

BY KIERON GILLEN

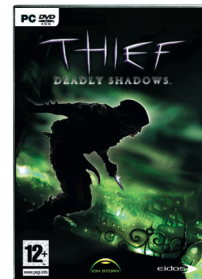


JOURNEY INTO THE CRADLE

THE CRADLE DOESN'T HAVE A HISTORY. IT HAS A SCREAM, STRETCHED OUT THROUGH TIME.

THIEF: DEADLY SHADOWS

- Publisher Eidos
- Developer Ion Storm
- Review PCG 137
- Released 2004



WARNING

READ ME FIRST

The following pages form a journey into one of the most brilliant and disturbing levels ever committed to PC. If you've played *The Cradle – Thief: Deadly Shadows* – centrepiece level, then don't hang back. The secrets and hidden stories of this house of hell are explored, analysed and constructed into something that will hopefully enhance and illuminate the experience you've had. If you've never played *The Cradle*, and have no plans to ever do so, then rush right in, and more fool you. If you've never played *The Cradle*, but plan to... be careful. This opening spread contain spoilers. The middle pages should be viewed in the same way as a walkthrough for a game you haven't played. The last two pages, an interview with Jordan 'Null' Thomas, *The Cradle*'s designer, should be safe. You have been warned.

It's too late to run. Running from The Cradle is like running from the air around you. People bandy the word 'immersive' around when discussing videogames, but miss the subtext of what they're really talking about. To be immersed is to be surrounded and submerged, thrust into a new context. If The Cradle is about anything, it's immersion. Your head pushed beneath murky waters until you choke and drown.

The Cradle is the penultimate level in last year's *Thief: Deadly Shadows*. It's what's known in television parlance as a 'format breaker' – something that subverts many of the set expectations of the show to stir the critical palette into new life. While The Cradle is based on *Thief's* shadow-stalking mandate, and a clear extrapolation from the first *Thief's* seminal Return to the Haunted Cathedral, it has amplified its source material to become something quite different. It's probably the scariest level ever made, an experiment in non-linear storytelling methods that pays off handsomely and is one of the towering gaming achievements of the past year.

Like anyone who plays The Cradle, I was anxious before I even arrived. Perhaps more than most; in a passing email, *Thief's* project lead, Randy Smith, had mentioned a "haunted house" level which was a deliberate extrapolation from the theories he laid out in a Fear feature in *Gamer's* prehistory (See the DVD for a copy). I was expecting something special, so waited until the witching hour and played the game on a wall projector in front of a group of unnerved peers. Even in Garrett's introductory speech, he doesn't sound his usual cocksure self. For the first time, he sounds anxious. The level starts and... there it is.

The Shalebridge Cradle. An ornate gothic facade on a dilapidated mansion. The starting view is angled so that you're looking up and it's looming over you like a furious parent about to discipline a child. In this first moment, The Cradle's themes are set – the relationship between those with power and those without, authority and the oppressed.

The level's genius is that it never explicitly states its purpose. The truth is only approached tangentially, in the non-linear method of storytelling entirely unique to games. That is, through immersion. The level doesn't tell you a story. It gives you clues, and you tell the story to yourself. It's this process of realisation that provides some of the most disturbing moments in The Cradle. You're told from the start that it used to be a madhouse. You're told that before that it was an orphanage. It's only when you're inside, reading a child's scribbled note, that you realise The Cradle served both purposes *at the same time*.

It's a horrific idea. A few years ago, one of my friends was sectioned, believing he was either the Anti-Christ, the Son of God or Muad'Dib from the Dune books. The cliché's true: you have to laugh, or else you cry. But when I visited him, in halls that stunk of disinfectant, full of people who only looked at you through drugged eyes, laughter was impossible. Madness is the most frightening thing in the world, and an asylum its church. The idea of the criminally insane intermixed with the stray children of a city is a horrendous concept, pure melodrama. If it was just told to you, you might have rejected it as simply that. But since the idea was hinted, and you made the dreadful leap of logic yourself, you accept.

Now, I've played The Cradle a half dozen times preparing this feature, and while the initial trip is still

the one that squats in the back of my mind glaring, it's never a comfortable place to be. Some of its torture-blades dull when the surprise is spent and you know what's happening, others remain permanently whetted. They're the incisions which attack your guts through mood and timbre: that is, what the place sounds like and what it looks like. That sound and images can disturb has long been known: the Roman Catholic Church expressly

forbade the creation of church music featuring chords including a diminished fifth ("The Devil's interval") due to its profound effect upon the psyche.

Sound-man Eric Brosius? He'd have been burned as a witch. His *Thief* and *System Shock 2* credits make as fine a resumé for horror as anyone in the business, but The Cradle is absolute career-best work. Mostly a drunken miasma of sound is smeared across your speakers, making you uneasy until an unexpected noise splits asunder. Distant sounds rise up, suggesting the scuttling of unknown things moving elsewhere, up to no good. Moments of plot-revelation are provided a chilling counterpoint by an apposite ghostly sound effect – find the ashes of a baby, still in a crib, and expect to be haunted by its cry from beyond the grave. The flickering of lights wouldn't be the same without the tiny crackle. And, most memorably, as you inch up towards the attic, the sounds of room-shaking violence that either petrify you or send you running back the way you came.

On the visual side, things are just as deliberately *wrong*. After all – there are visual tricks as disturbing as the Devil's Interval to apply. Take the Cradle's inhabitants – the puppets, whose movements are carefully judged to appear unnatural. They don't move like people. They move as if their insides are about to split or their bones have been broken and set at off-angles. The art here is to not be wrong (as in not correct) but Wrong (as in so



Pleased to meet you. I hope you've guessed my name.

