The Hero of Albion and Consumer Culture: The Exploitation Metagame of *Fable II*

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March 16, 2017

In the world of Lionhead Studios' *Fable II*, videogame players are tasked with creating a character that will rise to the needs of the citizens of Albion – a fantastic parallel world mirroring pre-Industrial Britain – and defend the world from the power hungry Lord Lucien determined to remake reality to his liking. Along the journey, the players, and their characters, will encounter tempting and sensual offers that may skew their very moral being. Given this moral spectrum, characters could grow horns and develop glowing red eyes based on the more nefarious acts they committed, while more righteous characters could develop an ethereal glow and possibly a halo for their saintly deeds. Yet, this model of choice and consequence seemingly held little sway on the actions of players across the globe; instead, of communing their most moral or immoral actions, players came together as a community to develop a vast network of lists, maps, and walkthroughs allowing other adventurers the chance to unlock the ancient secrets buried across Albion, or to uncover hidden treasures and legendary weapons. Some players did seek to speedrun *Fable II*, but there was a stronger and more constant emphasis on discovering rumored weapons and treasures, but more importantly: players sought new ways to gain more money, fast. The metagame present within communities of *Fable II* players was a subtle metagame, i.e., it was a metagame that almost all players contributed to and participated in, but did not seek for fame on leaderboards. The metagame present within *Fable II* relied on a real world tried-and-true tradition: consumerism. Once players had completed the overarching narrative thwarting Lord Lucien's plans to build and activate an eldritch edifice known only as The Spire, the game revealed side quests to the player that encouraged them to purchase varying pieces of real estate all across the land of Albion, but beyond these quests of economic gain

were hints left within the world of *Fable II* that enticed players to explore the world and perform elaborate tasks until every Demon Door was opened and every Legendary Weapon uncovered. The metagame of *Fable II* mirrored real world elements of capitalism, consumerism, and exploitation. Adding more credence to this claim of virtual Marxist criticism is the fact that *Fable II* also encouraged players to utilize Xbox LIVE to visit other players' versions of the game and to mine that parallel version of Albion for wealth and resources, which shifts the tone of the game from being about heroics and moral choices to capitalism and materialism; however, this change in the tone of the game are not simply limited to the fictional world of Albion, but eerily mirror the real world of videogame development as seen in matters of cognitive capitalism and conflict minerals.

Set 500 years after the events of 2004's *Fable*, *Fable II* introduced players to a world called Albion where a legendary line of heroes once roamed the land committing equal acts of good and evil (*Fable II*). The aptly named Hero of *Fable II* is an orphan who, through the murder of their sister by Lord Lucien, is revealed to be a distant descendant of the Hero bloodline, which launches the character on a quest to avenge their sister and protect the land of Albion. While along their journey, the Hero takes on varying tasks that earn them: renown, gold, and experience. Each of these awards serve as some form of monetary agent – renown affords the Hero praise (or fear) from locals, while gold acts as the game's main currency, and experience allows the player to cash in different types of actions performed in the game, e.g., melee combat, ranged combat, or using Will (the in-world source of magic) for upgraded physical and mystical character attributes (*Fable II*). These economic aspects of gameplay prove fruitful for the player in

order for them to progress through the game to not only accomplish certain tasks, but to also equip their character with weapons and resources that enable impossible feats to be accomplished as though they were everyday chores. However, the commodification of Albion is just one aspect of the game play that proves alluring to players.

As an "action role-playing open world video game" *Fable II* allows players to create and customize their character over the course of the game while at the same time interacting with the world around them without being forced to constantly fulfill the needs of the main storyline ("Fable II.") Players are encouraged to take on side quests that can be anything from rounding up local citizens for forced labor to helping a farmer's lonely son find true love, while at the same time, characters can work as blacksmiths and bartenders to earn extra money in between quests and side quests (*Fable II*). Each action carried about by the character has a negative or positive (and in the case of jobs, a neutral) moral correlation that has real world effect on the character by not only changing the way other non-playable characters (NPCs) perceive the main character, but how the main character actually appears within the game. Expanding on the work of its predecessor, *Fable II* updated elements like the moral meter and earning experience, but also added new features like the aforementioned jobs, and even added a four-legged companion who aided the character in their tasks, and while the gaming components made the in-world play that much more fun and diverse it was the technological factors that added a new edge to the overall gaming experience.

