at undead corpses, clearing horde of hobgoblins with fire tornadoes, and aimlessly trekking across the immersive fairy tale landscape with your dog. Otherwise, the narrative of the game forces you to play as the Prince(ss) of Albion and secret "Hero of Brightwall" on their quest to lead a revolution against their tyrannical brother, King Logan. Approximately 550 years after the first game in the franchise, *Fable III* weaves together the aesthetics of medieval and Industrial England (the thinly veiled name Albion says it all) and threads in the adult humor that rivals *Monty Python*. After players successfully topple the government, they become monarch and must weigh life or death decisions day in and day out for the next 365 days.

The mechanics of *Fable III*, like its predecessors, revolve around player choices. Each choice and action taken in the game world has a moral value that influences the way your Hero is perceived with evil on the left end of the spectrum and good on the right. The main menu during gameplay is called the Sanctuary, a safe space cared for by your butler, Jasper (Cleese), where you can access all your weapon, character, and game modifications in different mini chambers. The gold that you collect during the game is visually represented by an adaptive pile of coins, goblets, and chests in your treasury and all your outfits are displayed on mannequins in your costumery. Along with the Hero's perceived morality (good vs. evil), it's here in the Sanctuary that players also track their avatar's overall weight and attractiveness, which must be modified throughout the game to achieve certain tasks. For instance, to pass through one of the world's giant, talking Demon Doors and access its accompanying treasure (e.g., a small fortune, a rare weapon, XP, etc.), players must "reject hegemonic beauty standards" by tipping their "weight" meter up to the maximum and wearing ugly pajamas. A nice attempt to self-consciously poke at the patriarchy, but it doesn't quite work.

Despite the appearance of gender, sexual, and identity fluidity, and regardless of the game's insistence on free choice, *Fable III* is limited in its representational modes and leaves players wanting more. For instance, players can dye their clothes, hair, and shoes and can have

multiple spouses of different genders, races, ethnicities, and can teleport across mountain ranges and seas, but must always be white and are limited in other ways that allow real-world identities to translate across the digital void. Scholars like Amanda Phillips and Adrienne Shaw have talked about these issues of player representation *Fable* franchises in their books [*Gamer Trouble*](#) and [*Gaming on the Edge*](#) respectively, and in the same year I wrote my praise of *Fable III*'s queer possibilities in my undergraduate thesis, Stephen Greer underscores the limited nature of queerness in the *Fable* franchise in his article, "[Playing Queer: Affordances for Sexuality in *Fable* and *Dragon Age*](#)." Each one of these thinkers is right because the representational categories in the game are flawed and need updating. It stands that this game is better than most of its time at allowing playable diversity, but in 2021 *Fable III* doesn't stand up.

Aside from the general lack of diversity, *Fable III* offers a few standard colonial narratives beginning with a cringeworthy depiction of the Romani ("Dwellers") in their desolate camps and ending with a vague but terrifying Darkness that threatens Albion from across the seas in the desert land of Aurora. From the Sand Furies of the Shifting Sands to the Veiled Path, Aurora serves as an exoticized, fabulous (literally) version of the Middle East. At one point in the game, players must decide, as the new Hero monarch, whether to annex these peoples and support them with resources or let them starve. The savior complexes, the colonialism, and the gross capitalism of this game put an initial sour taste in my mouth, but this whole game, and this whole franchise parody the fairy tale and fantasy genres. Once (upon a time) I realized that every element in this game is self-consciously making fun of itself, I understood that *Fable III* critiques many modern social complexities and ills in a steampunk cosplay disguise.

It would be nice to see a remake of this game, or a *Fable IV*, but sadly Lionhead Studios went under not too long after it released *Fable: Anniversary*, its remastered edition of the first *Fable*. In a remake, I'd focus on character customization and flesh out the possibilities that lie in the Sanctuary so that players have as much control as possible. In a game world that shows us that narrative and game are inseparable, the next step would be to put the pen in the players' hands and allow everyone to identify with their Heroes. After all, in a real world where so many of us don't have heroes, games like *Fable III* open the door to new adventures here and once upon a time.