

THIEF: DEADLY SHADOWS



■ £34.99 | Pub: Eidos | Dev: Ion Storm | ETA: Out Now | www.thief3.com

REQUIRES P4 1.5GHz, 256MB and a 64MB 3D card DESIRES P4 2GHz, 512MB RAM and a 128MB 3D card

Everyone's favourite medieval mischief-maker is back. *Will Porter* picks a pocket or two



Keep still. Hold your breath. Stay quiet. I don't think he's seen you yet.



"You can't stay up there forever, taffer!"

BEFORE we get started, a word to the *Thief* faithful – if everyone else can just hang on this shouldn't take two ticks:

INPERSPECTIVE

SPLINTER CELL:

PANDORA TOMORROW

Reviewed Issue 141, Score 89%

If you like stealth then Sam Fisher should be your first port of call – *Deadly Shadows'* guard AI is smarter, but overall *Splinter Cell* is a lot more polished.

HITMAN: CONTRACTS

Reviewed Issue 143, Score 75%

Eidos's other stealth-ster isn't half as sneaky nor as entertaining as Garrett. We'd choose the metal-eyed miscreant over the bald nut-job any day.

third-person mode good, zombie usage sparse. Everyone still with me? Right. Let's get down to business.

Garrett's big new adventure is a success. Not only is it brilliant fun, it's a worthy follow-up to the esteemed *Thief* canon and one that's sure to please fans of the Looking Glass originals. It hasn't been spoiled by console priorities in the way *Deus Ex 2* was, and manages to refine the stealth formula in a number of clever ways. It does, however, have baggage. It's baggage that makes you roll your eyes rather than slam your head into the keyboard, but be warned that this review will have its fair

share of open sighing. Let's keep it sweet for now though, because overall this third trip around the block with the Master Thief is a very enjoyable one, and if you're comfy and settled I'll tell you why.

YOU'RE NICKED

The story picks up with Garrett thoroughly estranged from his previous mentors the Keepers (a Knights Templar/Masonic affair that guides the course of the city) and continuing his burgeoning career in larceny, often plucking treasure from under the noses of the opposing factions of the religiously fervent Hammerites and the organically crazed

Pagans. As the game progresses your thievery leads you back into the cautious arms of the Keepers, who need a few things nicked to help them with a prophecy in which (surprise, surprise) you figure prominently. From the Bible to *Star Wars* to *The Matrix* to *Thief 3*, the old 'chosen one' chestnut doesn't look like cracking just yet.

For those not in the know, the *Thief* template gives you a crumbling old manor/castle/sewer system, a hastily scrawled map and the knowledge that within the said establishment there are some alpha-steals that you need for plot, some precious steals that

you need for finances and some lesser steals that you need because you're a greedy git. There's some sublime level design within these walls, which is in part what makes *Deadly Shadows* such an enjoyable ride, and there's also a fair contingent of suspicious (and rather chatty) guards – that either need avoiding, or (more likely) incapacitating and dumping in a shadowy corner.

And with the help of some above-average AI and Garrett's credible ineptness in a fight, the whole thing works. You don't know true tension until you're pushed up against a crate in the bowels of Pavelock prison with two guards



convinced that they've just heard something odd; and you know even truer tension when one of them mutters "I'm going to check behind yonder crate." The search AI that's on offer after you've been spotted (and the NPCs' habit of telling you exactly what they're thinking) is the meat and gravy of *Deadly Shadows*. If you're making too much noise, are standing in too much light or if you've just stuck an arrow in their best friend's neck without their approval, then chances are you're in trouble.

If a serving girl spots you then she'll run for a guard. If the guard then chases you down a corridor and you clamber up a

wall then your pursuer will patiently wait and inform you that you can't stay up there forever – before (perhaps) rushing off to get reinforcements. If you carelessly leave a door open, meanwhile, they may switch to investigation mode, or perhaps just mutter about the residents of the castle always leaving that bloody door open.

OLD GUARD, NEW TRICKS

It's events like these that make the game so much fun – every guard has the potential for a variety of different reactions, and you never quite know how events are going to pan out. It's certainly not

"IN YOUR HE-AD, THEY'RE IN YOUR HE-EY-A-ED"

ZOMBIES MAKE A RETURN, AND THIS TIME THEY'VE BROUGHT FRIENDS



Hey Dead-Head. Take a bite of peach.

