THIEF

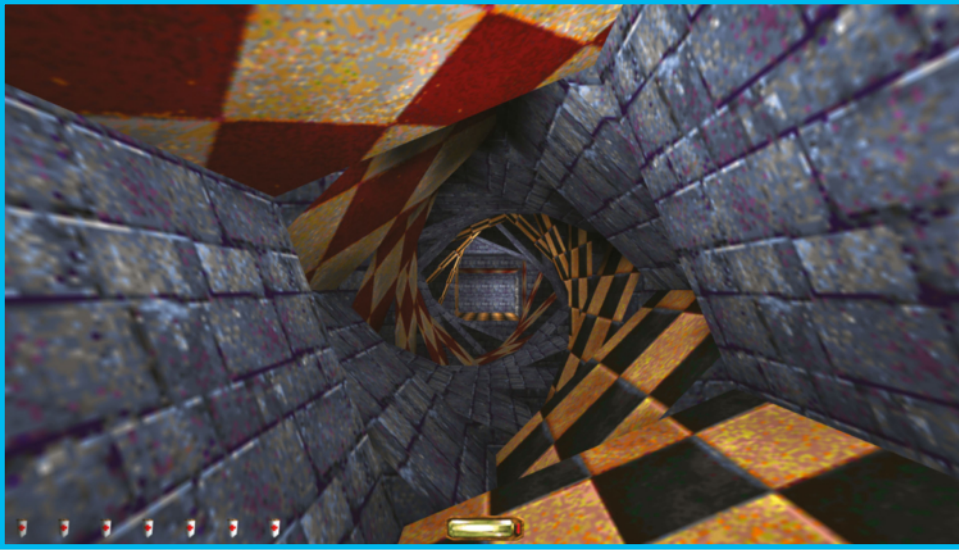## THE DARK PROJECT

AN ENDURING LEGACY

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, A GROUP OF MISFITS AND MIT
GRADUATES LOCKED THEMSELVES IN A DARK ROOM… AND
CREATED ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL VIDEOGAMES OF
ALL TIME. WHAT FOLLOWS IS A DEEP DIVE INTO THE MINDS
OF ITS CREATORS – AND ITS ENDURING LEGACY

WORDS BY LEE SEYMOUR

» [PC] Thanks to strong art direction, *Thief*'s iconic, sometimes surreal maps remain striking in 2024.

One night in 1999, while working late at Looking Glass Studios in Cambridge, level designer Terri Brosius received a call. Not from a colleague… but a colleague's wife. "She called us because her spouse was staying at work so late that she was convinced there was an affair going on," Terri recalls with a laugh. "And we had to talk her down. 'No, there's no affair. Some of us are just… sleeping here. At the office.'"

The anecdote captures an inflection point at the storied studio. It had just shipped *Thief: The Dark Project*, the seminal stealth-'em-up, which received rapturous reviews and sold well enough. But the team knew no rest, and immediately began work on both an enhanced version called *Thief Gold*, and a direct sequel, *The Metal Age*.

"I called it the Dark Pit," jokes Emil Pagliarulo, who joined as a level designer for the sequel, describing an open floor plan with blackout curtains over the windows. "It was the most intense two years of my life. And I was having a fucking blast."

Stephen Russell, who voiced *Thief*'s protagonist Garrett, recalls his first visit to the studio. "It was remarkable. I couldn't even tell what most of the people were doing there, but I could see they were really, really busy. And sleep-deprived."

» [PC] *Thief*'s story had players tangling with demigods and dictators alike – though rarely face to face.

In 1999, Looking Glass was renowned as a hive of creativity, where MIT programmers and cinema junkies from Southie dreamt up paradigm-busting games together. It was also known as a place where the work was so intense that it threatened to derail marriages. But while Terri's anecdote might raise an eyebrow, even more notable is the fondness with which she recalls it. "It was a joy," she says of her time working on *Thief*, late nights and all. "I couldn't get enough of it."

Twenty-five years on, the studio holds an almost mythic place in the history of game development: a singular environment and cohorts driven by passion, not profit margins. And while the studio itself closed in 2000, its output has influenced interactive media ever since. *Thief* is frequently cited as a favourite of other gamemakers, including *Half-Life* architect Marc Laidlaw, and it's no coincidence that Looking Glass alumni went on to lead the teams behind landmark games like *BioShock*, *Deus Ex*, *Guitar Hero* and *Skyrim*.