Designed by Peter Molyneux, developed by Lionhead Studios, and published by Microsoft Game Studios, *Fable II* was introduced to the Xbox 360 in October 2008 ("Fable II.") The game added a two-player component and utilized Xbox LIVE to enable

co-operative play allowing players to visit other versions of Albion – the in-world

storyline hinted at the possibility of parallel worlds – and interact with NPCs of alternate

Albions ("Fable II.") Added to this feature of traveling to different worlds were Hero

Dolls: plush representations of the primary Hero of a world visited by an off-world

player; these Hero Dolls were an element to Xbox Achievements, which encouraged

players to perform varying tasks that were sometimes not directly mentioned in the game

("Fable 2 Achievements.") Given all the components involved in the development and

execution of *Fable II* it is difficult to discern what kind of metagame could exist in a

game designed to allow players free reign in a world of magic and monsters.

   While there are online conversations regarding speedruns and even rankings of

these speedruns, there is a more interesting and subtle form of metagaming that appears

online in the general *Fable II* communities ("Fable 2 Speed Run.") In a game where

actual labor (blacksmithing, woodcutting, and bartending) is available, players are bound

to look for easy ways around earning gold, and the community forums for *Fable II*

delivered. Ranging from sites like *Cheat Code Central* to *IGN*, players have posted ways

to manipulate the game in order to earn money or experience points faster and without

having to engage in actual labor or combat ("Fable II Cheats & Codes.") For a game that

allows players the freedom to murder townsfolk or sleep with prostitutes (with the

potential for an unplanned pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease) it would seem

reasonable for players to engage with the lusory rules of the game rather than find some

technical glitch that affords their character more money by altering the time and date

setting of the Xbox ("Fable II Cheats & Codes.")

One aspect of the metagame of consuming and exploiting the resources of Albion relies on a violation of the lusory rules of *Fable II*, i.e., by agreeing to play *Fable II* the player accepts certain rules that "require one to employ worse rather than better means for reaching an end" (Salen 14). Rather than allowing the character to stop Lord Lucien from murdering their sister when they are both children, the player submits to the rules of the game that force the player to develop their character over simulated years as they quest after Lord Lucien. By playing the videogame, and without hacking the hardware or software used to play, the player enters into an invisible contract with the overall game agreeing to adhere to the dynamics presented within the narrative of the game itself. However, players from around the globe have exploited loopholes outside the mechanics of the game in order to earn more gold, furthering a consumer culture within Albion. A common mechanical exploit deals with the internal clock of *Fable II*. The game uses the Xbox clock and date settings to track time outside of the game. Normally, when a player returns to their game, and assuming they have rental properties, the game collects the rent generated over the course of the time the player was away from the game, i.e., the videogame tracks and pays the player for rent "paid" by NPCs within the game. The exploit comes in the form of manipulating the Xbox internal clock. A player simply starts their game, exits *Fable II*, and then enters the Xbox settings where they can advance the system's internal clock – moving the clock forward indicates to the *Fable II* software a shift over time resulting in the player receiving a larger than earned collection of rental payments ("Fable II Cheats & Codes.")

An interesting element to *Fable II*, and one that serves as a built-in metagame, is the ability of the character to earn gold by performing menial tasks throughout the land.

