



FABRICE

Simulation And Story Collide:
Project Ego Becomes A Reality

Game Informer was first introduced to Fable, then known as Project Ego, during a closed-door meeting at the 2001 Electronic Entertainment Expo with the enigmatic head of Lionhead Studios,

Peter Molyneux. If you have ever had the opportunity to meet Mr. Molyneux – which sadly many of you haven't – he has this ability to make any game sound like it's going to revolutionize the industry. It's an amazing skill, but lucky for us, he is usually right and tends to find developers and products that push the envelope just as he describes.

Peter's resume is proof of his ability, featuring gaming landmarks like Populous, Magic Carpet, Syndicate, Dungeon Keeper, and Black & White. There are both positive and negative observations that can be made about his former projects, but no one can deny that each and every one of these titles pushed the accepted boundaries and left players with experiences that simply couldn't be forgotten. Whether it was cruelly punishing your followers to instill fear of your god-like powers in Black & White, or simply setting a trap for the hapless adventurers who had the poor luck of wandering around your labyrinth in Dungeon Keeper,

he gives gamers memories that they will cherish for a lifetime.

So, when Peter let us in on a screening of a short preview movie of his latest masterpiece, Fable, we were more than just a little interested. The imagery that Fable delivered was amazing, but details regarding this new piece of Molyneux magic were few and far between. Thankfully, this has changed. Recently, Game Informer ventured off to merry old England to find out why many in the industry are speculating that this highly anticipated title may well prove to be Lionhead Studios' greatest accomplishment to date. Gather around the fire, we have a Fable to tell...

■ **FORMAT** XBOX ■ **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/ROLE-PLAYING GAME ■ **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT ■ **DEVELOPER** BIG BLUE BOX/LIONHEAD STUDIOS ■ **RELEASE** NOVEMBER

Fable: The Simulation

The centerpiece of any RPG is the hero, but in the case of Fable this aspect is taken to an extreme. In reality, Fable isn't so much an RPG, but a simulation of a world. The hero starts off as a young boy who must write his own tale. You can be what you want to be, for good or ill.

Fable is built from the ground up with this in mind. All the characters have their own independent intelligence that reacts to the moral decisions you make

throughout the game. Kill everyone and everything in your path, and the game will answer accordingly. Lead a chivalrous life, and you will attract ardent fans and the admiration of the common people.

The objective here is to teach the player that everything has consequences and that you have to live with them. This aspect, at first, can be rather daunting, but once you start to see how things work it makes sense. Basically, our hero has two ways to interact with

the people. You can draw your sword or give them items from your inventory to see how they respond.

If you choose to kill them, a series of events can unfold. For example, if you slay one of the women in town and she just happens to be married, her husband will attempt to off you, and her children will cry and run away all as a result of that one choice. The amazing thing is that everything is presented to the player with very obvious animations and facial expressions from the villagers.

There are various factions locked in eternal struggle during your quest. For example, if you wipe out some bandit camps outside of a village, a number of things could happen. The townspeople may take over the camps, or perhaps monsters from another area may invade to expand their domain. In this way, the game has an eternal ebb and flow

You start off your adventures as a young boy, and from there all the choices are up to you

The Big Blue Box And Xbox

As it turns out, Fable is actually the work of a brand new developer by the name of Big Blue Box. However, the term "new" might be a little deceiving as its founders, Simon and Dene Carter, are longtime veterans of both the industry and Molyneux's unique approach to gaming, having worked closely with him on Dungeon Keeper. This partnership spilled over into the development of Fable, with Molyneux's Lionhead Studio giving financial and creative support throughout the project.


"The last two and half years of Dungeon Keeper we worked in the

back of Peter's house. There was an awful lot of conversation going on there about general game ideas, from ideas for Black & White to ideas for [Fable]," remembers Dene.

However, the origins of the game date back further than that. The two brothers, who have an uncanny knack for completing each other's thoughts, actually began conceptualizing Fable during their childhood. Simon continues, "[The original concept came to us] when we were about that age [pointing to a picture of them as children], because Dene and I were always coming up with new ideas for games. One day we came up with this rather fatuous

and stupid design for the perfect game, which was kind of a role-playing thing which had everything in it. It was almost like a simulation of life in a role-playing world. This game is a piece of that."