But what's remarkable is how many of them share Terri's sentiment, speaking wistfully of their time crunching in the Dark Pit. Not to mention how they link that crucible directly to innovation, and creating an entire new genre. "Everyone was very connected to each other," says Eric Brosius, who designed *Thief*'s revolutionary audio engine (and is married to Terri). "That doesn't mean everyone got along. But we had good managers who realised that magic happens if you let things play out."

"Magical is the best word to describe it," agrees Randy Smith, who was a level designer before becoming project director of the third game in the series. "The team somehow shared a vision for something that didn't exist yet."

"We were all constantly in dialogue. That kind of jazz," says artist Daniel Thron, noting that everyone wore multiple hats. (He was also a voice actor, who collaborated heavily with ▶
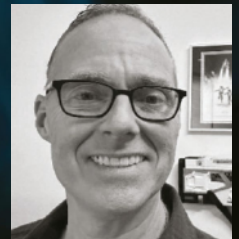

» [PC] The Looking Glass team wasn't above a few cheeky Easter eggs, like this hidden basketball court.
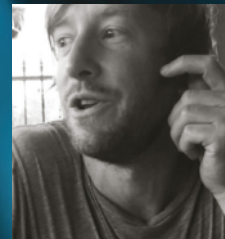
Randy Smith
» Randy was the level designer on *Thief* and *Thief II*, and project lead on *Deadly Shadows*. Is currently making a new stealth game with fellow *Thief* designer Daniel Thron.

Emil Pagliarulo
» Emil was a level designer on *Thief II* and has spent the last 20 years at Bethesda, and is the studio's design director.
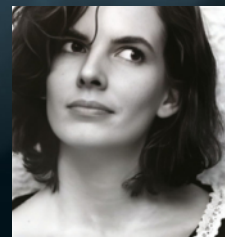

Stephen Russell
» Stephen was the voice of Garrett in *Thief*, *Thief II* and *Deadly Shadows*. He has voiced characters in many iconic games since *Thief*, including *Fallout 3* and *4* and *Dishonored*.

Eric Brosius
» Eric was a sound designer for *Thief*, *Thief II* and *Deadly Shadows*. He moved from Looking Glass to Harmonix, along with original *Thief* director Greg LoPiccolo.

Terri Brosius
» Terri was a level designer, voice actor and writer on *Thief Gold*, *Thief II* and *Deadly Shadows*. She is currently working on *Thief* successor *Gloomwood*, and is also known as the iconic voice of SHODAN in *System Shock*.

Daniel Thron
» Daniel was a designer, voice actor and artist on *Thief*, *Thief II* and *Deadly Shadows*. A VFX artist with credits on the *Avengers* films, he is now making a stealth game with *Thief* alum Randy Smith.

» [PC] A posh bank, after hours. The design ethos foregrounded maps that felt like real places to infiltrate.

» [PC] Much of *Thief*'s story was left for players to discover at their own pace, like the secrets in this abandoned library.

» [PC] "Immersion" doesn't preclude the supernatural. Zombies – and worse – haunt *Thief*'s darkest corners.

Terri, who was also a writer, and so on.) "We would go to the office at two in the morning. Everyone has that story. But we'd go because we couldn't get it out of our heads. It's not a product to us, it's a work of art that we are creating." Despite the Dark Pit, Emil concurs. "It was a bastion of creativity, where creatives had the power to make the vision that they had in their head. I was obsessed. We all were."

And – of course – it couldn't last. While Looking Glass was making a name for itself as a creative powerhouse, it was also, as Eric Brosius put it, "Famous for being behind schedule and over budget." Despite shipping an even more lauded *Thief* sequel, the studio shuttered in 2000. It turns out profit margins couldn't be sidelined forever.

O K. So, Looking Glass was a beautiful, bubbling cauldron of a studio, filled with creative geniuses but overseen in a way that would make most managers shriek. It didn't survive… yet here you are, reading a feature about its legacy 25 years later. What, exactly, was so special about its flagship pilfering simulator?

Briefly: in 1998, the gaming landscape had no real stealth titles amid *Mario*-clones and *Doom*-clones. Then two of them, each with wildly different takes on the concept, launched almost simultaneously: *Thief* and *Metal Gear Solid*. Konami's game was an operatic, third-person espionage game studded with military jargon and bombastic boss fights. Its stealth systems were clear but cartoonish, with exclamation marks appearing above enemies when alerted, and felt as often like a movie as it did a game.

