Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Thief: The Dark Project*
Platform: PC
Genre: First Person Stealth
Release Date: 11/30/1998
Developer: Looking Glass Studios
Publisher: Eidos Interactive
Initial Design and Story Concepts: Ken Levine
Cutscenes Screenplay: Terri Brosius

Overview

Thief: The Dark Project tells the story of the reluctant hero Garrett, a pickpocket and
burglar in "The City", an amalgam of dense medieval streets, steampunk technology, and
secrets veiled with myths and magic. Contracted by an eccentric aristocrat named
Constantine, Garret undertakes stealth missions taking him from shadow to shadow to
pursue a gem called The Eye. Garrett soon finds himself in an unexpected quest against
supernatural creatures and the forces of chaos.

Characters

- **Garrett** – The player protagonist. Garrett is a master thief with a callous
  professionalism and wry charisma. He has little regard for authority or politeness
  and is unabashed about stealing from the rich for his own benefit.   Garrett carries
  a sword for protection, but much prefers to go unnoticed, wielding sap and
  lockpick under the cover of night. Primarily motivated by greed and self-
  preservation, Garrett is an unlikely hero. However, when evil villains betray him,
  Garrett's cunning makes him a formidable opponent.

- **The Keepers/ Keeper Artemus** – Keeper Artemus is Garrett's mentor and
  connection to the secretive sect known as the Keepers, whose goal it is to
  maintain balance in the world. When Garrett was a child, Artemus recruited
  Garrett into the Keepers and trained him in their skills of stealth and subterfuge.
  Even though Garrett's rebellious streak led him to turn his back on Artemus and
  the Keepers in favor of a more nonconformist life, a connection of prophecy and
  destiny between Garrett and the Keepers remains.

- **The Hammerites** – Followers of the Order of the Hammer. The Hammerites are a militant religious sect that value technology, architecture, and order as represented by their god, the Master Builder. The Hammerites serve as the police and the military in The City.

- **The Pagans** – Followers of the Trickster. The Pagans value nature, chaos, and the cycle of life and death. The Pagans are the ideological foil to the Hammerites.

- **Viktoria** – A mysterious contact who contracts Garrett to steal a sword from a local nobleman and collector named Constantine.   Secretly, Viktoria is a sort of supernatural being, a "Woodsie" or Wood Nymph, and a Pagan servant of her "Woodsie Lord" Constantine, the Trickster. Viktoria appears to be a normal, attractive woman until her betrayal of Garrett, at which point her physical form becomes wooden and plantlike and her speech becomes that of a crazed, fanatic zealot.

- **The Trickster** – Viktoria tells Garrett about a man named Constantine, an eccentric nobleman and collector new to The City, and target for a burglary. In reality, Constantine is the Trickster, the "Woodsie Lord", a godlike demon who recruits Garrett to retrieve a powerful gem for his own dark purposes. The Trickster is the personification of chaos, with no intention of honoring his contract with Garrett. He is a monstrous, powerful devil-like figure with horns, fangs and a third eye, able to disguise himself as Constantine, an older, balding white-haired aristocrat.

Breakdown

Thief: The Dark Project tells most of its narrative through the mission briefings and cutscenes between each level. The cutscenes typically contain two elements – first, a quote that helps introduce or elaborate on elements and themes in the gameworld, and second, a new piece of the story from Garrett's point of view, typically with a narrative voiceover by Garrett.

For example, the game's introductory scene gives a quote by "Mayar, Third Keeper" beginning, "The essence of balance is detachment," introducing the Keepers and their primary characteristics. Then in the cutscene Garrett briefly tells his own origin story as a child pickpocket taken in by the Keepers, and leads the player into the tutorial training stage. For a first person action game of its time, these cutscenes are generous in length (between one and three minutes between each stage). While these cutscenes alone provide a coherent storyline and thorough characterization, the gameplay itself also gives important details beyond simply moving the story forward, through elements such as chatter between NPCs, and notes left for the player to read.

The first half of the game, and story, focuses on characterization of Garrett and the world in which he works. The story explores Garrett's unique moral code and life as master of an unscrupulous art. The player sees Garrett as ruthless, but relatable, funny and

sympathetic in his voiceovers, and The City as an eclectic mix of medieval elements with some interesting, unexpected low technology. The story provides an intriguing combination of the familiar and unusual, and reinforces these elements at every opportunity.

