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DGD 709 - Thesis Lab  
We 5:00-7:40PM  
Dr. Elena Bertozzi  
Game Presentation: Mark of the Ninja

*Mark of the Ninja*<sup>1</sup> is part stealth game, part side-scrolling platform game. It's the marriage of these two normally disparate genres that sets *Ninja* apart from the crowd. I do not think *Ninja* would have been as successful and well received as it was if it was not a 2D platformer, and yet I was quite surprised to learn that the 2D take on the stealth genre was not actually part of the game design decision making process, but rather out of circumstance - 2D platformers were what developer Klei Entertainment knew best. It certainly worked out for Klei, as it allowed the studio to implement game elements that would have been near impossible in a 3D first-person or third-person environment.

*Ninja* works so well because Klei threw normal stealth genre tropes out the window. I attended Lead Designer Nels Anderson's talk at GDC 2013 entitled "Of Choice and Breaking New Ground: Designing *Mark of the Ninja*." In his talk, he touched upon five genre traditions Klei defied, which he referred to as "heresies." These five heresies were transparent stealth systems, transparent AI, narrow "gulf of execution," limited consequence for failure, and less open level design. While all five heresies help form *Ninja*'s greatness, it's the first one that really did it for me.

The core of any stealth game is to be neither seen nor heard. As such, one can reasonably argue that the most essential game systems in any stealth game are its light/darkness and noise systems. In most stealth games prior to *Ninja*, these systems are not so black and white; no pun intended. Can enemies see you if you're in low light rather than complete darkness? Can enemies hear you if you knock over a chair in a nearby room? Stealth games often take a lot of practice to be good at - players must experiment to truly know the ins and outs of these systems. Anderson says the core of the stealth genre is "intentional play and player centric systems" (GDC 2013). He likens them to strategy games in that players must think ahead and carefully consider the

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<sup>1</sup> Klei Entertainment. *Mark of the Ninja*. Microsoft Studios, 2012. Windows PC & Xbox 360.

repercussions of any action they take. Without understanding the light/darkness and noise systems, strategizing becomes difficult. The ambiguous nature of these systems aids in the tension of stealth games, but it also turns some newcomers off. *Ninja* eschews all that. These stealth systems are transparent to the player - there is never any guessing whether an enemy will see you or hear something.

Light/darkness in *Ninja* is binary - you are either bathed in light or you're not. This is always made crystal clear to the player because the appearance of the player character (the ninja) changes. When the ninja is in light, his outfit is colored. When the ninja is in darkness, he appears black with red highlights. As such, there's never any confusion as to whether the ninja can be seen by enemies - if his outfit is colored, enemies will spot him if he's within their line of sight.

As good as the light/darkness system in *Ninja* is, the noise system is the real star of the game. Noise in *Ninja* is visualized. There is never any guessing whether an enemy will hear you or something you do. Whenever a noise is made, a translucent blue ring emanates from the source. If the blue ring overlaps the enemy's head, that sound is heard. In addition, apart from footsteps while running, those blue rings are actually shown *before* the sound occurs. This means that players can anticipate whether an action will be heard or not and use that knowledge strategically to their advantage. Want to distract a guard? Toss a smoke bomb in just the right place for him to hear it. It is this unique noise system that explains why *Ninja* would not have been as good in a 3D first-person or third-person world - visualizing noise would be rather difficult and probably extremely distracting.

The stealth systems are not the only transparent features of the game, the AI is also transparent. Enemies essentially have three states: normal, suspicious, and alerted. Each state is clearly visible to the player. All enemies start off each level in a normal state, where they are not aware of the ninja's presence. If an enemy catches a quick glimpse of the ninja or hears a noise, he enters the suspicious state. While in the suspicious state, the enemy will investigate the cause of his suspicion. An icon appears above the enemy's head indicating his suspicion and whatever caused the suspicion will also be visualized in a matching color so that players are

always keenly aware of the cause and effect of their actions. If an enemy sees the ninja or a dead body, he enters the alert state and actively pursues the ninja. Both the suspicious state and alert state have timers that count down how long the enemy will remain in those states, with the alert timer only counting down after the ninja has broken line of sight. When line of sight is broken, an outline of the ninja will appear at that location, clearly letting the player know they are once again safe.