Sound-man Eric Brosius? He'd have been burned as a witch





ABANDON ALL HOPE



THE OUTER CRADLE



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close to being normal... but not *quite*). No matter how long you stay, there's always another detail to shake you when you're getting too comfy, like realising the lights in the building pulse, as if they were slowly breathing, or... Well, when mapping a section for this feature, I physically screamed when one of the inmates pulled himself from the ground unexpectedly and lurched to attack.

And these touches unnerve on every journey into The Cradle. The first time you walk down the steps into its basement, when you know nothing, it's devastating. The masterstroke is that the first half of the level is empty. Nothing's there, so you spend almost the first half of the visit inching around darkened corridors, trying to work out what went wrong while

Chased through a pallid, fish-eye world

jumping at shadows. You hate the darkness, as you know it could be concealing anything. And then, once you've reactivated the generators, complete with the sort of rattling mechanical scream that you just *know* will have alerted anything with something vaguely analogous to ears within a square mile, the electric lights twitch back into life and you'd do anything to have a good darkened alcove to crouch in again. Masterful psychology: make you hate one thing, then take it away in a way which makes you wish for its speedy return.

It's this manner of mind game that forms the foundation on which the whole Cradle is built. Insecurity is reinstated by changing the rules just as you've grown familiar with them. As you explore the Outer Cradle, it is only your own fear that twists the knife. By the time you realise you're being manipulated, you've entered the Inner Cradle. Here the corkscrewing of your guts has been externalised in the form of the inmates' impossibly convulsing bodies. When you grasp that particular problem, the Cradle twists again and transports you from its current ruined state into its memories of earlier times, to be chased through a pallid, fish-eye

LET'S START. THE GAME'S AFOOT.

While most films specifically feed you the story on a drip, the best games put you in a context which you explore. The Cradle is full of clues – in its sounds, in text, in graphics, in the action of its inhabitants – which you piece together inside your head then perform an act of closure upon to fill-in the gaps. You aren't told the story; a world exists, and you transform it into a coherent image through the power of your mind. In other words, exactly the way you gather diverse information from the real world. Any game can do this. Many have. The Cradle does it particularly well, so makes a fine example for us to examine more closely.

PREVIOUSLY
Before entering the Cradle you know little about the place. You come because Hammerite Inspector Drept saw the Gray Lady here when he was a child, as she killed his friend Lauryl. It's your only possible link to catching up with this mysterious figure and uncovering what horrors she plans for the City.

On the following annotated maps are marked the more significant clues you find when playing The Cradle, along with some notes on their possible significance. The pages after that are an attempt to transform them into a linear narrative. If you've played The Cradle, take it as a guide to the place. If you haven't... essentially this is a videogame murder mystery, transformed to paper. We show the clues and provide what we think is a likely and entertaining solution.

A) NOTE

"It was better before. Too many rules to remember. Don't go here. Don't touch that. Don't talk to the patients. The Doctors are just as scary as the patients. Miss Arthur says orphans shouldn't complain." The moment you realise Shalebridge was an orphanage and asylum simultaneously.

B) LAURYL'S PORTRAIT

The second you touch this, you become aware of Lauryl's ghost and able to communicate with her. Once you free Lauryl, she disappears from the frame – The Cradle no longer has any hold on her. Relevant question: who painted it?

C) LAURYL'S GHOST

Still haunts the location of her murder in the attic, blood stains still visible. Despite its ovoid shape, this bubble of light casts a human shadow. It's a fantastic effect due to its impossibility being more tangible than it would be in another medium, such as film. Look closely and you can see the soft outline of Lauryl's face on its surface. She acts as the voice-in-your-head plot guide for most of the game. Point of interest for fans of *System Shock 2* – the same voice actress, *Thief* writer Terri Brosius, also played SHODAN, who fulfilled a similar, if more aggressive role.

D) LAURYL'S BLOOD

In a vial. Still warm. Yuk.

E) CASE STUDY

Examines one C Pins, the patient in room 7. Claims he's decorated his cell like "The Murder Scene". Discusses his obsession with birds. Foreshadowing of in-mate viciousness and disturbing obsessions.

F) CASE STUDY

This one's of F Topper, in room 6, who was found carrying an urn filled with ashes which she claims is her child. She treats it exactly like a baby.

Recommended experimental Hascombe's therapy.

Foreshadowing of the brutality of the regime. Listen to the sound effect of a baby crying after you read this, for a first example of sound used to reinforce the impact of your discovery.