Instead of exterminating bandits raiding a local farm, players can pour drinks at the local tavern. Yes, people can turn on their Xbox 360 and perform a virtual version of a real life job, which does seem counterintuitive to the idea of playing a game. Bernard Suits calls for a distinction between playing a game and work, and he goes so far as to describe work as an "activity in which an agent seeks to employ the most efficient available means for reaching a desired goal" (Suits 54). And, it is not like the player is without other options to earn gold; aside from performing more heroic deeds like saving villagers or storming caves, the player can simply rob local stores. The gaming dynamic of *Fable II* contradicts the conceived notions of rules and how they adhere to the world of videogames: players have alternative options to earn experience, gold, or renown, but instead the game encourages the player to pursue simple tasks as another way to supplement an income.

Moving past the simple mechanical cheats of exploiting more gold and experience from *Fable II*, players have cultivated lists locating various hidden treasures that are not directly mentioned within gameplay ("Fable 2 Cheats."). The community succeeded at mapping the locations of Legendary Weapons and hidden artifacts, but they also revealed the tasks necessary to unlock Demon Doors (stone portals that allow players to enter pocket dimensions containing unimaginable possessions) ("Fable 2 Cheats."). Here is where the metagame of *Fable II* takes an interesting turn: the entire game is based around consumer culture. By creating a network of information granting players access to resources previously unknown to them, the metagame perpetuates a Marxist view and criticism of Albion. This criticism comes in the form of how the game stops being about new threats or challenges to the player, and becomes a vehicle for consumer, capitalist culture. The player, and by extension their character, take on the role of someone

interested in "the increasing value of the world of things […] in direct proportion [to] the devaluation of the world of men," (Leitch 653). Rather than exploring new regions of the world, contributing to the betterment of mankind, or even engaging in some form of diplomacy, the player instead becomes a collector of mythic and legendary items that serve no purpose beyond being the next thing to obtain – the game becomes void of conflict and instead becomes a game of amassing material goods.

The overarching story of *Fable II* is stopping Lord Lucien from using The Spire to bring back his deceased family, but no matter how long the player takes to play the game Lord Lucien never succeeds (*Fable II*). Yet, once the player defeats Lucien, the game presents the player with different side quests encouraging the player to purchase as much real estate as possible. Once the main villain is killed, *Fable II* moves from a game of monsters and magic to a game of renting and playing landlord. The general gameplay is a consumer-based scenario: the player needs to acquire different properties in order to accomplish different quests that are not instrumental to the main narrative of the game (*Fable II*). Granted that the overall game narrative shifts from heroics to economics, it is the metagame of players mapping and charting the various resources to exploit that creates a new take on *Fable II*.

Before entering into the final analysis of the metagame and its implications for the overall game of *Fable II* it is imperative to define this particular meaning of metagame. Metagame, as it pertains to *Fable II*, implies what a player brings to the game, i.e., what knowledge a player brings with them from the experience of other players. This use of metagame is a variant of Richard Garfield's definition of what exactly a player brings with them to a game (Garfield 19). Compiling and utilizing the information from other

players, a player engaging in the exploitation metagame of *Fable II* is not by any means cheating or spoiling the game, but is instead using whatever resources are available to them to succeed at the game, which does harken memories of the lusory rules of *Fable II*, i.e., the players are not violating any of the in-game components, but are masterfully playing the game with newfound wisdom. However, instead of manipulating in-world mechanics to earn more gold or experience, a player can take the knowledge they have acquired from other players and allow further consumption of Albion.

What about the game once the player has purchased every building, unlocked every Demon Door, uncovered fabled potions, and unearthed all of the Legendary Weapons? The player, assuming they are linked to Xbox LIVE, can turn to other worlds to exploit and momentarily colonize. During the course of the game, the character has been an unwitting instrument in a bourgeoisie takeover of Albion. Lord Lucien may have wanted to bring back his dead family at any cost, but the character has been duped into consuming every available resource and possessing every building and item imaginable within the game. Another way to look at the actions of player is: "The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe," (Leitch 659). The more a character purchases products in one location, the better the economy becomes. However, only certain items may be purchased in certain regions of the world, which serves as motivation for the player to travel and exploit more goods and resources. And, if a player were to enter another player's version of *Fable II*, then there is the likelihood that the player "has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country," (Leitch 659). In the eyes of Karl Marx, the Hero of *Fable II* stops being a hero