Zombies ruined the original *Thief* for me – they just didn't seem to fit within the boundaries of a stealth game. (And *Thief II*'s bizarre clockwork enemies didn't improve matters either.) It's for reasons unknown then, that Ion Storm has resurrected the undead in *Deadly Shadows*, as well as throwing in a bunch of strange Man-Rats and *Stingray*-style Mermen for good measure. Story- and gameplay-wise they're pretty much gratuitous, though they're used sparingly enough for the game not to suffer (too much).

It still gets our goat though. What's the point in sticking in a load of credulity-stretching monsters when you've got such strong characters and narrative anyway? Answers on a postcard, usual address.

perfect, and in many cases the fragility of mind that curses so many in-game characters still applies, but as far as the routine of spotting, investigating and giving chase goes, Garrett's enemies are extremely proficient. Excellent, even.

To aid you in your skulking you have a full complement of medieval gadgets. As well as your standard head-piercing arrows you can arm yourself with water arrows that

Blackjack retains its position as your most subtle and useful drubbing device. In fact, watching your right arm slowly rise as you sneak up behind an unsuspecting member of the constabulary is almost worth the price of entry alone.

Which leads me to my first concern – as a devoted *Thief* fan how could I even contemplate playing the game in the third person? Well, at first I resisted bravely. I tried reader,

walls and hackle-raising views of angry Pagans scouring the room for your scrawny hide. The third-person view, however, is a touch clunky. It's great when you're creeping, but as soon as more nimble actions are needed – say balancing on a pipe or taking a difficult jump – you invariably have to flick back to first person. What's more, Garrett is no Sam Fisher when it comes to acrobatics, and you often feel constrained when the supposed super-thief has so many problems climbing through an easy-access window.

“When you're chased, it all turns a bit Benny Hill – minus the jolly music and breasts”

extinguish torches, moss arrows that cover the floor in sound-proofed green stuff and cause bizarre allergic choking reactions in guards, and fire arrows that, unsurprisingly, ignite the poor souls they strike. Gas bombs, mines and holy water do the jobs you'd expect them to, while the noble

I really tried. But then I spectacularly caved – because it actually turns out that the third person works, and works well. For a start the game is built expecting you to use it, and if you're grumpily insisting on doing it the traditional way you'll miss out on features like pushing yourself up against

SOUNDS SUSPICIOUS

With a raft of familiar sound effects carrying over from the previous games, aural effects are a *Deadly Shadows* speciality. From footsteps tapping over metal grates to the thud of Blackjack on skull, the quality in sound never dips. On one occasion I found myself creeping up a jeweller's staircase when a scripted



In FPS mode, you can see your own two pins. Finally!

sequence saw the shopkeeper come in through the front door, and the simple sound of a door opening and closing behind me had me tapping the quickload key just to hear its eerily authentic slam. Dialogue meanwhile (despite the way it often sounds, see 'Missed Opportunity', right), is impressive simply because of the sheer quantity of lines that have been recorded – you rarely hear a guard say a line you're certain you've heard before. And when you're standing on the stairs of a crumbling manor and a guard shouts out "I see thee on the stairs!" it really gets you by the throat. It's no hard task, I suppose, but no NPC has ever told me exactly where I'm standing before.

When we move on to visuals, however, things aren't

so peachy. Sure, it looks nice, with excellent lighting effects and all, but I know my PC can do better. I also know that it's pretty hard to program an Xbox game that does better, and herein lies the problem. In my view, when you have a cathedral or a castle – anything gothic – you do it grand, majestic and awe-inspiring. Here, they're just done boxy. Everything is crammed up and done at 90 degrees, and quite frankly it isn't good enough. Level design is the area in which *Deadly Shadows* shows its true credentials, but you can't help but feel that it's hampered by the need to pack everything into relatively small, separately loaded zones to cater for console memory. As mentioned, it's nowhere near as bad as the compromises made in *Deus Ex 2*, but you can't help but feel aggrieved nonetheless.

While I'm waving my angry-stick, I'll start up on another gripe. The physics (and the ragdolls, see 'Cryin', Walkin' Talkin'...', left) are integrated into the game with an alarming lack of panache. Where a game like *Far Cry* can seamlessly merge its physics engine with the game environment, *Deadly Shadows*' physics are simply wrong. Should



You're only ever 15m away from a giant six-foot rat in London.



Not big enough, or gothic enough.

CRYIN', WALKIN', TALKIN'... RUBBISH DOLL

RAGDOLLING HITS NEW HEIGHTS OF IDIOTRY

I'm not going to write much here; after all, they say pictures speak louder than words. Suffice it to say, the inhabitants of *Deadly Shadows* have iron girders for bones and silly putty for cartilage. Ragdolls: not Ion Storm's strong point.