G) THE STAIRCASE

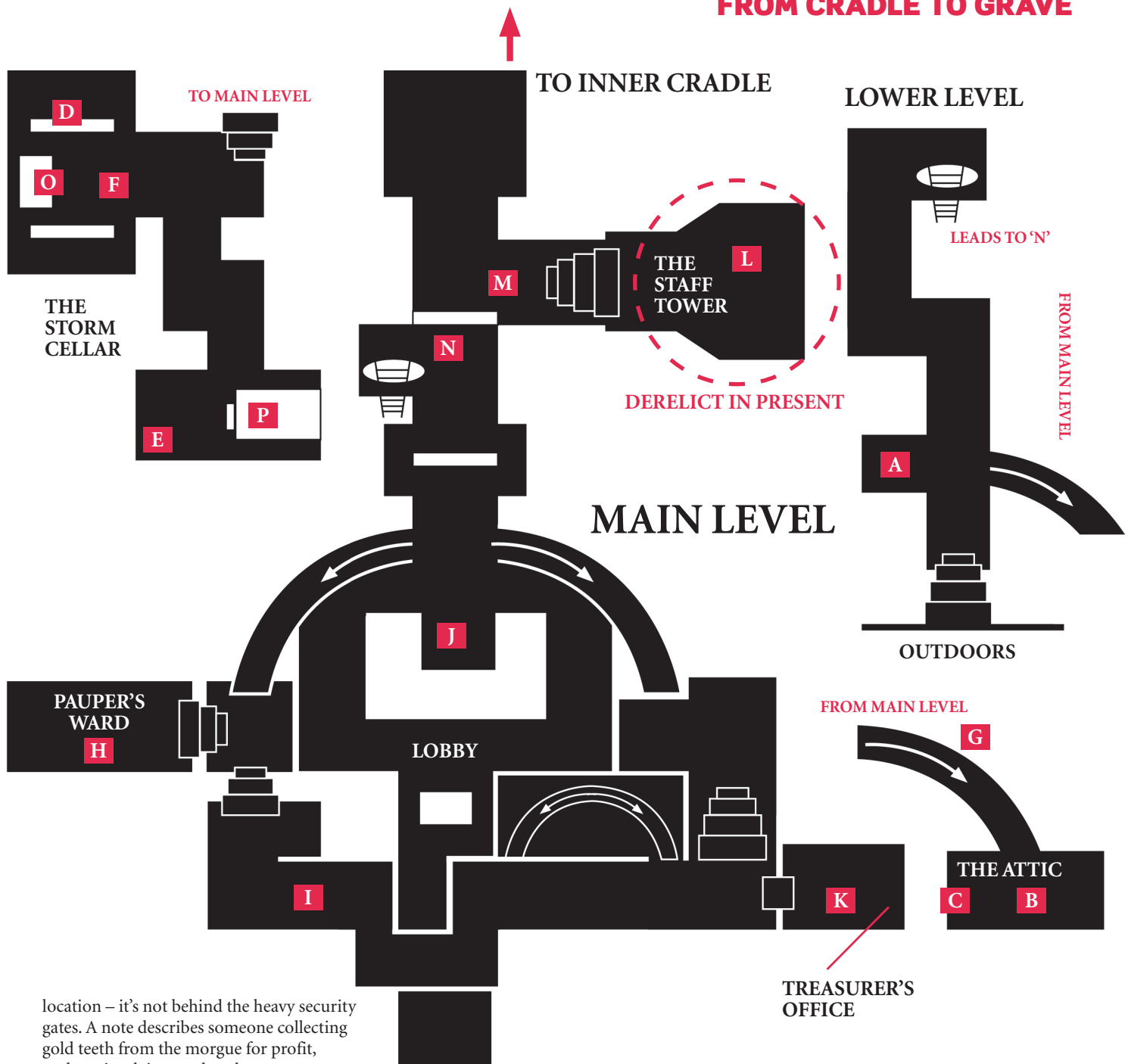
Rattling noise as you head up the stairs, provides one of the biggest scares. Something's going on up there. Best guess: the ghostly echoes of the murder.

H) THE PAUPER'S WARD

Low security ward. Note its



FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE



location – it's not behind the heavy security gates. A note describes someone collecting gold teeth from the morgue for profit, perhaps implying workers here too.

I) NOTE

"I didn't want to have my picture painted, but I was too scared to say no. I guess I did it right because he said I sat good and still." A note, probably written by Lauryl, since hers is the only unmutated portrait in the building.

J) THE LOBBY

Apart from looking beautiful, noteworthy for a book that gives a feel for the institution's policy on lobotomy: "More can be learned from a surgery performed incorrectly, so we'll keep the training to a minimum." Nice. Also claims that this may solve the problem of an "uprising" at The Cradle.

K) TREASURER'S OFFICE

Useful to a thief for the money it contains, but plot relevant due to the notes on Dr Hanscombe's experimental heat therapy to

dry the "excessive humours" which are, he believes, a cause of madness. "The heat must be of the dry variety" he urges, and "hot elements must be laid directly onto the skin."

L) THE STAFF TOWER

Lauryl warns you that no one is allowed to go up there. In the 'real' time period, it's destroyed and in rubble, making exploration impossible. When you first venture into the past, it exists again. When explored again after using the Cage to transport yourself into the past – that is, to a later period than the first – the entire place is emitting ghostly smoke, as if on fire.

M) THE CHAIR

Only present when visiting the latter of the two time periods, it faces the Staff Tower, casting a dramatic shadow. Suggests that someone was watching it during this period.

N) THE DOORS

Heavy metal doors, only capable of being operated from the outside. Implies that the dangerous stuff is beyond this point.

