

Game Narrative Review

Your name: Michel Sabbagh
Your school: Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Your email: mksabbagh@wpi.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2016

Game Title: *Thief: The Dark Project*
Platform: Microsoft Windows
Genre: First-person stealth game
Release Date: November 30, 1998
Developer: Looking Glass Studios
Publisher: Eidos Interactive
Writer/Project Leader/Lead Designer: Ken Levine/Greg LoPiccolo/Tim Stellmach

Overview

Set in a steampunk metropolis dubbed “the City,” *Thief: The Dark Project* puts players in the shoes of Garrett, a witty and highly disciplined master thief. After proving his abilities by stealing priceless artifacts and escaping an assassination attempt by a crime lord, Garrett is offered a fortune to retrieve a mysterious artifact known as the Eye. As he gathers the talismans necessary to access the haunted cathedral harboring this mystical relic, Garrett becomes embroiled in a conflict between the City’s two major warring factions, the technocratic Order of the Hammer and the nature-worshipping Pagans.

Characters

- **Garrett**

“I guess if you’re rich enough you can build any sort of madhouse to live in.”

Garrett is a sarcastic kleptomaniac whose only wish in life is to steal in peace. He spent his orphaned youth on the City’s streets surviving as a pickpocket so he could “keep his ribs from meeting his spine.” Garrett was taken in by the Keepers, a secret organization devoted to preserving balance in the City, after impressing one of their agents by attempting to rob him. He was trained in the arts of stealth and subterfuge as he grew up, but found it more enticing to make use of these skills as an independent thief than to remain with the Keepers. Garrett displays a strong sense of survival, self-interest, and professional pride, and makes it a general rule not to kill anyone while on the job.

- **Viktoria**

“Is this really Garrett the Master Thief I hear talking? If danger is going to be a problem for you, then...”

A mysterious woman who is, in reality, a wood nymph capable of changing her appearance at will. Her true form is that of a humanoid entity with comely facial features and green, bark-like skin. Viktoria assumes a human mien to beguile Garrett into procuring the Eye. She allies herself with the Pagans against the City’s inhabitants.

- **Constantine (The Trickster)**

“I can't tell you how pleased I am with you, Mister Garrett. I simply can't find the words. But perhaps Viktoria can help me in that regard. She has such a way with them.”

A reclusive aristocrat who lives in a peculiar manor full of vegetation and bizarre collectibles. He puts Garrett to the test by having him steal a sword from his own mansion, then hires the master thief to obtain the Eye for him in exchange for a large sum of money. Upon obtaining the magical relic, Constantine reveals himself as the Trickster, who believes that technology has no place in the world, and wishes to return it to a purer, more natural form.

- **The Order of the Hammer**

“In the beginning we lived as thieves, stealing fur and fang of beasts for survival. Then came the Builder who brought us the Hammer, and with it we forged a new way of life. To reject the Hammer is to denounce the Builder.”

The Order of the Hammer, also known as the Hammerites, is a technocratic religious group who wishes to realize the vision of the Master Builder, their architect god. In addition to strict enforcement of their tenets, the Hammerites are also characterized by their dedication to industry, acting as contractors for manufacturing plants and providing other engineering resources for the City. Along with the metropolitan police, the Hammerites are responsible for keeping the City in order.

- **The Pagans**

“...And the manfools piled rock on rocks and raised a treesie roof, hammers saws tear the skin of goodsie wood...and laughs at the Woodsie Lord. ...And when learns the Lord of this, He sends His beastesses to the manfools...who attacks and hammers saws their useless fleshes, and build him a house of they rotting skins.”

The Pagans are nature-loving creatures who worship the Trickster and promote nature and chaos in opposition to technological and environmentally-destructive progress. They prefer to live in forests located outside the City, whose denizens they deeply loathe, especially the Order of the Hammer. The Pagans believe in the life-and-death cycle to the degree that they are glad, and sometimes eager, to feed the plants and trees with the dead. They have been known to take great joy in allowing flora to consume the corpses of their enemies.

- **The Keepers**

“The ancient corruption was again contained. To do more would have upset the balance, but we knew to remain ever vigilant lest it resurface. Neither the Hammers nor the pagans could be trusted not to meddle.”