Trying since childhood to find the platform that would enable their dream to become a reality, Project Ego (as the game was tentatively titled) made stops on PC and Dreamcast before it finally found a home on Xbox. Once you start looking at all the pieces that make Fable the unlikely RPG that it is, it's easy to see why they needed a machine with the advanced capabilities of the Xbox.



The camera can be set by the user, but if left alone it will pick the most cinematic view



Here are various examples of the looks the hero can sport



It's really quite astonishing to see. The children rub their eyes crying, and the husband runs around, shaking his fist, calling you out for the bastard you are.

Of course, the game won't punish you for being bad. It's a very viable approach to playing through Fable, but there will be consequences. If you kill more villagers, the town guards will gather a posse and track you down, and you can pretty much write off ever being able to buy any items or stay at the Inn.

Conversely, you can be the noble hero. Give a woman a box of candies and watch her blush. Do it again and she may even take a liking to you. Clear out some of the bandits patrolling close to the town and you can return a triumphant hero, with children singing your praises and clapping happily with a gleam of admiration in their eye. They may even try to look like you, because quite frankly, you are the coolest thing to hit the town since that juggler with the bad limp.

How people react to you is an easy way to monitor your standing with the

various inhabitants, but Fable also has a Renown meter to show how good or evil you are being. Plus, every town features a Hero Podium where all the people will gather around to give you the overall temperature of the current public opinion. This can be an ego boost or a letdown, depending on how you play the game.

Surprisingly, all this depth is found just in the town portion of Fable, as there is still a wide-open world full of monsters and mayhem left to explore. Advancement in Fable is not done through the conventional route of gaining experience to get more hit points and acquire new skills. Instead, your hero has all things available to him from the beginning and the player must choose which skills to develop.

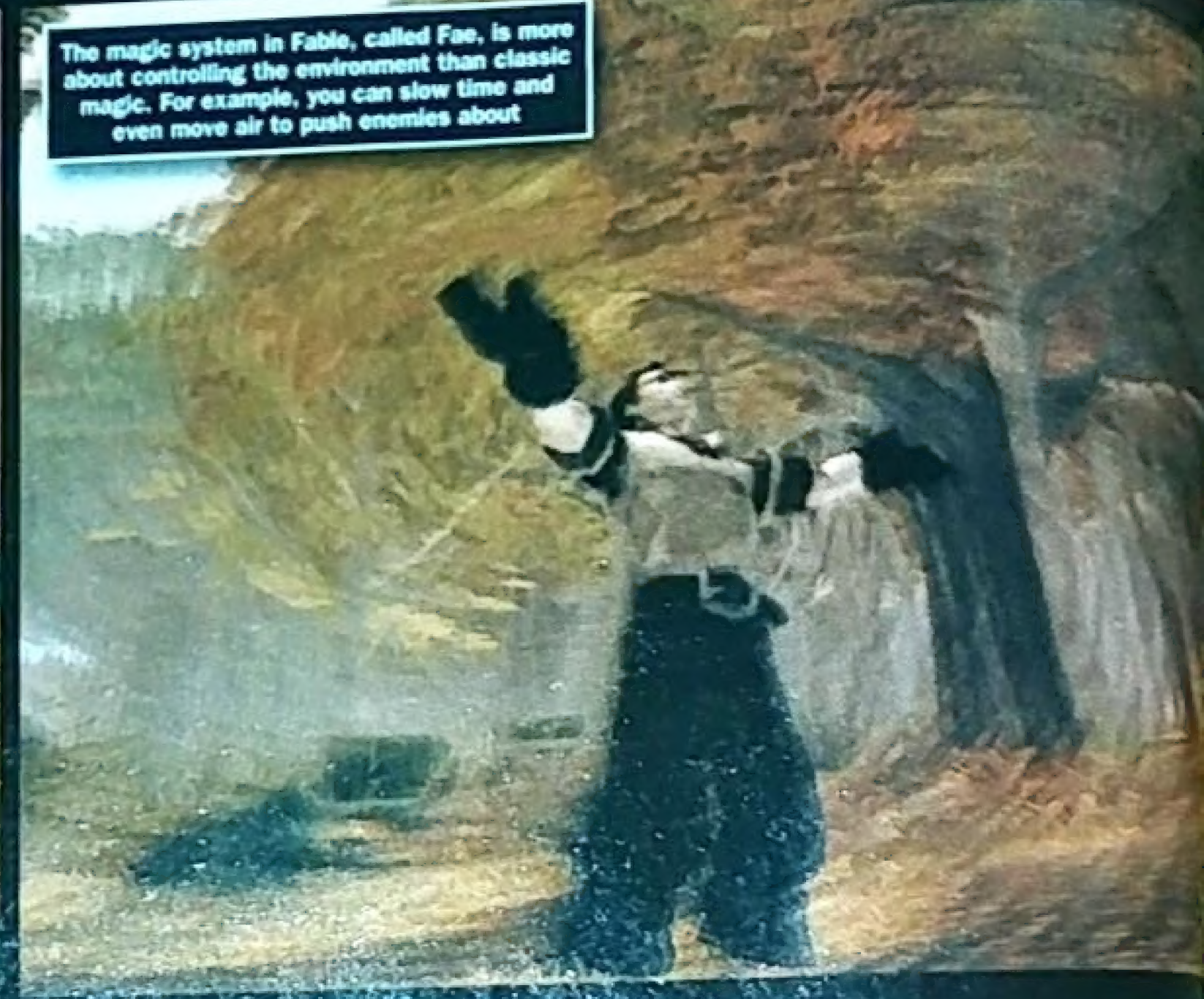
If you wish to go down the path of the mighty warrior, your best bet is to use your sword in combat to increase your strength, which in time will unlock combos that enable you to unleash bigger and better flurries. Of course, there are many different paths you can choose from