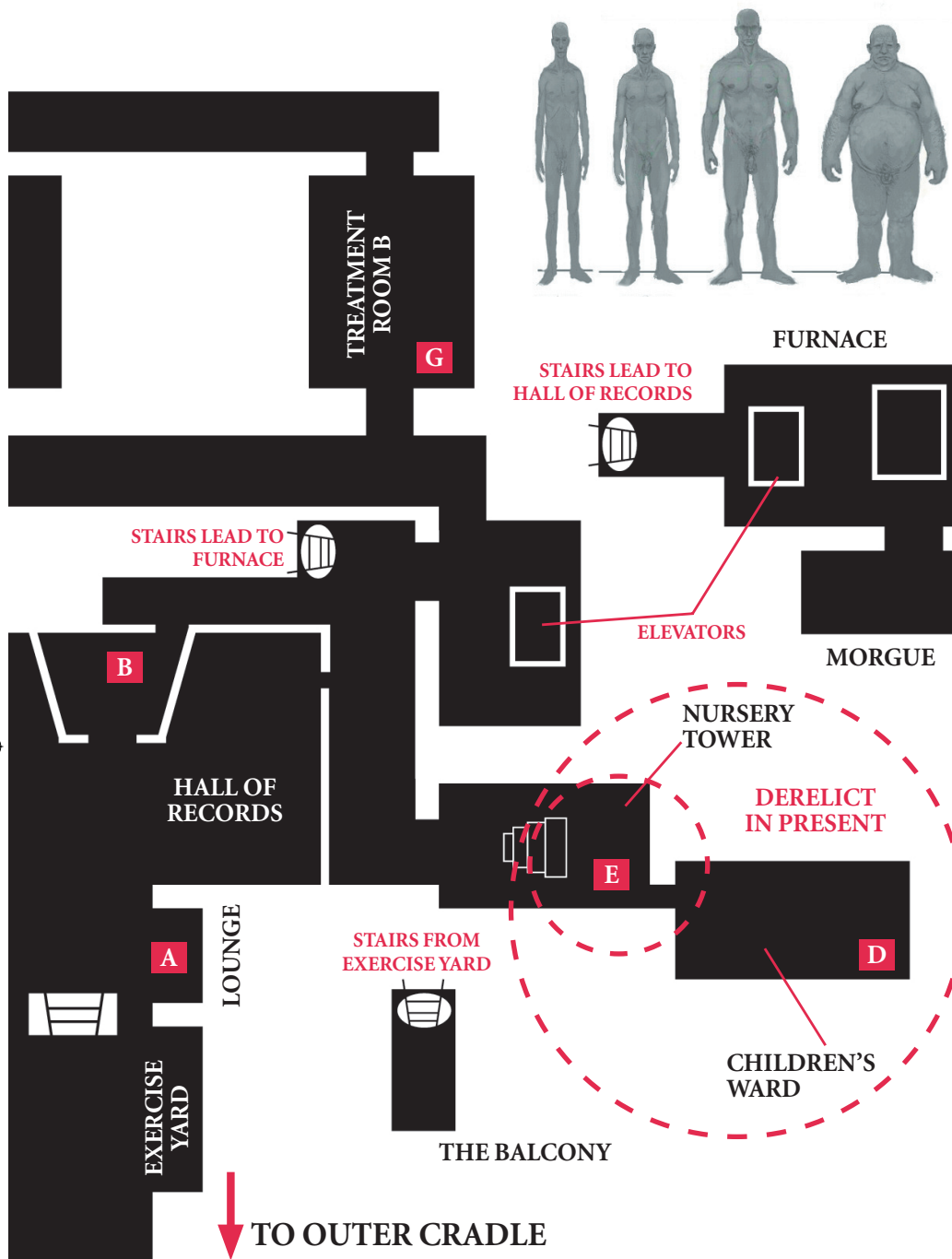
O) THE CAGE

Where they kept new prisoners entering The Cradle. Lauryl urges you not to go in, for fear of The Cradle noticing you. Eventually you're forced into doing so, in order to enter the past for your escape – which brings you to an entirely different period to previous trips. Interestingly, you can also use the cage before you've been told you can.

P) THE GENERATOR

All lights are off and access to the Inner Cradle barred until you replace its fuse. This implies that the doors to the Inner Cradle have been shut for a considerable length of time, and you're possibly its first visitor.

FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE



Ranker Lobotomy and use it on the most difficult cases.”

H) THE WHITE HALL

Nine cells, in a circular formation around a central meal hall. Each is decorated according to the style of its occupant, only the most notable of which are referenced here. This whole section is heavily locked down, with heavy steel gates preventing access to the area outside. Lockpicking is required to get anywhere. People other than Garrett would need keys.

I) SECLUSION CHAMBER

Home of King No One – a play on words of “Number 1” or “No. One”, his patient number. Comprises an elevator, ascending to an isolated cell. You hear the King’s manic laugh on the way up. Only at the top do you realise it’s because there’s no button for sending the elevator back down.

J) CELL 5

A telescope is positioned, watching a portrait with the face cut out. Clear links to what you find in the observatory. The cell has a false back wall where, once dismantled, you find Lauryl’s blood-stained dress. If it’s the Gray Lady who killed Lauryl, this patient must have come into possession of it shortly afterwards.

K) CELL 6

Foreshadowed in the Outer Cradle, belonging to F Topper. Tiny baby clothes hanging above a crib. As you inch closer, it becomes obvious that it’s an urn not a child that rests there.

L) CELL 7

Home of C Pins, the Birdman of Shalebridge, foreshadowed in the Outer Cradle. Contains what is presumably his re-animated form, standing, perpetually admiring his array of birds, nailed into the brickwork. A row of skulls rest on the desk.

M) CELL 9

A relatively bare cell. It takes a second to realise that it’s because the entire place is burnt out, especially towards the far side. A tinderbox lies nearby. Someone clearly likes lighting fires.

N) THE INMATES

Physical puppets of The Cradle’s will, in the ‘real’ material plane. While they can be taken down with a physical blow, they will only get up again. The only way to permanently disable them is through flashbombs and holy water. Notice the unearthly, jerky movement cribbed from Jacob’s Ladder.

him for what happened to me,” Lauryl reveals after you’ve read it. “They were wrong”. Who is “him”? There’s also a note to the effect that rules to keep patients and orphans separate must be followed.