and starts becoming an instrument of the bourgeoisie and given over to consumer culture. The Hero of Albion defeated a madman hell-bent on remaking reality in his own image only to remove any and all real conflict within the game – there are side quests dealing with bandits and rogue mythical creatures called Hobbes – to then have the character become tasked with purchasing new properties all across Albion.

In the end, the exploitation metagame of *Fable II* turns the main character into an agent of consumerism, a bourgeoisie member of society who seeks out new lands and resources for financial gain. The heroics of saving a land from a mad man bent on remaking the world in his image gets lost in the notion that the agent of all that change was merely looking out for their own interests as a slave to production and consumption. Given all the possibilities within the game of being a moral or an immoral character, the final choices before the player are simply to continue consuming products in a mindless cycle with the occasional visit to a fellow player's world. With no looming adversaries or citizens in distress, the Hero of *Fable II* earns money to buy things it no longer has a need for.

The consumer based metagame of *Fable II* lends itself to a new metagame that is counter to the materialistic and capitalist game mentioned above. In this particular metagame there is only one rule: do not spend gold. The player continues on their quest to protect Albion from the machinations of Lucien and his men, but the player cannot purchase anything while playing the game. Before diving into the actual impact this has on the game it warrants a further understanding of what this actually means.

The player will play the entire game equipped with the weapons they receive during the game – any weapons found while playing can be used to argument their

experiences, but the player cannot purchase weapons from vendors. Potions are another feature the player can only use if they come across them during their course of play. Any and all potions received as gifts or found in treasure chests across Albion are fair game, but trips to apothecaries are forbidden. These same rules apply to the player's clothing, gifts, and miscellaneous items: none can be purchased; all that are received as gifts or discovered during quests are acceptable. However, there is one caveat to this rule: a player can only make a purchase if the game demands it, i.e., if the game or its narrative will not progress if a player does not make a purchase, then the player is allowed to spend gold.

While the game offers players a side quest to donate to The Temple of Light (a religious order symbolizing extreme goodness within the game, which is countered by The Temple of Shadows) this new metagame forbids donating to the temple due to the fact the more a character donates, the more "gifts" the player receives. At certain donation points, the character is rewarded with changes in their moral counter moving them closer towards being a good and moral person within the confines of the game; however, these changes pale in comparison when the player makes the largest donation possible and receives a Legendary Weapon, The Rising Sun ("Donating to the Light."). Certainly, there are no direct goods purchased over the course of the player donating to The Temple of Light, but there are still rewards in exchange for money that imitate a consumer culture. Of course, players can also donate gold to NPCs in exchange for gifts and favors – these donations are also strictly forbidden in the new metagame. As much as this new metagame seems to limit many options for the player to progress and develop a formidable character, there are some facets of the gameplay that remains the same.

The language chosen by the developers in regards to a character upgrading their experience can seem problematic. When a player is gaining new abilities, the general abilities screen mentions spending and buying experience points, but the subscreen (when the player is actually obtaining these new abilities) refers to gaining experience rather than purchasing it. So, the metagame does not view gaining experience as a form of purchasing goods or services, but instead sees gaining experience as the natural progression of the character learning from their actions and being rewarded appropriately. With these new metagame rules in place, the play and feel of *Fable II* took an interesting turn.