Thief, by contrast, was almost haptic in its immersion. It was in first-person, with hypnotic audio and diegetic feedback. Each heist was designed to feel like a real place, and players were encouraged to drink it in, manipulating the environment as they explored. It was deliberate, mysterious, empowering – and wholly unlike anything on the market.

"We were very serious about presenting an environment that you could believe in," Randy says. "We think about the stealth now, but I'd argue it was actually the immersion that made it successful. Very few games – to this day – make you feel as much like you're in a space as *Thief* does."

"Looking Glass had such a long-term, profound effect on people because of the deep sense of trust we had in the player," Daniel adds. "There isn't a single solution in *Thief*. It's up to you to figure out how to steal the thing. It's letting you tell that story through gameplay. And that sense of ownership makes it unique. It becomes yours."

So what happened next? The turn of the millennium saw an explosion of these games, collectively known as immersive sims: *Thief*, *Deus Ex*, *System Shock* and their sequels all emerged from the same core talent pool, and seemed poised to reinvent gaming as we knew it. But in the years immediately following, their influence was subtle. One might even say (ahem) stealthy. This is partly due to a narrower appeal; immersive sims are widely beloved by designers but often overlooked by more casual gamers. "Sitting still is not one of humanity's

THIEF'S LEGACY

FIVE WAYS THIEF CHANGED THE GAME
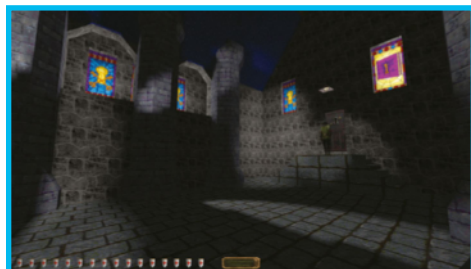
AVOID THE LIGHT

■ *Thief*'s stealth is deep but clear – a HUD indicator displays exactly how visible you are to enemies. This mechanic has been widely adopted, notably by *The Elder Scrolls* series and its Sneak skill, which features an 'opening eye' detection meter.

WATCH YOUR STEP

■ "It was ray tracing, but for audio," says executive producer Jonas Eneroth of *Thief*'s revolutionary sound design. Realistic propagation allowed players to track enemies by the sound of their voices – and footsteps. Rarely equaled since, it remains top-of-its-class even in 2024.
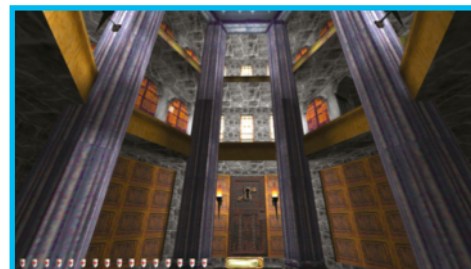
IMMERSE YOURSELF

■ Each heist in *Thief* is designed to feel like a real place into which the player intrudes, not an expectant shooting gallery. Revolutionary in 1998, this verisimilitude is now commonplace. Think *BioShock*'s lived-in districts, or *Hitman*'s levels that even make use of mundane toilets.

» [PC] You can't hear pictures, but if you could, this one would make your skin crawl. Promise.

THE BLACK PARADE

A LANDMARK COLLABORATION OF FANS AND DEVELOPERS

■ One of *Thief*'s most enduring legacies is its fan community, which is still thriving today. For 25 years, sneaky modders have crafted custom heists for the original games, from funky experiments to full pro-tier campaigns. Indeed, many of these authors have gone on to become professional devs, making AAA immersive sims at studios like Arkane and Ion Storm. And to mark the 25th anniversary of *Thief*'s release this winter, a supergroup of pros and amateurs joined forces to craft *The Black Parade*, a free, ten-mission prequel to *The Dark Project*, built in the original engine. The response from players was huge – it won ModDB's Mod Of The Year – and the work is truly stunning. *The Black Parade*'s heists are gargantuan maps, crammed with all the sneaky, spooky goodness you could hope to find in a *Thief* game in 2024.

Making it all the more special was the full-circle involvement of Daniel Thron, one of *Thief*'s original designers, who recorded voice over for several characters. "It's incredible," Thron says of the project. "An absolutely insane piece of work. It's 100% the old vibe – and its own beast." For those interested, you can find *The Black Parade*, and hundreds of other custom heists, at ttlg.com

strong points," Emil sighs. "It's a tougher sell in a mass market."