The Keepers are an ancient organization dedicated to preserving balance and order in the world. They employ “glyphs,” mysterious spells and symbols, to influence the course of the City's history. They consider selfishness, arrogance and pride as indicators of imbalance in one’s life. Their prophecies warn future Keepers of the dangers presented by the zealous Hammerites and Pagans.

Breakdown

As one of the first games to embrace the “immersive sim” philosophy of player agency, *Thief* uses its backstory and setting to create a subtle but effective dialog between the player and the environment. This is accomplished by allowing the player the freedom to uncover the story on their own initiative, and through detailed level design that accentuates the player’s sense of vulnerability to create a palpable environmental narrative that complements the game mechanics.

Thief sets the mood for each of its sixteen levels through cinematics that combine Garrett’s explanation of his situation, cryptic quotations and a map of the relevant locale that acts as an important world-building element. Maps for abandoned places such as the Old Quarter and Lost City are somewhat sketchy and crude owing to their lack of human activity, whereas populated locations such as the Hammer Temple have explicit labels indicating points of interest.

Regardless of detail, these maps only serve as general guides. It is ultimately up to the player to carve out their own path by scouting out the mission area, circumventing conspicuous entry points that are blocked by hostile NPCs and/or environmental hazards, and navigating critical mission areas in search of loot and objects of interest before escaping. This design strategy reinforces the player’s sense of tense immersion without resorting to extensive dialog to communicate the danger and lore of each level.

The contextualized placement of interactive items also helps reveal character and story through the environment, compelling the player to discover for themselves the location of loot and information. In Ramirez’s manor, for example, the player comes across multiple rooms to explore. Using common sense and their insight on the level layout, the player

might think that little to no gold would be found in spaces such as the cellar. But in that one room, Garrett will come across the mansion's owner counting his loot judging from a conversation between two servants the player may have overheard earlier. The Thieves' Guild is another good example of important items being placed according to the narrative, with the peculiar location of a priceless vase in a safe hidden behind a banner highlighting the paranoia and strife of the two bandit leaders calling the shots. Aside from the opening cut scene expounding this conflict, all of the information the player needs to acquire the vase is obtainable through eavesdropping on NPC conversations as well as collecting notes scattered in the level.

This symbiosis of improvisational exploration and environmental storytelling means that the player's success hinges on their desire and ability to uncover the backstory of the level and the City as a whole. Letting players uncover the world for themselves makes them feel like they're accruing knowledge they're not meant to stumble upon, resulting in the same rush they would get from finding a shortcut to circumvent guards. All of this is possible thanks to how gameplay necessities sync with the reality of the game's locales, enhancing the City's sense of place and the player's absorption of the environmental details without the need for contrivances such as conspicuous quest markers or dynamic mini-maps.

The City, in particular, benefits greatly from subtle world-building and scene-setting that broaden the player's worldview without spoon-feeding them. Despite being a linear game, *Thief* provides the player with a portrait of a rich, detailed universe that lies beyond the levels' boundaries. For instance, the player can overhear a conversation between two guards outside Bafford's manor arguing about going to the bear pits. One guard insists it's entertaining because the bears don't spike that make them vicious, while the other is old enough to remember when bears didn't need that kind of equipment.

This mix of pure scene-setting pieces, like notes about how to prepare dinner and ledgers of illegal payments, and gameplay-relevant information, such as a tip describing the incompetence of certain guards that alerts Garrett to potential exploitation of their demeanor, means that *Thief* strikes a fine balance between gameplay and environment storytelling by leveraging its lore to not only bolster the player's worldview, but also apprise them of potentially beneficial information on points and items of interest that will compel them to explore every nook and cranny in the game.

The levels' structure also highlights the sense of danger and uneasy emotional involvement that the player subconsciously feels as it's being fed back into the player-environment dialog. Water, for instance, serves as a boundary between the game's safe and hazardous spaces. Locations such as Cragcleft Prison and the Opera House require Garrett to swim through water, emphasizing that the player is entering a high-risk area. This design technique of establishing a motif of impending danger becomes especially noticeable in the second act, from stealing Constantine's sword to retrieving the Eye in the haunted cathedral using the talismans found in the Opera House, Mage Towers, Lost City and Hammerite Temple, which gradually contrasts the natural and paranormal

threats with the City's technological prevalence to which the player has previously been exposed.