as well, be it a magic user (or Fae, as it is called in the game), a bow-wielding ranger, a stealthy thief/assassin, or some combination of all of these. It all depends on the way you play the game. However, keep in mind that whatever direction you take will determine what items you can and can't use. For example, you can't be a thief in big clunky armor, and if you've never touched a bow in your adventures, you won't be able to hit the side of barn from six paces.

To bring all these different choices to life, Big Blue Box has implemented over 600 animations to show your ability or inability to do different things. Equip a sword as a weakling wizard and you will drag the blade through the dirt and give a half-hearted, pathetic-looking swing when you try to attack. Try to summon a companion as a warrior, and you won't get a fly to follow your commands. Don't even think about attempting to sneak into a house to steal some new goodies when in full armor, because your clumsy gait will surely give you away.



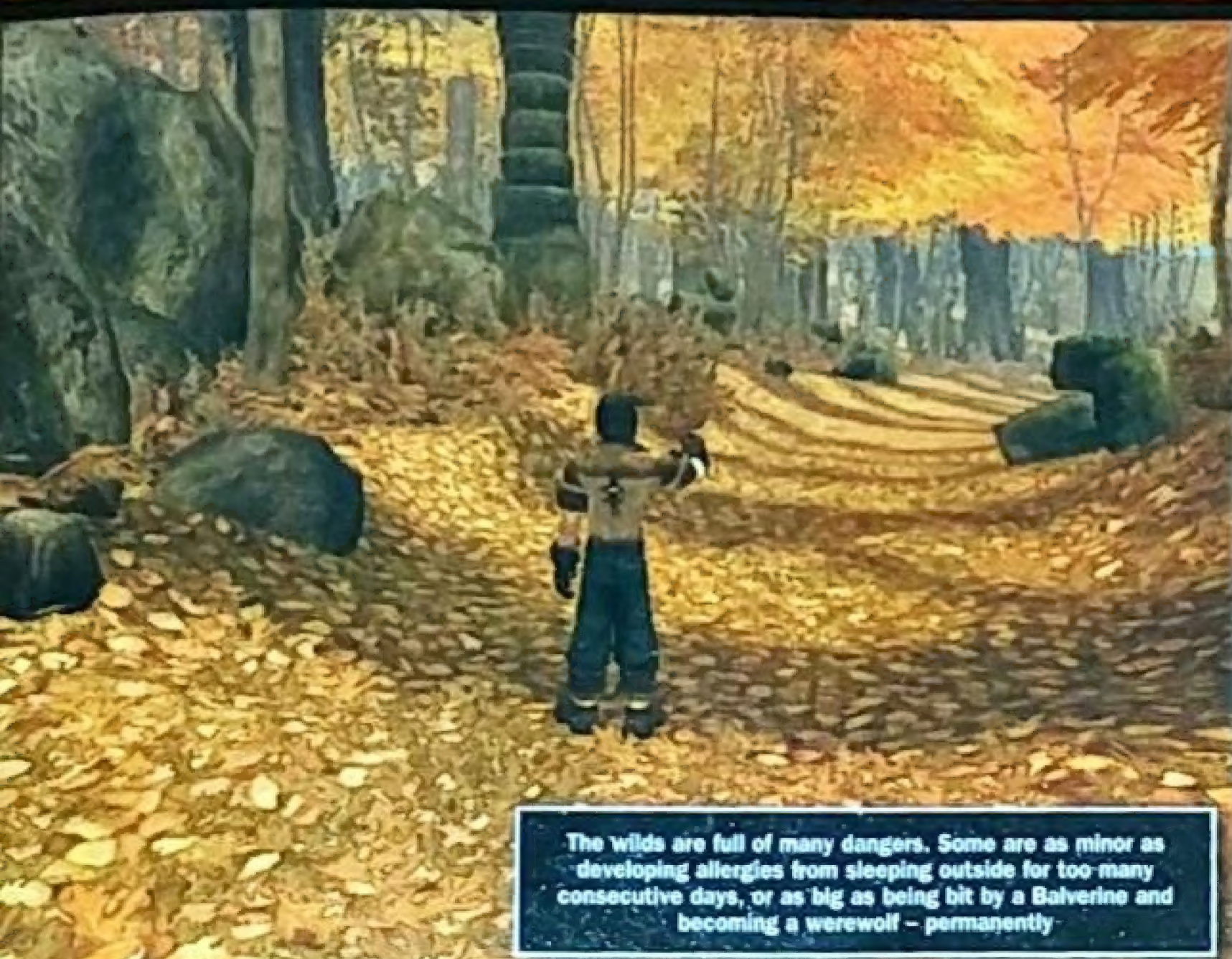
Master the art of stealth, and you can climb through windows and pillage homes at night



The magic system in Fable, called Fae, is more about controlling the environment than classic magic. For example, you can slow time and even move air to push enemies about



There are many types of people you will encounter in Fable, including merchants, commoners, guards, bandits; and creatures like nymphs, screamers, zombies, trolls, golems, and dragons



The wilds are full of many dangers. Some are as minor as developing allergies from sleeping outside for too many consecutive days, or as big as being bit by a Balverine and becoming a werewolf - permanently





Gain enough combat skills and you can behead your enemies, knock them back, or head butt them

