



• *Jade's* environments range from vibrant cities to the heavens themselves. And, yes—heaven's overrun with demons, too.

JADE EMPIRE: SPECIAL EDITION

Silver tongue, glass fist

PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: BioWare GENRE: Roleplaying AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Mature
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 8GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended) MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW

Two years after striking gold with 2003's turn-based RPG *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, developer BioWare struck jade. Picture *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* unfolding in a colorful pseudo-fantasy world where airships zoom through the sky, shadow governments direct the course of history, and kung fu masters tangle with spooky ghosts, and that's *Jade Empire* (finally available on the PC... with some fancy "Special Edition" nomenclature to one-up its Xbox counterpart) in a nutshell.

Jade's story plays the "epic" card pretty quickly. After creating your character (a process as simple as choosing a name, a character skin, and a couple of martial arts styles, and then spreading some points across a trio of abilities), you soon learn from the wise old master of your little out-of-the-way martial arts academy that you're a star pupil with a destiny. It seems that the titular *Jade Empire's* overrun with ghosts, bandits, and a mysterious cabal of conspiratorial assassins...and you're—surprise!—destined to deal with all the trouble and figure out just who's running things back at the Imperial capital. The story's considerably less boilerplate than it sounds from this description...but let's not spoil it here.

IMPERIAL ENTANGLEMENTS

As in *KOTOR*, most of your problems get solved through either conversation or combat. The former is where *Jade's* attention to detail comes in—as you wander from place to place and clear objectives from your quest log, you meet



• Character development's quite basic—expect to get pretty powerful without much effort.

dozens of people, most of whom have a lot to say to you. It doesn't take long to get a sense of the time and attention put into the game's atmosphere and dialogue; once you get over the amusing irony of *Jade's* heavy reliance on Western accents, it's easy to appreciate the detail that went into the various plot threads. Most of your dialogue responses amount to "good" and "evil" choices but, unlike in *KOTOR*, these are framed more as differing-but-equally-valid philosophies (Way of the Open Palm/Way of the Closed Fist) and less as hard-and-fast moral beliefs, though they do dictate your martial options to some extent.

Jade's twitch-based combat isn't nearly as compelling as its fiction; brawls essentially boil down to button mashing, as you assail opponents with alternating weak/strong attacks. You can swap fighting styles on the fly, though you'll likely find yourself dumping all of your experience points into two or three stances and



• Your attitude toward NPCs determines which philosophy you follow, which dictates what fighting styles you can learn later on.

just running exclusively with those. For a game whose story hinges so much on the martial arts, *Jade's* strangely devoid of tactical depth or challenge; bumping the difficulty slider just swings things to the other extreme, and the on-demand Focus mode (read: bullet time) acts as an all-powerful panic button that trumps almost any foe you'll ever face. Oh, and the various traveling companions you hook up with (who run the gamut from a drifter to a demon-child) make combat even *less* challenging.

Compelling narrative and crippled combat make *Jade Empire* a case of form over function—and depending on what you want from a single-player RPG, that might be totally OK. It's short (in the 20-hour neighborhood for first-timers) and sweet; just don't let the premise trick you into expecting gameplay that isn't altogether there. • Ryan Scott

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VERDICT

- Great characters; intriguing plot; beautiful and original Eastern fantasy setting.
- Combat and character development are shallower than you might expect.

7/10

GOOD



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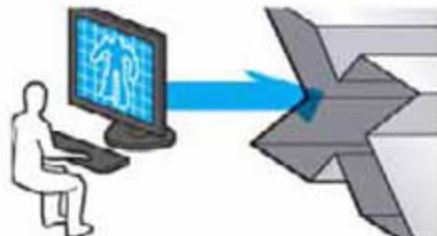
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