The same can be said of the rift in structural layout between rich and poor areas, which underlines the idea that power and technology are meant to be feared. The variety of surface materials Garrett can step on, from damp dirt to solid tiles, makes the player more confident in shabbier areas such as city streets and ruins, and more fretful in rich or high-security locales such as prisons and mansions with their noisier surfaces and narrower corridors, forcing the player to devise new strategies to evade their physically and numerically advantageous foes. Likewise, the use of torches that can be extinguished with a water arrow in downtrodden areas and lamps that can't be deactivated in wealthy ones emphasizes the progress the player is making through the game from an environmental standpoint.

This, in turn, opens the door to twists and turns that can highlight the daunting nature of the game's locales and the core pillar of subterfuge that defines much of *Thief's* gameplay and emotional tension, such as the Eye locking the haunted cathedral's doors behind Garrett upon entering it and retrieving the artifact, and narrowing the gap in knowledge between the player and their avatar. The sense of vulnerability stemming from not knowing what exactly awaits the master thief can also impact the briefing information the player and Garrett possess upon being dropped into a level.

The sound design also alerts the player to their situation. For instance, once they reach the chapel at the top of Cragscleft Prison, Hammerite chants are overheard in the background, highlighting the building's sanctity and level of security. Likewise, a riotous tune lets the player know they've infiltrated the heavily guarded Thieves' Guild, and a looping melody imparts a sense of relief upon reaching the sword room in Constantine's manor. The same can be said of the abandoned and rural areas in the game such as the Lost City, Boneyard and Old Quarter, where the game's atmospherically paranormal elements crop up. Regardless of where the player goes, the feeling of danger in populous and ruined areas serves to reinforce the theme of nature in decline vs. technology on the rise. By using the soundscape to communicate the precarious shifts in danger, *Thief* lets the player know that either technological evil or natural hostility can lurk around every corner.

Thief grants the player freedom of movement by making them nimble, but also encourages stealth by making them physically weak. This mechanic affects the narrative from both a player and environmental standpoint. As an embodiment of Garrett, the player experiences a sense of exposure and peril in a hazardous world filled with enemies who greatly outnumber him. From the environmental perspective, that emotional involvement enhances the theme of nature vs. technology. The uncertainty of how scenarios will play out due to the enemies' advantages and Garrett's weaknesses emphasizes the importance of information-gathering, which bolsters the sense of player agency while preserving the tension of the story.

Strongest Element

Thief's greatest strength is its use of subtle foreshadowing to mete out critical bits of exposition. The quotations in the cinematics are a good example. While many of these are pure scene-setting, such as the Hammerite and Keeper quotes that flesh out their beliefs, others, such as those pertaining to the Pagans and the Trickster, hint at story events that will later prove to bear terrible fruit. This foreshadowing pays off at the game's major turning point: Garrett's betrayal at the hands of Viktoria and Constantine upon retrieving the Eye. This event triggers *Thief*'s third and most intense act, in which the Pagans attempt to open a portal to the Maw of Chaos in hopes of restoring the City to nature. This scheme is intimated by the surprising amount of vegetation in Constantine's mansion which, given the City's segregation of nature and technology, a perceptive player may find incongruous. In addition, several documents, such as a letter that can be found in a crime lord's accounting vault, hint at locations and characters that may prove important later in the game. The seamless integration of these hints encourages inquisitiveness, tangibly investing the player into the story.

Unsuccessful Element

Thief falls short in its overreliance on underdeveloped paranormal elements, such as ghostly specters and the undead, in sparsely populated missions that don't involve burglary. Although effective at bolstering the game's oppressive atmosphere, these entities are mechanically incongruous. Their relatively predictable AI reduces the risk of getting caught or killed, discouraging exploration and diluting the player's emotional involvement. This shortcoming could have been avoided by rebalancing the behavior of the paranormal entities to more closely match the threat posed by the human opponents, or simply removing them from the story altogether.