Morphing People And Places

Life in Fable is in constant motion. Just because you are away from a village doesn't mean it stops growing, or that the inhabitants don't continue to go about their daily tasks. The game is meant to span a lifetime, with each adventurer defining himself with the skills he learns and traits he gives to his character. To further the impression that Fable exists in a persistent world, the developers employ a number of technological marvels and a fantastic art team to flesh out the places and its people.

For example, you will find various haircuts and tattoos that you can then take back to any town and have a local merchant outfit you with this new look. Find a fancy new cloak, try it on and see if it fits, because every person in the world has a different body type and some items just won't fit. Your character also can take on wounds in battle that, if left for too long without a bandage, will turn into scars.

The hero and all the main characters in the plot will age as the game progresses, so if you spend too much time in the sun during your adventures, you will grow into a wrinkled and suntanned old man. Choose

to travel under cover of darkness, and your character will be a pale looking creature of the night (much like many of the video game players out there).

Characters aren't the only things that react to time and the actions that take place during the game. Weather is constantly cycling between rain, snow, and sun. The wilds of the world are home to numerous factions which are constantly going back and forth controlling different points. This means that a place that was once friendly can, in time, turn into a wasteland that you wouldn't want to venture into unless covered by the veil of night. Nothing can be taken for granted to be what it once was.