Line of sight actually comes into play for the player as well, which is not only unheard of for a side-scrolling platformer, but even quite unusual for many stealth games, at least the third-person ones. This is an aspect of the game that Anderson did not touch upon, yet I feel is equally important to the overall makeup of *Ninja*. While line of sight in a stealth game is always a critical aspect of enemy AI, in third-person stealth games, the player often has an almost omnipotent view of the action. In *Ninja*, there is a line of sight mechanic even for the player - if the ninja is not able to see the enemy, then the player cannot either. Similarly to when line of sight is broken by the player during an alert, when an enemy moves out of the line of sight of the ninja, an outline appears to indicate his last known position. In order to see enemy positions in rooms, the player must peek through doors or vents, which is visually represented by the ninja leaning against those respective objects and looking through. It adds a sense of realism to the game, while also aiding in keeping that bit of tension and mystery prevalent in stealth games.

The third heresy Anderson mentioned was "narrowing the gulf of execution," which is simply his fancy way of saying Klei made it easier for the player to do what they want and feel empowered. In most stealth games, precision and accuracy are key. Lining up the perfect shot and learning the nuances of the different projectiles takes practice, especially since ammunition is often limited. As such, the shooter practice of spray-and-pray is completely inefficient, not to mention that doing so raises the alert level of any enemy around you. In a stealth game like *Thief*,<sup>2</sup> there's quite a sense of accomplishment pulling off a perfect arrow shot from across a room because doing so is rather difficult. So it may seem odd that *Ninja* throws that out the window. Pulling off the

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<sup>2</sup> Looking Glass Studios. *Thief: The Dark Project*. Eidos Interactive, 1998. Windows PC.

"perfect shot" is not even slightly difficult in *Ninja* because you cannot miss your target. By holding down Left Ctrl (on PC), the game enters "Focus" mode, which completely stops time, allowing the player to aim at multiple targets with the click of the mouse. When Left Ctrl is released, time resumes and the ninja tosses projectiles at all the marked targets automatically. Focus isn't limited by time or the number of uses - players are free to use it as often and for as long as they like. The main reason Klei implemented such a system is because precise aiming in a 2D environment is quite difficult and no one would be able to be fast enough to pull off such moves without slowing down time. The added benefit to such a system is that the player feels completely badass, just as a ninja should. I liken this feeling to the one I get playing the *Batman: Arkham*<sup>3</sup> games - the combat is not very difficult, which does a great job in making you *feel* like you truly are Batman. Similarly, in *Ninja*, your borderline-superhuman ability to simultaneously pull off some insane acrobatic maneuver and toss out three shurikens with impeccable accuracy provides the feeling of truly being a badass ninja.

This feeling of empowerment fits perfectly with the fourth heresy, limited consequence for failure. *Ninja* has an extremely generous checkpoint system. For the most part, there's a checkpoint in between each "encounter," which means the game almost never devolves into tedium. Applauding such a system may seem odd for someone who loves Roguelikes, which go out of their way to punish the player, but for *Ninja*, this works quite well. Not only does it reduce frustration by not forcing players to replay sections over and over again, but it also provides the hidden benefit of encouraging experimentation. By having such frequent checkpoints, I felt more free to try various techniques because even if I failed, I knew I would respawn relatively close to that encounter. This was especially true when I replayed levels for the "undetected" bonus. Despite the checkpoint frequency, the game is by no means made simpler because of it. I relate the experience to that of a game like *Super Meat Boy*<sup>4</sup> rather than one like *Dark Souls*<sup>5</sup>. Failure is frequent in all three games, but only *Dark Souls* is truly punishing, forcing the player to replay huge sections of the game every time he or she dies. In later levels of *Super Meat Boy*, the player is likely to die countless times, but each level is bite-sized encounters. Due to the

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<sup>3</sup> Rocksteady Studios. *Batman: Arkham Asylum*. Eidos Interactive & Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2009. Windows PC, PlayStation 3 & Xbox 360.