Highlight

Of all the locales Garrett visits, Constantine's mansion stands out. Its clever use of environmental storytelling and level design toys with the emotions of the player more potently than any other part of the game.

By the time players begin the mission dubbed "The Sword," they will believe they have developed a good understanding of the tactics required to infiltrate well-guarded establishments, sharing Garrett's confidence in his ability to plunder the mansion. However, the associated map challenges the player's initially optimistic mindset. Although the front of the mansion is clearly labeled, the back is left blank, owing to its recently built nature and Garrett's reliance on observation and hearsay to get a rough idea of the layout.

As the player ventures into the mansion, the disorientation increases. The back of the estate contains cavernous tunnels full of foliage, rooms that spiral, tilt and go upside down, and magical booby traps, enhanced by haunting ambient sounds. At the moment the player gets their hands on the sword, they discover that their client was none other than Constantine himself, now revealed as a manipulative and potentially dangerous character.

The lack of expository dialog on the strangeness of the mansion or its twisted occupant enabled the designers to evoke a specific emotional effect essential to the impact of the story: stupefaction. This scene exemplifies *Thief's* commitment to letting the player uncover the game's story through exploration, with little or no handholding.

Critical Reception

Thief received critical acclaim upon its release, earning a 92/100 on Metacritic.¹

While most of the praise was directed at the game's unique take on the first-person shooter genre by eschewing combat in favor of stealth, the narrative still garnered positive recognition from gaming journalists.

Emil Pagliarulo, writer for Adrenaline Vault, awarded the game an A, praising "its intelligent, fully-developed storyline" which enhanced the mystery of the various factions in the game owing to the player "not knowing who or what is in control beyond the confines of the City."²

GameSpot's Greg Kasavin gave *Thief* a 9.1/10, lauding its synergy of subtle storytelling and methodical gameplay. He pointed out the "strong narrative structure and excellent mission design" as well as its "emphasis on stealth, strategy, and ingenuity that adds up to a game that's stylish, serious, rewarding, and unique."³

Lessons

- **Use exposition subtly to present world-building elements:** As a way of compelling the player to search for details that will broaden their worldview and gameplay knowledge, *Thief* cleverly mixes expository information with pure scene-setting elements that flesh out the game's locales and characters. For example, the design of Constantine's mansion slyly apprises players of dramatic possibilities, making their discovery all the more impactful as they materialize.
- **Set the tone for each level and design them in a way that communicates progress:** In addition to the objects and characters that provide gameplay and narrative information, designers should consider the theme and mood of each mission to communicate their level of challenge and adjust the player's expectations. From using water and sound design as spatial barriers, to populating the levels with different light sources, corridors and surface materials to reinforce a fear of power and technology, *Thief* makes effective use of level structure to bring its locations to vivid life.

¹ "Thief: The Dark Project." *Metacritic*. CBS Interactive Inc., 1998. Web. 14 Nov. 2016.

² Pagliarulo, Emil. "Thief: The Dark Project." *Adrenaline Vault*. NewWorld.com, Inc., 19 Dec. 1998. Web. 14 Nov. 2016.

³ Kasavin, Greg. "Thief: The Dark Project Review." *GameSpot*. CBS Interactive Inc., 4 Dec. 1998. Web. 14 Nov. 2016.

- **Let players feel as if they're learning things they're not supposed to know:** Designers should hint at the backstory, doling out lore and exposition in bits and pieces (such as the documents and conversations encountered in the Thieves' Guild) scattered across the levels. Player agency is enhanced by encouraging exploratory improvisation.
- **Use mechanics to communicate story and player-environment dialog:** Garrett's constraints and vulnerabilities play an essential role in bolstering the player's sense of tension, reinforced by an emphasis on non-lethal tools and restrictions on killing NPCs. *Thief* produces its intended emotional effect by stressing the importance of subterfuge, solidifying its synergy of narrative and mechanics.

Summation

With its deft integration of mechanics and level design, *Thief* weaves a satisfyingly deep and dark experience. Its tense environmental narrative and palpable sense of agency opens a possibility space for the player that encourages exploratory improvisation, fully delivering on the promise of its title.