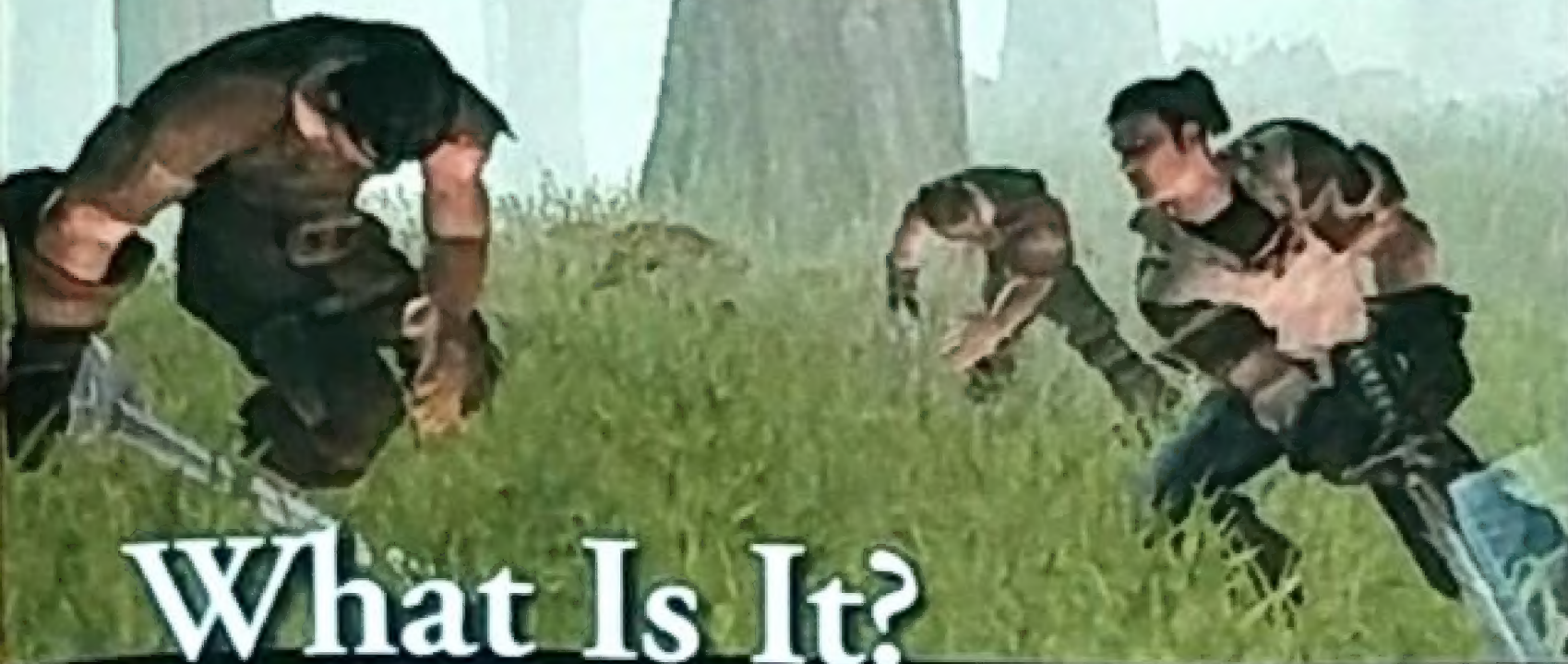
The only exception we found was that the environments themselves aren't affected by seasons. However, the quest will take you to many outdoor locales, cities, and deep dark dungeons, each with its own theme. Of course, you will get to experience the snowy mountain and the volcanic rock areas that are the standards of most RPGs. However, the art team at Big Blue Box is to be commended on their work in this department, as the world

of Fable is simply gorgeous, achieving an unprecedented level of beauty. From the castles to the monsters in the world, everything has a very organic look, with some of the most detailed models we have ever seen in a real-time rendered world.

To finish off the experience, Fable will also include many audio cues and cutscenes that give the player a feeling of being part of a bigger story. These also give evildoers and other creatures that menacing backdrop that will instill the player with the sense of fear and awe that is the mark of any good story. You won't hear the hero speaking to anyone, but almost all the rest of the interactions are delivered through voiceovers complete with lip-synching.