At the start of the game, the player is introduced to a younger version of the character and their character's older sister, Rosie. Rosie and the player visit a travelling merchant in possession of a music box that claims to have magical powers (*Fable II*). Before the Hero can pick up a sword, they are eager to earn enough gold to purchase the box, and by performing varying tasks throughout the neighborhood they receive the perfect amount of gold pieces to acquire the music box. In order for the game to develop, in order for the Hero to be subjected to the death of their sister, which serves as the catalyst for their actions throughout the rest of the game, they must purchase something. This becomes an interesting point in the game to meditate on: if the Hero were not intent on obtaining the magic box and did not desire a life filled with material goods (the Hero and Rosie are homeless) there would be no game to play. This metagame of not purchasing anything only further highlights the impact material possessions have on the overall game: from the very beginning the player is conditioned and encouraged to be an active participant in consumerism. The Hero's purchasing of the magic box rouses the

attention of Lord Lucien who calls Rosie and the Hero to his castle where it is revealed the Hero and Rosie are descendants from a long lost lineage of Heroes, and without hesitation, Lucien kills Rosie and wounds the hero (*Fable II*). Through the use of cut scenes, ten years pass from the night the Hero was wounded until they reappear on the screen as a young adult ready to fight Lord Lucien and defend Albion.

The player has a clear objective, prevent Lucien from building The Tattered Spire, and sets out on the quests necessary to bring the Hero face-to-face with Lord Lucien; however, these quests become significantly more difficult as the player progresses unable to purchase newer and more efficient equipment. The player is equipped with a simple sword and crossbow that are tailored to deliver the necessary damage to basic level enemies such as Hobbes (goblin-like creatures) and bandits, but as the Hero progresses throughout the game the threats become more difficult to kill resulting in more of a challenge for the player.

Shortly after *Fable II* was released there was criticism over the difficulty of the game. In fact, some reviewers claimed the game was "too easy" and provided very little challenges to the player ("Fable II User Reviews."). However, this particular metagame alleviates some of the concerns of how easy *Fable II* truly is. Granted, by the nature of the game, the character is incapable of dying (when a health meter becomes empty, the Hero is knocked unconscious, which results in a new scar forming on their body as well as losing all experience points they had not collected while in combat) but the potential setback of a character losing experience becomes tantalizing.

Lacking a need for potions or weapons, the focus shifts from exploring all of Albion by engaging in side quests, or taking on random jobs such as bartender or blacksmith, and becomes a tale of revenge. Playing with an aim to maximize experience points gained through combat, but keeping in mind that an absence of remedies to keep the Hero unscathed, there is a stronger focus on pursuing the main storyline of preventing Lord Lucien from completing The Tattered Spire. Reckless actions like fighting in The Crucible (a gladiatorial arena filled with ten rounds of combat with strange and exotic enemies) in order to gain more gold create a sense of urgency within the game. With no allure of earning enough gold to purchase a home or business, *Fable II* becomes an enthralling quest of heroics.

And while the focus on protecting the world is still present, there is something magical, for lack of a better word, about interacting with an Albion that, in parts, seems off limits. By adhering to the main storyline, it becomes easier for the Hero to maintain a positive moral disposition considering a need to purchase something like a pistol or a rifle might encourage a player to raise the rent on their properties (high rents are considered evil in *Fable II*) is now absent from the game. Yes, defeating Trolls can prove problematic with a simple crossbow, but there is still a challenge for the player – a weapon incapable of greater damage warrants smarter and faster gameplay.

The purchasing restriction does make the overall story more entertaining, but it also highlights the game's general emphasis on consumer culture. Once Lucien is defeated, the game becomes all about capitalism. There are several new quests that become available only after The Tattered Spire is no longer a threat, and those quests require the Hero to purchase various properties across Albion. Ultimately, the game shifts

from being concerned with moral fortitude and emphasizes obtaining exotic properties such as The Sandgoose, a local tavern, or Brightwood Tower, a portion of a defunct castle rumored to possess magical powers. With no real threat looming in the background, *Fable II* becomes more of a fantasy realtor simulator than an action-adventure roleplaying game.