E) GHOSTLY STAFF

The Cradle only animates the staff when you are in the past, and even then, only as spectral memories in silhouette. Since The Cradle is quite capable of animating the actual corpses of the patients, you have to ask where the bodies of the staff went to prevent it from doing this to them. That this is how The Cradle ‘remembers’ people also tells you something about its perspective on the world.

F) TREATMENT ROOM A

Home of the asylum’s electric shock and wet-heat treatment room. “I saw a man all wrapped up in wet bandages,” Lauryl informs you as you enter, “I think he wanted me to help him, but I was too afraid.” Tells us that orphans and patients mixed to some degree. Also note a wax mask resting on the electric chair: someone discarded it here.

G) TREATMENT ROOM B

The lobotomy theatre, containing Dr Ranker’s specially made silver tools. Includes a note congratulating Ranker on his report on the “botched” lobotomy, speculating that “in the future they’ll call the procedure the



THE SHALEBRIDGE CRADLE: FOLKLORE



THEN WE WILL BEGIN.

AN EXEGESIS
The following is an attempt to transform the various clues and elements of The Cradle described in the previous pages into a linear narrative. It isn't a definitive story of 'What happened at the Shalebridge Cradle'. As Alan Moore speculated in his graphic novel From Hell, when dealing with murder "a solution, any solution, is inane. Murder isn't like books... it holds meaning, and shape, but no solution." This isn't the only way you can piece everything together by any means, and much is extrapolated from the clues. But when placed in the heart of something as deliberately baroque as Shalebridge, there are some leaps which you have to make on instinct. This is mine. If you've thrown yourself out of The Cradle's highest window and found yourself in a different place, I'd be interested to hear about it.



The City is used to strangeness. The bizarre is the mortar that holds it together. Its people are a hardy sort. In a world where the dead won't stay buried, they have to be. It hardly counts as superstition when you know what's out there, in the dark, waiting for a chance to make you join it. Still, even in the City, no-one loiters too long in the shadow of one particular building, which hangs off the east side of the Old Quarter like some facial canker. Shalebridge Cradle. "If there's a way to cram more misery into one building's history," Master Thief Garrett once said, "I can't think of it."

The Cradle doesn't have history. It has a scream, stretched out through time.

It's said Shalebridge used to be that sad institute for lost children: an orphanage. It's also said that it was that sad institution for lost adults: an asylum.

What most don't realise is that, during its latter days, it was both at once. While safer in-mates were kept in the pauper's ward towards the front of the building, the murderously insane – of which, at The Cradle's demise, there were nine – were kept in the White Hall ward, towards the rear, with heavy metal, lock-down doors between them and civilisation. Near them, the orphans, high in the Nursery tower. At the building's heart, looking over all, was the Staff Tower, the stronghold of the lawmakers. Children and the insane, under the lock and key of nurses and doctors. Authority and oppression, bound together.

The tale of Shalebridge rests on two children – a boy and a girl. The boy, Drept, ran away, grew up, found redemption in the order of the Hammer and became known as a fanatical hunter of shadows. The girl, Lauryl, didn't get the chance to grow up at all.

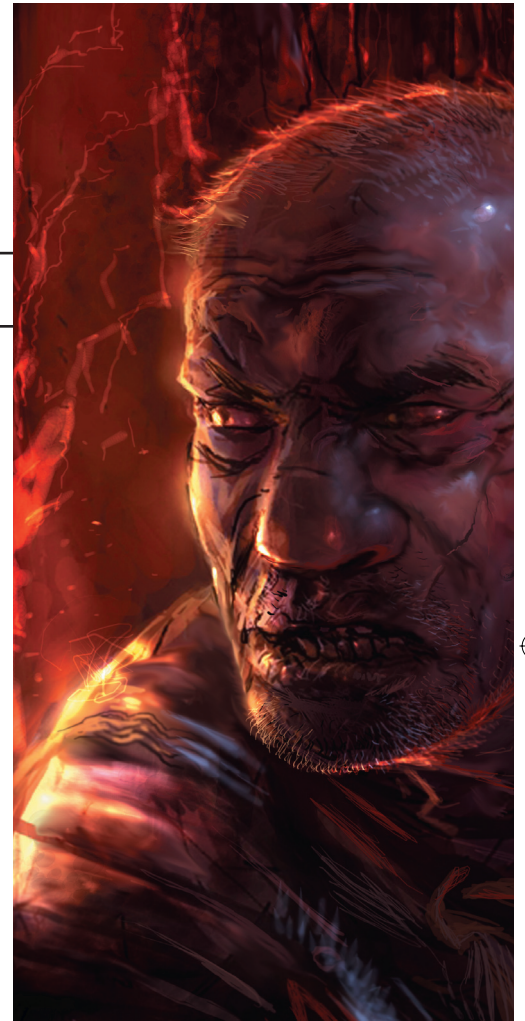
The head doctors – Dr Sanbridge, Dr Ranker and Dr Hascombe – had strict rules which Matron Miss Arthur was to follow. Obvious rules: such as homicidal patients and the children weren't to mix. But rules in a madhouse tend to err, so it came to pass that Lauryl found herself sitting while having her portrait painted by the patient in Room 5, known as The Watcher. He was brought to Shalebridge after

So Lauryl lived. No one is that lucky twice.

slaughtering his previous sitters because "they moved". He then smeared his victim's blood over each portrait's face, in frustration at the lack of life in the final work.

Lauryl was a good girl. Lauryl didn't move at all. So, Lauryl lived and The Watcher made the one perfect picture of his life.