Another interesting thing to note is the fact that you will not be the only hero in the world. Sadly, this doesn't mean Fable is Xbox Live enabled, as it is most definitely a single-player adventure, but rather that other AI-driven adventurers will be wandering the land. There are even outposts where you can check to see where you stand in comparison to the other heroes in the game, much like Pokémon Centers.

You can pick locks with practice, grow strong in battle and gain the ability to score one-hit kills, and use stealth to approach opponents and silently slay them. Or, use stealth for avoidance and become a better thief. Of course, you can't sneak in full armor, so your character will have to fit the skills and traits that you wish



What Is It?

When all the pieces come together, Fable really isn't anything we expected – and that is most certainly a good thing. Dene and Simon Carter, along with the rest of the team at Big Blue Box, are looking to break new ground in the RPG realm and it shows in both the product and their attitude. “[In most RPGS] you are nothing until you have brought back someone's cat, or rescued the entire village from [some threat],” explains

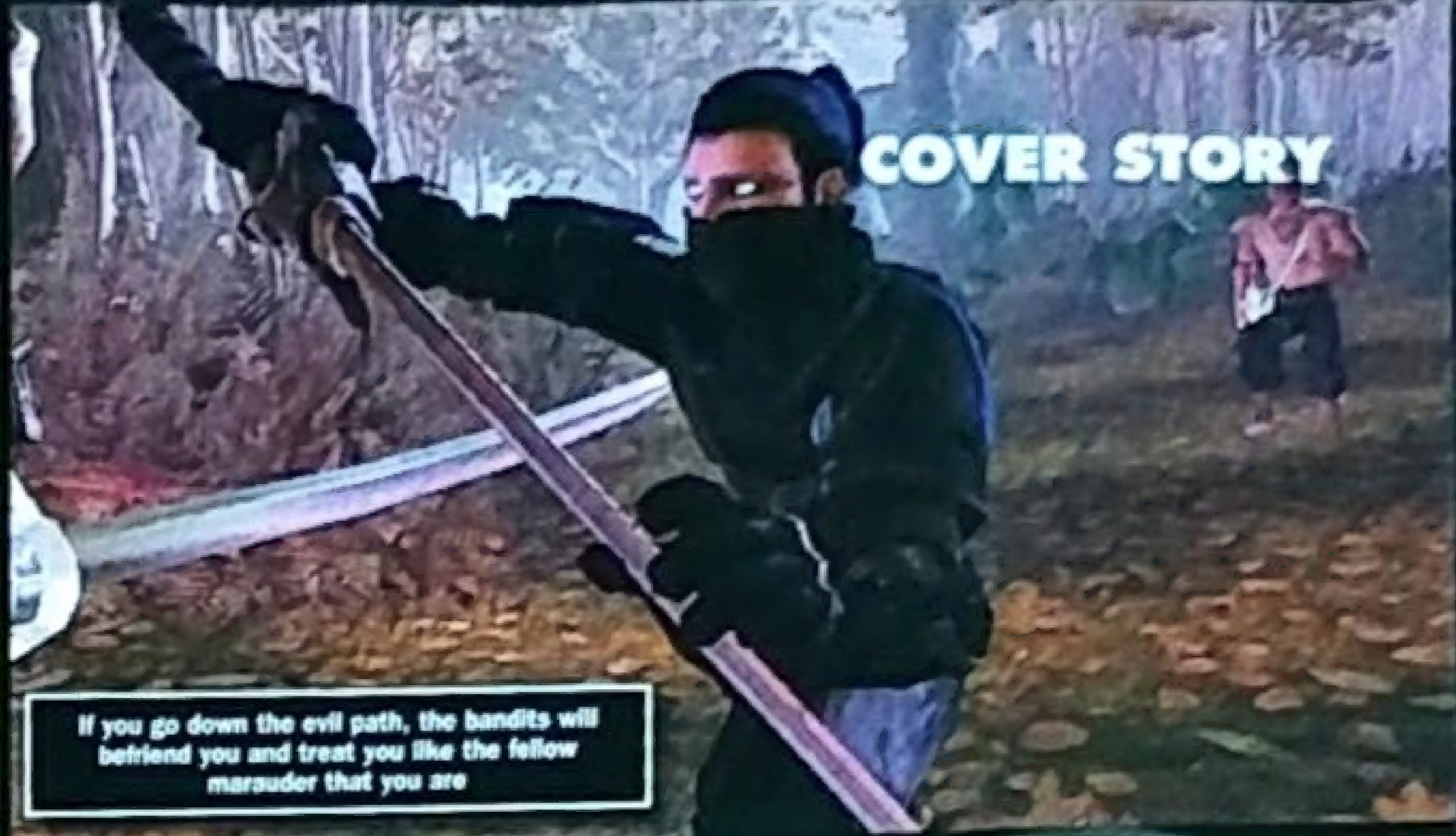
Dene. “In which case, the only thanks you get is ‘The thing you are looking for next is over there.’ That's it. That's the sum total of your thanks. I've just saved you, your wife, your children, and your entire village, and that's all you're gonna do for me? That's pathetic.”