Eat window sill you taffer!



Wait till rigor mortis sets in...



Garrett's metal eye once again has a zoom function.



Rope arrows are out, climbing gloves are in.

you want to move something you'll have to run into it for a second or so before it wants to shift, and even when it does it'll move as if you're on a medieval moonbase. And how can a cardboard box be weighty enough to stop a heavy cathedral door from opening? (And while we're on the subject, why can't you actually see Garrett holding an object rather than have it appear as an icon on the screen? Bah!)

Despite early claims, physics rarely enter the gameplay, and when they do it's in situations with teetering heavy objects above conveniently placed

Pagans – the likes of which you've seen many times before.

Another feature that doesn't hit the mark is the ability to wander the streets of Garrett's hometown between missions. At first this is great fun: you can raid your local inn, break into your landlord's house and nick all his stuff, offload your stolen goods and stock up on equipment and murder screaming women – all entertaining stuff, but you'll tire of it quickly. There's not enough variety or reward, and later in the game (when all you want to do is walk to your next mission) there's always a cavalcade



Lockpicking is a bit easier than it looks...

of guards, angry Hammerites and pissed-off Pagans who want to chase you through the streets. It all turns a bit Benny Hill (minus the jolly music and breasts) with a so-called man of the shadows brazenly legging it to the next load zone – through which he knows damn sure he won't be followed. The entire presence of this cityscape just smacks of a creative concept that was smothered halfway through development, and the game suffers for it.

AND RELAX

Enough moaning though, as when it comes down to it, I truly enjoyed this game. Its Xbox loyalties may be somewhat misplaced, and it has too many niggles to be considered a true great, but the experience remains compelling. The story is great, the tension is real and if you like copious adrenal activity then you won't go too far wrong.

Occasionally (though admittedly quite infrequently), you're

even faced with a moral decision – do you steal the inheritance of a recently widowed woman who's crying her eyes out while her extended family descend on her belongings like hawks? I didn't, I really couldn't. What would buy me five gas bombs could have brought her a smidge of happiness, so I left her with her loot and a mansion full of unconscious servants instead. Call me a sap, but I think I did the right thing. **PC**



SECOND OPINION

ANTHONY HOLDEN

Despite being something of a stealth addict, I'll admit I've never been the biggest *Thief* fan in the world. I was never sold on the 'medieval cat burglar' premise, nor the ridiculously contrived gadgets (like moss arrows) and clockwork super-technology (like the robots that would short circuit when struck with water – the equivalent of a *Gilligan's Island* coconut TV).

However, *Deadly Shadows* has changed all that. The level design is simply so good, the AI so diligent and the sense of freedom so superior to any other stealth game, I can't help but love it. The gadgets and the weapons really don't matter – this game is all about mood, atmosphere and immersion.

Of course, I agree with all Will's objections, and have a few more of my own besides (mostly to do with inconsistencies in the freedoms offered to you), but despite all this I wholeheartedly recommend the game. It's the best thing Ion Storm has done since *Deus Ex* and no stealth fan should be without it.

MISSED OPPORTUNITY (O)



"Thou is a rancid-mouthed taffer – for sure. Thou art."

VOICE-ACTING IN MEDIEVAL AMERICA

It's not a great chat-up line I know, but I know my Medieval literature. And my Elizabethan literature, come to that. From this smart-arsity (and the occasional bullying that comes with it), I therefore know full well that nobody, before the 19th century, had an American accent.

The olde worlde dialogue of *Deadly Shadows* is truly, laughably lame. If anyone had bothered conjuring up a scholar who'd read even half a Shakespearean sonnet, they'd have realised the phrase "No biggie!" has *never* rubbed up against the 'thees', 'thous' and 'wherefores' that've been ham-fistedly crammed into the dialogue.

Prime offender in the 'I wouldn't know history if it bit me on the bum' brigade, however, is the word 'Taff' – the game's nod-and-a-wink replacement for modern expletives. There are plenty of defunct swearwords they could have used, so why use an invented one that sounds so crap?

Next time Ion Storm, get a professor in to check the script. And hire some real English people for the voices. Sermon over.



PCZONE VERDICT

- ✓ Drips with tension
- ✓ Impressive stealth AI
- ✓ Beautiful level design and lighting effects
- ✗ Dodgy physics and ragdolls
- ✗ City sections don't quite work
- ✗ Compromised by console considerations

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A tarnished gem, but great all the same