S o even as *Thief*'s designers moved to new studios, its influence between 2003 and 2012 was more piecemeal. It is there: in the environmental richness of *BioShock*'s Rapture; in *Hitman*'s methodical infiltration setups; in the stealth systems of broader games, like Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls*. "*Thief* led directly to better stealth in our games," Emil says of Bethesda, where he is now the design director. "But here, we always skew a little easier than harder, a little more accessible."

For the most part, the Noughties focussed on expanding that accessibility: *Gears Of War*, *Halo*, *Call Of Duty*. Bombastic popcorn games that

served up a player fantasy more suited to loud dorm rooms than solo exploration. Even stealthy peers like *Splinter Cell* transformed, fetishising lethal action over considered espionage.

Then, in 2012, *Dishonored* released: a stealthy, first-person sim that allowed tremendous degrees of player freedom in its moody, richly detailed environments. And it was a hit. (Not coincidentally, one of its directors was Harvey Smith, lead designer of *Deus Ex* and torchbearer of the generation that had come through the Looking Glass.)

And in 2015, *Metal Gear Solid* performed a gargantuan buttonhook. Eschewing the cinematic bloat of its predecessors, *The Phantom Pain* foregrounded a dynamic, open map dotted with opportunities for player expression. One could scout locations, ▶

BUILD YOUR KIT

■ In 1998 first-person games, player 'tools' were usually guns. *Thief* provided a toolkit that could manipulate your environment. Extinguish torches with water arrows, or distract guards with noisy objects. *The Phantom Pain* and *Breath Of The Wild* are two modern torchbearers.
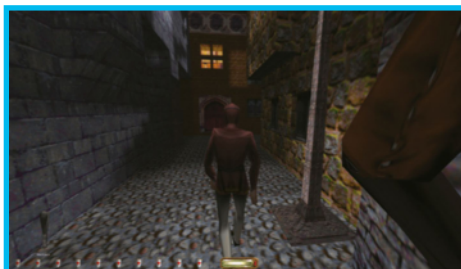
KNOCK 'EM OUT

■ In *Thief*, murder is the mark of an amateur, and players are encouraged to 'ghost' missions without being detected. This ethos influenced a whole lineage of immersive sims, all of which allow player expression through degrees of pacifism – or violence.

STEALTHY SEQUELS

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE DARK PROJECT'S PROGENY

THIEF II: THE METAL AGE (2000)

■ Bigger, bolder, stealthier… better? Freed from the burden of inventing a brand-new genre, the devs could hone its strengths for the sequel, with more heists and less tomb-raiding. Overall, the missions are larger, with more secrets – but the vibes are palpably different. Superficially similar, the first two *Thief* games are distinctly their own beasts.

THIEF: DEADLY SHADOWS (2004)

■ After Looking Glass closed, core team members moved to Ion Storm Austin to finish the third game. Production was hampered by technical issues, including a map-destroying renderer that tanked months of work. But the storytelling remains terrific, and it features several iconic heists – including the Shalebridge Cradle, widely regarded as one of the most frightening levels in all gaming.

THIEF (2014)

■ This iffy reboot is a case study in the challenges of replicating Looking Glass' magic at a modern AAA studio. Gone are series hallmarks like open environments and immersive storytelling, replaced by claustrophobic maps and QuickTime Events. The stealth is murky, the story is schizophrenic and the scars of cut content are palpable throughout. An ignoble end to the series – for now.

» [PC] Eavesdropping on *Thief*'s bumbling guards provides both a tactical advantage… and levity to break up tension.

» [PC] Nightdive's remake of *System Shock* adheres fantastically (and fanatically) to the precepts Looking Glass laid out in 1994.

» [PC] *Dishonored* iterated *Thief*'s stealth formula with supernatural powers, faster movement, and stylish violence.

» [PC] The iconic cardboard box is but one of dozens of player tools in the most immersive *Metal Gear Solid* entry.

» [PC] *Prey* is an astonishing immersive sim, featuring a single contiguous map that responds constantly to players and their choices.

» [PC] *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* left its story unfinished, but provided abundant depth and freedom for player expression.

» [PC] Swordplay was clunky by design – a last resort for heists gone wrong. You're a thief, not a thug.

infiltrate compounds, carry out missions with custom toolkits, improvise on the fly and escape unscathed. Indeed, if you replace 'missions' in that sentence with 'heists' you might as well be describing *Thief* – just with a few more silenced firearms. It also became the best-selling game in the series, with nearly ten million units moved.

2016 followed as a banner year. First, the *Hitman* series rebooted itself, giving players an embarrassment of stealthy tools and the freedom to mash them up in surprising ways, across maps that felt like real places into which one discreetly intruded. It was a huge financial success.