“I hope people will actually genuinely care about their own interactions with people [in the game]. I hope they don't just wander into town and say, ‘Oh, I'm gonna kill everybody.’ I hope they find themselves thinking that would be

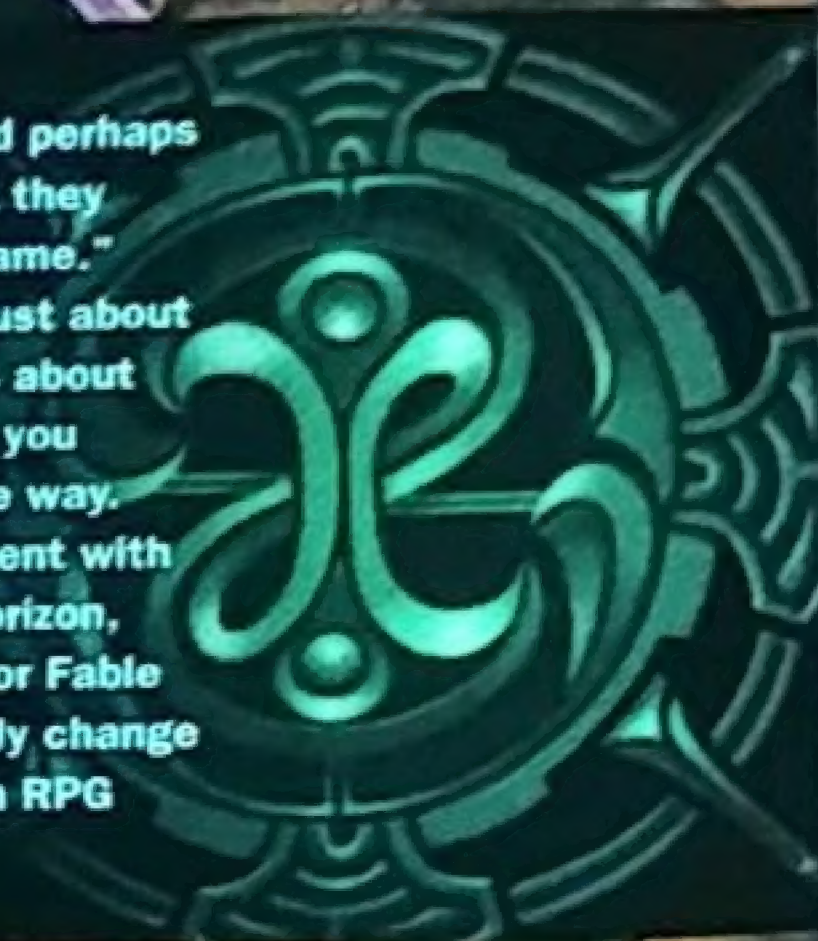
really cruel if they did that, and perhaps making moral judgements that they wouldn't normally make in a game.”

As you can see, Fable isn't just about the story or the adventure, it's about the people, places, and things you come in contact with along the way. Already two years in development with no solid release date on the horizon, gamers will just have to wait for Fable to become a reality. It will likely change everything you ever thought an RPG should be.

COVER STORY



If you go down the evil path, the bandits will befriend you and treat you like the fellow marauder that you are



The developers are toying with the idea of giving titles to the player by the things you do. Lose an eye and people may refer to you as “One Eye.” Be good with the ladies and perhaps they will call you “The Charmer.” Or, kill lots of defenseless chickens and you may be embarrassed by your title of “Chicken Slayer.”