

# Lionhead Studio's Closure Is Part Of The Industry's Age-Old Problem



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Video games are goddamn expensive to make. Everyone in the business knows this, and if they don't, and are promptly staggered by the revenue some of these games generate, it is not hard to explain why. Naturally, such large revenues demand large budgets. Most of the time these numbers work out, we get a game together, the developers rejoice, the publishers rejoice, and everyone goes back to work on the next project. Sometimes, regrettably, the numbers don't add up, and if they don't add up once too often, a developer may see their lifespan cut short because they simply don't pull their weight in the industry that we reside within. No one is safe from this inevitability; such is the nature of the beast. Yet, when a beloved developer falls under the knife, it always prompts a moment of reflection of their contribution to video game history and the hole that their absence will have in the aftermath.

Such is the case with the proposed closing of Lionhead Studios, one of Microsoft's first-party developers. Founded in 1996 by my favourite video game personality to take the piss out of – the grandmaster of hype Peter Molyneux – the studio went on to create the *Black And White* and *Fable* series. They got picked up by Microsoft in 2006, made a couple of lackluster sequels to *Fable*, and then were shut down yesterday because Microsoft decided the cow had been milked enough and that the studio couldn't add to their coffers any more. So it goes. The earth keeps spinning. The internet, however, has mourned the loss of the studio. What could have been, the fans wail, pointing at the now cancelled *Fable* Legends and alleged potential to resurrect the *Fable* franchise.

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I'm sorry, but I am about to say something incredibly brutal: should Lionhead Studios close, it will not really matter too much in the grand scheme of things. It is sad that the employees of this company will lose their jobs – you would have to be made of granite to not feel at least some sympathy for the poor people that will be made redundant. But come on; Lionhead Studios have been under the radar ever since that horror show of a Kinect title, *Fable: The Journey*, and if you heard the news and didn't immediately think: "What, who? Oh yeah, the guys that made *Fable*. That kinda sucks I guess", then you're one of the few. Peter Molyneux had long since jumped ship, and the studio had done what Rare had done years earlier and become part of the gelatinous gray blob of in-house first party developers, losing all spark of their former selves in the process.

I mentioned Rare, and I mention them again because the stories are just so similar. A company that was developer as an independent entity in the '90s goes from strength to strength by acting on its own, before being bought out for their potential by a larger publisher and being forced to shill out mediocre games that cashed in on the initial audience following the company into the deal. When that audience got justifiably annoyed that there was a notable dip in quality and a notable spike in blandness and executive meddling, the publisher simply throws its arms up, says "screw it, what's popular with the kids these days?" and then fades away into mediocrity. Am I discussing Rare's turn from Nintendo 64 masterpieces to its kid-focused colour bombs and Kinect cash-ins, or Lionhead's spectacularly crafted *Black And White* to whatever the unholy hell *Fable: The Journey* was?

Let's not mince words though: the real murderer of Lionhead Studios, as with many first-party developers that have gone the same way, is the publisher themselves – in this case, Microsoft. But can you blame Microsoft? They were only trying to help support a smaller company back in the day, offering them resources in exchange for their talents and expertise. The answer is of course we can, because a publisher does not pick up and buy out a developer out of the kindness of its own heart. It does it for the IP, the talent and the profit potential of the new acquisition. Once all of these things have been siphoned from the fresh faced studio, they are taken out back and given two bullets to the back of the head like Old Yeller. Ask Maxis, Westwood Studios, Pandemic Studios, Neversoft Studios, Radical Entertainment or Origin Systems just how much use was sucked from their workers before being thrown under the bus, and the answers will be almost identical.

Early 2013.....



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If this opinion sounds spectacularly bitter, it is because the practice of developers getting screwed over by publishers that are more concerned with profits than results is something that makes me froth at the mouth. It boils down to a fundamental difference in the roles of developer and publisher, and the relationship between these two entities. Developers are product creators with no money, and publishers are salesmen with deep pockets but no product. In a symbiotic relationship, the developer and the publisher works together to produce a profit that the two entities mutually benefit from. In a perfect world, this relationship would function, but we are not in a perfect world: we are in a video game environment where publishers with too much power take advantages of the hard work of developers with no respect for the medium other than how much money they make.

There are publishers that treat their developers well, but they are few and far between. Santa Monica Studios is a prime example of a developer that is offered the freedom that a developer deserves in this industry, but still adheres to the obligations of their publisher. Compare the *God Of War* series to *The Unfinished Swan*: two totally different games with completely different development philosophies, made by the same company, and receiving two different sets of audience reaction – both of them arguably successful. Sony Computer Entertainment must surely have had a hand in the funding and development of these titles, and were willing to trust the devs in their decisions. But of course, in saying that, it plays into the notion of publishers having more power than the developers – a curious situation when one considers that, without developers, there would be no video games in the first place.

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Alas, here we are now: saying goodbye to Lionhead Studios. They made *Black And White*, they made *Fable*, and then they fell prey to the same fate as other development teams taken in by the system, with publishers that value profit margins over creativity. One could argue that we would remember them better if they made better games, but it wasn't strictly speaking their fault. But, like I mentioned earlier, it does not really matter in the grand scheme of things. Developers come and go. But maybe, when another amazing developer falls to this particular cycle of circumstance, we can look suspiciously at what was really left behind: a legacy of good games ominously halted by an acquisition, followed by their slow demise, and at the end of it all, with a publisher standing over the corpse with fatter pockets than when they started.

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