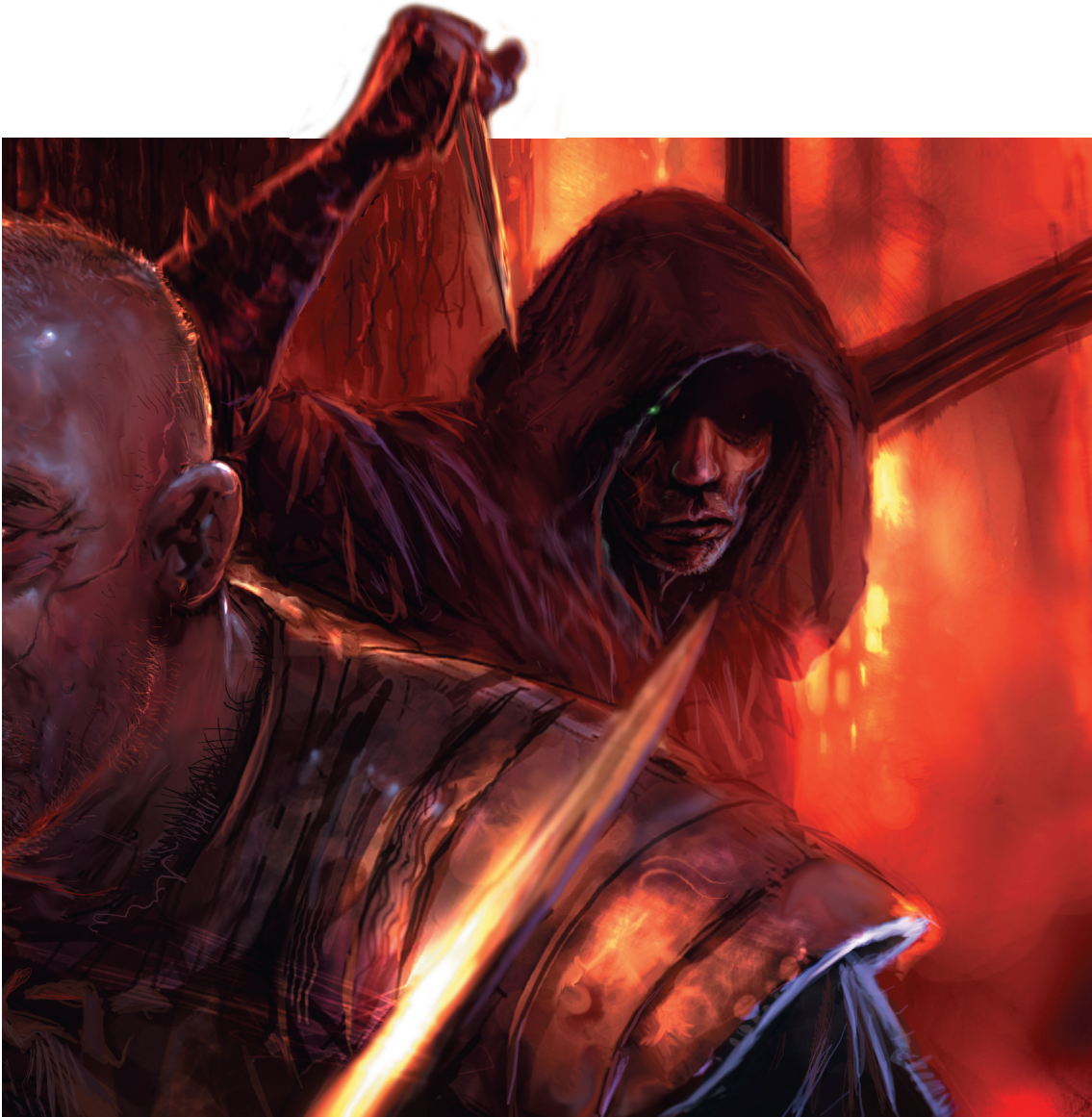
No one is that lucky twice. The Gray Lady of myth and nightmare came to Shalebridge to find a body to use for her devilish purposes. Someone discarded already. Someone no-one would miss. That is, an orphan. If Lauryl and Drept weren't playing in the attic that day, maybe the Gray Lady would have chosen a different victim. Would The Cradle's cry have been stifled early? Perhaps, perhaps not. We can only speculate as to the reasons why The Watcher was close enough to the murder scene to take



Lauryl's bloody, tattered dress as a keepsake before anyone else arrived. Perhaps the murder he would eventually carry the blame for would have occurred anyway? The Cradle's birth is rife with such sick irony.

Despite Drept's testimony that some hag-like creature butchered his little friend, the material evidence pointed at the man locked in cell 5. Extreme measures were called for: lobotomy. Or rather, all too common measures. The staff of Shalebridge – when not experimenting with their weirder theories such as applying red hot bars to bare skin or testing the outer limits of electrocution – turned to Dr Ranker's custom silver knives that could transmute a pest into a vegetable. The 'result' could be stored cheaply with the other trash in the pauper's ward rather than the

FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE



expensive Whitehall. News spread that whatever made The Watcher himself would be sliced away in Treatment Room 2.

These words eventually reached the man who hid his shattered features behind a wax mask, Patient Number 1 – or “King No One” as he was known among the in-mates thanks to the script on his door. The fact that he was contained in the isolation chamber, at the top of an elevator shaft in the White Hall, wasn’t enough to separate him from the other patients. His poisonous whispers leaked out, fanning the flames of dissatisfaction. The Watcher was a popular madman. His fraternity owed him an attempt to stop this. After all, they could be next. Dissent sparked into a fiery riot. Before anything could be done, the

keys were with the patients. They were all free. The gates were sealed, but most of the children and the staff were inside, trapped and barricaded in their towers. At least the lucky ones were – those on the ground floor proved wet and scarlet sport for the rampaging White Hall inmates.