The latter half of the game focuses on the storyline surrounding Constantine, the Trickster, and his manipulation and betrayal of Garrett. Constantine and Viktoria send Garrett on a quest to recover a gem called The Eye. When Garrett succeeds after many trials, they reveal themselves to be monstrous Pagan creatures motivated to shift the world toward chaos and nature's whims using The Eye as a ritual relic. They take The Eye from Garrett, take one of Garret's own flesh eyes as a ritual component, and bind him in vines, left to die.

The climactic conclusion of the game surrounds Garret's escape from his betrayers, and getting his revenge against the Trickster by replacing The Eye with an explosive forgery of Hammerite construction.

Strongest Element

The key draw of the *Thief*'s story is the characterization of Garrett as a credible and sympathetic antihero with a cold sense of humor. Garrett's voiceover dialogue in the first few levels after the tutorial stage quickly draws the player into his character and makes the player feel like they know Garrett. His characterization is effective because his character flaws are so honest and Garrett is so self-aware. He lives in a harsh, difficult world, and makes his way on his own terms – even if his chosen profession is dodgy, there is some honor in this *Thief*. Of course, it helps greatly that the stealthy gameplay reinforces his mercenary characteristics.

Unsuccessful Element

A key turning point in the game is the introduction of explicitly supernatural forces as Constantine's quest puts Garrett up against enemies such as the undead and Frogbeasts. While the Trickster's betrayal leads to some of the most interesting plot elements of the story, the shift in tone from that established at the beginning of the game is jarring. Garrett's weary cynicism seems relevant to a life of crime stealing from wealthy aristocrats and dodging their guards, but when facing off against skeleton warriors and a demon-god, Garrett's character seems a little less real.

Highlight

After Garret finally completes an epic quest to retrieve the gem known as The Eye, Constantine and Viktoria reveal their true forms, betray Garret, and Viktoria slices out one of Garret's eyes.

Critical Reception

The aggregate review site GameRankings gives *Thief: The Dark Project* an 89.41%, making it the 5th best reviewed PC game of 1998 and the 90th best PC game overall. http://www.gamerankings.com/pc/71536-thief-the-dark-project/index.html

Trent C. Ward at IGN gave *Thief* an 8.9 out of 10, praising the way the story unfolds:

> "While the first few missions can be a little confusing, by the end of the game, the story really starts coming together and will have you on the end of your seat hoping for success just so you can find out what happens next.."

http://pc.ign.com/articles/153/153476p1.html

Greg Kasavin at Gamespot complimented *Thief*'s story structure in his review, giving the game a 9.1:

> "Its emphasis on stealth, strategy, and ingenuity, coupled with its strong narrative structure and excellent mission design, adds up to a game that's stylish, serious, rewarding, and unique."

http://www.gamespot.com/thief-the-dark-project/reviews/thief-the-dark-project-review-2533843/

Empire Online listed Garrett as number 29 of 50 all-time greatest video game characters and the PC Zone Magazine staff listed him as the 9th best character in PC gaming.

Lessons

- Lesson 1: Strange enough to be interesting, but familiar enough to be relatable.

  Garrett was not the first antihero in a game, and The City was not the first steampunk town. The player's ability to easily slide into Garrett's shoes and to sympathize with his thoughts made him special, and the player's ability to feel comfortable with The City's specific mix of knights and engineering made it immersive.

- Lesson 2: Reinforce character traits to make them memorable.

  The majority of the cut scenes include a line alluding to Garrett's indifference to the immorality of theft, or greed as his motivation:

  > "I'd rather not have to do this job, but Cutty's a reliable fence, and I don't appreciate the Hammerites abducting him. And he owes me money for the Bafford job."

  > "When I get paid for this job, I'm gonna retire in style."

"The time is ripe for a bit of burglary."

As another example, when the game first described Constantine, Viktoria called him an eccentric collector. The first time the player explores his home, Garret's primary goal is to find a unique magical sword from his collection, and while there, the player runs across additional unusual displays and loot. When Garrett finally meets Constantine, he describes himself as a collector and gives Garrett a quest to acquire another rare item for him.

- Lesson 3: Use narrative as a consistent reward

   The cutscenes between each level of *Thief* are all high quality, of consistent length, and similarly constructed. After players complete the first few levels, they come to expect and look forward to an evolving story narrative to follow each level thereafter.

Summation

Thief: The Dark Project serves as an enduring example of characterization and narrative in an action game. One can easily see Garrett's influence as a cynical but likable antihero in numerous other games such as *Assassin's Creed* and *Prototype*. While *Thief* did not invent or perfect the narrative cutscene, the craftsmanship of the scenes in the game were a significant step forward at the time for storytelling in its genre. In *Thief*, Looking Glass created a unique character and gameworld that proved both memorable and beloved by its fans.