As I had mentioned before, the new metagame does not fix all of the problems with *Fable II* but instead illuminates some stronger, real-world implications. While players engage in the exploitation metagame (discussed in the first half of this paper) they are not merely exploiting the fantastic world of Albion, but they are also exploiting the cognitive capitalism of fellow players. Cognitive capitalism is defined as "a system of production in which knowledge plays the integral role," which does fit the description of how players who have mapped and shard their discoveries of *Fable II* act: it is not their actual gameplay that is a product, but it is their knowledge of the game that becomes capital (Dyer-Witheford 391). The act of sharing tips and discoveries online is nothing new to the gaming community, but when those tips and discoveries can result in an increased profit for the developers and manufacturers of a game, and not the devoted players who took the time to play and publish their work, it becomes troublesome. Yes, the players of *Fable II* are not actually laboring away at the game in the same manner as the designers and engineers at Lionhead Studios did, but it is the labor of playing the game that earns Lionhead employers more money. Lionhead Studios and Microsoft lined their pockets on the backs of dedicated and devoted fans of *Fable II*.

The second half of *Fable II* encourages players to visit and exploit other players' games in order to unlock new achievements, gain more gold, and receive renown. Of

course this might seem trivial, but considering the exploitation present in the development of gaming systems like Xbox, which runs games like *Fable II* there is a disturbing parallel that can be drawn between the quests present in *Fable II* and the real world practice of natural resources to fund global conflicts. According to Ewan Sutherland in "Coltan, the Congo and Your Cell Phone" a key component in the manufacturing a console like an Xbox is mined under brutal and inhumane conditions (459). To compare the actions of the Hero of Albion to the lives ruined by military groups who engage in child labor and torture to turn a profit on mineral deposits like Tantalum would be an injustice to people suffering human rights violations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but there is a sense of being complicit on the part of the *Fable II* player.

The exploitation metagame of *Fable II* does serve as a shocking reminder of the powers of capitalism, but when taking into consideration the impact of cognitive capitalism and how videogame developers profit off the knowledge of players it becomes a strange reflection of reality onto fantasy: the Hero of Albion is doing no harm, simply having fun, yet the fun *Fable II* players have comes back as a profit for the creators of the game. Add into the mix the real world problem of mineral exploitation in the Congo paired with the virtual exploitation of *Fable II* and there is an interesting meditation on what we are willing to accept under the guise of recreation. Players devote time and energy around the world to unlock every secret in a game like *Fable II*, which results in money in the hands of developers with nothing given back to the players. And, the money delivered to developers trickles into the hands of war criminals in exchange for minerals necessary to create systems that make videogames possible. *Fable II* becomes a fantasy

version of the all too real practice of capitalism and exploitation, but instead of losing experience and gaining a new scar, the real world ramifications of exploitation become a matter of life and death.

The use of any multimedia as a means to tell a larger story, a story that connects to the world at large is nothing new, but when a videogame can demonstrate horrors committed by other humans under the guise of capitalism and progress it becomes a time to pause and reflect on the power of the medium. It is safe to say that *Fable II* was not designed to be a game that glorified exploitation and capitalism, but it was simply a game that mirrored what most of its players were used to: consumerism and materialism. The videogame industry is seemingly built around the idea of possessing the next best thing, be it the latest console, game sequel, or in-game feature. Yet, when a game comes along that promotes itself on the idea of a moral spectrum and how a player's moral actions can alter portions of the game, then it becomes an interesting thought experiment to imagine a game that places the player in a world where they are forced to either remain silent and complicit with the suffering of innocent people who make their recreation a reality, or for the hero to challenge the accepted practices of society at large. Perhaps there is another metagame to explore within the Fable universe that allows for a player to alter the capitalist culture present within Albion. *Fable II* is not the only videogame that follows this model, but it would be interesting to apply the restriction metagame to something like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Counter Strike* and to see what impact it has on the gameplay. By removing the capitalist elements of a game perhaps the overall gameplay becomes more challenging and creates a more visceral response between the player and the game.

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