The midwife to The Cradle’s true birth was the patient in cell nine, The Moth. A pyromaniac, she was allowed to keep her tinderbox as part of her therapy. Now free, she had all the fuel she could wish for. She lit the matches which reduced Shalebridge to the skeleton of a building it is now. First, in her room. Then, under the cover of the riot and urged on by King No One, the fires at the base of the Staff tower.

While the King discarded his wax mask, finally revealing his

molten face, and led the dismemberment of the remaining staff, The Moth pulled up her chair at the foot of the staircase and stared into the inferno as men and women were reduced to soot and screams.

Flames swept up. The Nursery tower joined its sister in misery. The voices of boys and girls merged in an unholy choir, a shriek to empty skies. The smoke arose to the heavens, blacking them out, forming a cloud of the remains of authority. Anything elevated was destroyed. All that remained was the base material.

The tortured voices were The Cradle’s birthing cry. The rising smoke was its first breath. Born of torture, oppression, authority, murder and a history of weeping, the place was alive.

It pressed down upon the remaining in-mates, who ruled the remains of the asylum under King No One’s malevolence. His Kingdom couldn’t last, in earthly terms. The doors were shut. There was no way out. The in-mates sickened, withered and died.

It wasn’t the end.

The inmates rose from death, becoming puppets of The Cradle’s will and twitching in meaningless echoes of their past existence. The bodies animated in a closed, spasming loop for fifty years, waiting for someone else to enter, to catch The Cradle’s attention, and so join its eternal, macabre dance.

They say its doors will open before you. They’ll seal behind you. And as long as you’re alive, it’ll never let you leave.

Even in the City, no-one loiters too long in the shadow of one particular building, which hangs off the east side of the Old Quarter like some facial canker. Shalebridge Cradle. “If there’s a way to cram more misery into one building’s history,” Master Thief Garrett once said, “I can’t think of it.” ▶





INTERVIEW

RETURN TO THE CRADLE



THE CRADLE DESIGNER JORDAN THOMAS SPEAKS CANDIDLY ABOUT THE MAKING OF FEAR.

JORDAN THOMAS

After a tenure as a journalist, the gamekeeper turned poacher when Psygnosis recruited him for the writing work on a number of titles. Interning briefly at Surreal Software, maker of dragon-and-semi-clad-lady game *Drakan*, Jordan's first real gig was working on – of all things – *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone* (PCG 105 78%) at the development studio Amaze. While there he learnt the intricacies of UnrealEd from Ben 'cyberartist' Golus, providing the skill basis that landed him a job on *Thief: Deadly Shadows*. Originally a designer, he climbed the ranks to the mighty position of Lead Designer. While his official duties kept most of his time, a significant amount of the after-hours was spent on constructing celebrated level 'The Cradle', which you may have read something about somewhere. He cites Ben Golus as his level-building mentor and *Thief* Project Lead Randy Smith as his game-design mentor. "Other than that, I've been playing PC games and thinking critically about them since I was about nine," grins Jordan, "And I'm not done yet!"

PCG Where did the conceit of *The Cradle* come from?

The *Thief* games are – in the abstract – largely about exploring unfamiliar, hostile spaces. It seemed an elegant sort of conceit to take that concept literally, and simply feed Garrett (the ultimate trespasser) to a vast building which harbours a sort of monstrous sentience, along with a perverse appetite. We knew that our 'haunted house' (the internal title) would be one of the latter entries in the story arc, and that it would pit the player against the undead, in some form.

I had a series of design discussions with Randy Smith (Project Director on *Deadly Shadows*) about our intent for the space during its infancy. We quickly concluded that our core objective was to devise the single most terrifying first-person game experience ever constructed. I'll leave it up to the fan base to decide whether or not we achieved it. Fear is inherently subjective, after all. At the very least, no one can claim that we were devoid of ambition!

PCG So what do you actually count as terror?

In terms of the aforementioned terror, we weren't bent on eliciting constant panic, per se. Our point-of-origin was the word 'dread'. I like to define it as that quintessential 'threshold' sensation which whispers rather than shouts, warning you that you're seven steps from the unspeakable.

With that emotional shape in mind, I began to draft the design equivalent of the level's 'blueprints'. Suffice it to say, I took the process seriously. It's probably obvious by



It's always the quiet ones.

now that the subtle manipulation of a player's darker emotions (most notably, fear) is an abiding interest of mine. Which is a fancy way of saying that I'm on a mad little crusade to improve the quality and range of games in the horror genre.

PCG Where do you think horror in games goes wrong?

We've got a deficit there, and it's far from exclusive to gaming; horror in general tends to ooze along the path of least resistance. Think back – in your entire life, how many movies have drawn you in deeply enough to make your guts go cold in genuine fright? They probably number less than ten, if you're reasonably hardy. With games, I suspect you could count them on one hand.

Fear is regarded as one of the easiest emotions to stimulate with any audio-visual medium. It is trivial

to frighten a reasonably receptive audience. You need only shout, "boo!" at the optimal moment, and your victims will find themselves clinging to the ceiling, quivering and hissing expletives.

Our reptile brains instantly respond, ready to brandish the adrenals at the drop of a hat. But will the memories last? Typically, no. They are warning signs, written in a very basic language. As the mind rights itself, these messages fade away, leaving it largely unblemished.

I want my scares to leave scars.

PCG Well, there's the pull-out quote. So how do you think of *The Cradle*?