Then came *Dishonored 2*, which doubled up on player powers, including a jaw-dropping time-travel mechanic that fit perfectly in the larger toolkit – and cast Stephen Russell himself as the protagonist. And *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* inched closer to the immersive-sim ideal as described by Looking Glass alum Warren Spector: a single city block in which the player could enter any door, and find a responsive world behind each decision. Lastly, the 2017 release *Prey*, also made by the *Dishonored* team at Arkane Studios, became a spiritual successor to *System Shock*. It even named its in-game sci-fi tech 'Looking Glass'.

This all amounted to a remarkable volley of high-profile AAA games that didn't just feature stealth sections, but were firmly anchored in the DNA of a long-defunct studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts. True, not all of them were hits. (*Prey* in particular remains criminally underplayed.) But through them one can trace a resurgence of the Looking Glass ethos: create a world that feels real, immerse the player in it, and let them find their own way through.

So how does *Thief* fit into 2024? The series itself is moribund; after a disastrous 2014 reboot by Eidos Montreal, it sat untouched until Embracer Group hoovered it up in its quest to

purchase all of Earth's IP. As of this writing, Embracer is shedding assets like snakeskin, so who knows how or if *Thief* will emerge again.

Stealth overall has become more a AAA mechanic than a mainstream genre, with mixed results. Some titles fold it organically into their broader canvases, like *The Elder Scrolls*. Others bolt clunky sneaking sequences onto their action fantasies, like Sony's *Spider-Man*.

One rather sees smaller studios taking up the immersive stealth mantle. Which, given its origins, feels fitting. Thomas Grip, founder of Frictional games, cites *Thief* as a prime inspiration for the studio's wildly successful *Amnesia* series. And Nightdive Studios came full circle last year, releasing its fantastic, faithful remake of Looking Glass' own *System Shock*. And Randy and Daniel themselves – who are now collaborating on a new stealth game – point to the indie scene as an analogue to the Looking Glass cauldron.

"I think it's coming back strong," Daniel says. "You can make a living, making a game with a team of five people. And the less people you have, the less you have to worry about reporting to somebody else. It gives you more freedom."

"You can make a game with Unreal or Unity and have it done in six months," Randy says bluntly. "And if it's really good, like *Vampire Survivors*, you are going to be a hit. And that wasn't available to folks in the Nineties."

One such project is dovetailing both figuratively and literally with the Looking Glass lineage. *Gloomwood*, led by Dillon Rogers at New Blood, is a spooky stealth-'em-up whose own website is, ahem, Thiefwithguns.com and it features none other than Terri Brosius as the voice of its prime antagonist.

"New Blood is sort of its own weird chaotic anomaly," Dillon says. "We're a bunch of
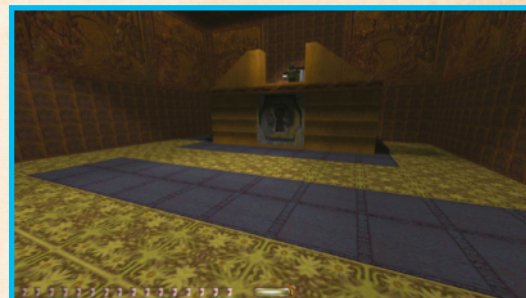
» [PC] Among *Thief*'s revolutionary audio features: different surfaces were "louder" than others, turning ordinary rooms into environmental puzzles.

people who just want to make games, came together as a collective… and now we have to figure out how to manage. It's artist-led, and it can get chaotic, but we're also malleable. And we'll just keep doing this until it stops working."

Sound familiar? As for *Thief* itself, while many of the original devs are excited about their new projects, the notion of a revisit still holds a special appeal. When asked if he would step back into the recording booth and play Garrett for another instalment, Stephen Russell answered in character and without hesitation, "In a heartbeat."

(And, of course, there's a dispiriting coda that leaked just before this piece's deadline: Arkane Austin, the studio behind *Prey* and *Dishonored*, was shut down by its new owner Microsoft. Not, evidently, because its immersive sims sold poorly, but because it was pressured to make the opposite type of game: a co-op-battle-royale-hero-shooter hybrid called *Redfall*. It's an awful echo of history, but the lesson here shouldn't be that Looking Glass' legacy is unpalatable. It's that developers should be allowed to play to their strengths. Only by giving the best gaming minds creative freedom can we hope to see the same kind of envelope-pushing that defined the turn of the millennium.) ✱