Unsurprisingly then, I regarded *The Cradle* as a kind of meta-project in addition to a game level. It was to be a multi-layered experiment in interactive horror, using players as

hapless test subjects. I suppose that's not entirely without irony, given the kind of 'science' fictionally practised within its walls.

The intent was to frighten, disturb, thrill, or startle as wide an audience as possible within the parameters I'd been given. And, if possible, to leave a few of those 'scars'. The jaded user would, hopefully, appreciate the grim narrative and physical tension. The highly imaginative or impressionable players would find themselves inching along through a simulated nightmare, trying not to breathe.

And, of course, I hoped to execute all of this without sacrificing the key intrinsic strengths of *Thief* gameplay. Stealth is inherently conducive to a feeling of vulnerability, but typically not quite this pronounced. The Cradle was, all in all, a holistic effort in game horror and stealth level design, intended to communicate the feeling of dread in several complementary languages.

PCG What do you mean when you talk about holistic level design?

The term 'holistic level design' isn't a buzz-phrase so much as a well established creative philosophy that is often put into practice across various industries, but is rarely put into words. In plain terms, it refers to the evaluation of any self-contained game segment as an integrated whole. The total package, as it were. It often manifests as a series of questions, some of which look like these:

- Are all the mission's systemic elements gracefully woven into each other?
- Does the space feel believably occupied by living, imperfect beings?
- How well does it fit into the experiential topography of the entire game?
- Does the end result offer the player a seamless, unforgettable experience?

I attempted to effectively answer dozens of queries along these lines with *The Cradle*. In hindsight, I can see plenty of room for improvement, but that's exactly how a developer expands the list.

PCG So – what rewards do a more holistic approach give the developer?

The expected reward for this (rather fastidious) series of trials can be summed up by one word: 'resonance'. All of *The Cradle's* actors, from the malfunctioning lights to the shambling undead themselves are tied into a central choreographer object. It's a kind of invisible 'puppet master' that tells them how to behave in the real world, and in the world beyond (which is comprised of the asylum's fragmented dreams of its former days).

And, although *The Cradle* has its share of entirely linear scripted sequences meant to induce the right mood, it is the purely circumstantial moments that took the most planning. Each object family has a special relationship to the rest, which can manifest during gameplay when they happen to collide with each other. I can't predict exactly what



"I want my scares to leave scars..."

kind of horrific moments will be generated by that ecosystem, which is ideal.

PCG I'm going to say the word 'emergence' now. Thank you.

Life, which we broadly emulate – and typically, embellish upon – in games, is the result of an unfathomable number of systems interacting with each other in a kind of eternal dance.

That's pretty easy to understand, subconsciously or otherwise.

Humans are accustomed to the transparent feeling of 'rightness' that results from being swaddled in such a dazzling, orchestral synthesis at all times. The mental recordings we make of all this data carry some inherent resonance, simply because of their unfiltered perfection. Simulations (like video games) do not nearly make the grade yet, and we regard them with inevitable scepticism. They simply cannot directly compete for territory with memories of the real world.

That said, by focusing on a specific type of target experience, and leaning heavily on the human instinct to fill the gaps, we are able to cheat a bit... We invite players to convince themselves that a sequence is 'real enough' or 'tight enough' to be drawn into, by carefully integrating all the level and game components. Gamers have a discerning eye, but they want to become immersed.

PCG All fiction's reliant on a leap of faith in that way, really.

The more appropriate the systems that are already at work in a given level, and the more elegantly they appear to 'plug into' each other, the easier it is for a human to become a willing participant in the suspension of their own

disbelief. Or, for that matter, in the suppression of their aesthetic scepticism. This provides a kind of indirect springboard into that notion of 'rightness'.

Because, in that tiny microcosm of supported behaviour choices (say, stalking through an abandoned building and trying not to die), the network of simulated possibilities is dense enough that you cease poking holes in the world-fabric, and begin actively filling them yourself! Your imagination becomes inextricably intertwined with the content you're consuming, and you become a partial architect of your own reactions.

The game is then far more likely to resonate with you, carving out a permanent niche among your long-term memories. And that, of course, is the honour for which we developers strive.

PCG How much reference work did you make when preparing *The Cradle*?

The Cradle is the synthetic offspring of dozens of actual, existing Victorian hospitals and reputedly haunted buildings. All the misery, malpractice and dementia that have been ascribed to those places are seen here through a proportionally exaggerated lens.

I read reams of patient and staff interviews, scoured countless articles on historical mental-health treatment practises, compiled a huge reference archive of photographs taken by urban explorers who regularly break into abandoned asylums, and even visited a few locations myself.

PCG Any particular incidents stuck in your memory from your research?

One story involved a patient who managed to escape into the storage wings of the asylum, and because of her eroded state-of-mind, she became lost and succumbed to starvation. The place was such a teeming 'snake pit' that she wasn't missed, and the stain from her body seeped permanently into the wood.

Another involved a man who was committed as a toddler. Decades later, when asked to sign his own name, he drew a rough silhouette of the hospital. The place was so omnipresent and dominant a force in his life that it eclipsed his identity. *The Cradle* was built out of that sort of cheery material.

PCG And, finally, what fictional influences shaped *The Cradle*?

Among the films that helped inspire it were *Jacob's Ladder*, *Session 9*, and *The Devil's Backbone*. Books included *From Hell*, *House of Leaves*, and *The Shining*.

My game influences are innumerable, but two most prominent were the *Silent Hill* series and the *System Shock* series, to which *The Cradle* owes a great deal.

ON THE DISC Read the original *Fear* feature, and see *The Cradle* for yourself with our saved game > Game Extras