<sup>4</sup> Team Meat. *Super Meat Boy*. Team Meat, 2010. Windows PC & Xbox 360.

<sup>5</sup> From Software. *Dark Souls*. Namco Bandai Games, 2011. PlayStation 3 & Xbox 360.

checkpoint frequency, *Ninja* is similar in that respect, quickly getting the player back into the action instead of having to redo the whole level. There were several instances where I had to do the same encounter several times, but at least I was not forced to endure all the prior encounters each time as well.

The last heresy Anderson mentioned was less open level design. Most stealth games have huge open levels that allow you to tackle problems in a variety of ways. Anderson said it is hard for a player to mentally map a 2D space due to its abstractness - a player cannot remember much more than the screen they're looking at. As such, *Ninja* is a fairly linear affair. However, Klei did a remarkable job making the levels feel expansive through multiple rooms, the ninja's ability to cling to walls and ceilings, and of course, lots and lots of vents. Vents are obviously a bit clichéd, and Anderson even admits that point, but they also work quite well, making the player feel like the sneaky, ninja assassin he is. In addition, vents are safe havens and allow the player to methodically plan his or her next move.

One last thing I want to mention is the combat system. *Ninja* employs a unique one-hit kill system using a quasi-QuickTime Event (QTE). When the ninja is in range of an enemy (and undetected), the player can click the mouse to initiate the attack. Once an attack is initiated, the player must then drag the mouse in the direction of the arrow that appears quickly and briefly on the screen. The quickness of such a maneuver determines whether the ninja performs a silent kill or a messy one. Completely messing up the maneuver results in a failed attack and most likely a quick death for the ninja. I typically hate QTEs with a passion, but in *Ninja*, it works so well, plus never evolves into having to press a string of random keys, so is rarely frustrating. In fact, I would even go as far to say that it fully maintains the feel of being a ninja, as the action is rather fluid - at least if you pull it off flawlessly. It felt like I was plunging my sword deep into the enemy's back when performing a forward thrust or slashing an enemy's neck when I was pulling back. As with many aspects of *Ninja*, this combat system empowers the player.

While Anderson may refer to them as heresies, these five aforementioned aspects, along with the player line of sight mechanic and unique combat system, are what make *Ninja* such a great game. Klei innovated by breaking the genre down to its core and then going against conventions. That approach may not work for every game or every genre, but I think it is important to consider such things when designing a game. I think it certainly helped that Klei was forced to think of the stealth genre differently simply because of the necessity of using 2D, but there are certainly lessons there to be learned by all developers. On the surface, certain aspects of a genre may seem essential, but upon breaking it down, you may realize that some of those aspects can be messed with while still maintaining (or even enhancing) the core feel of that genre. I think the beauty of *Ninja* is that it lowers the barrier to entry to the stealth genre, while still appealing to hardcore stealth fans.

Unfortunately it's not all sunshine and rainbows. *Ninja's* controls are extremely sensitive, which can cause great frustration when you seemingly do everything right only to see the ninja take one step too far. I do not know if movement using a gamepad is pressure sensitive, but with the keyboard, holding down A or D (left or right, respectively) causes the ninja to run in a singular speed. In addition, on several occasions, when I went to pop out from behind cover, I moved out too far, causing me to come face to face with a guard. Let's just say those encounters never ended well for me - thank god for the frequent checkpoints! That being said, I *am* a fan of the overall PC control scheme. It seems Klei actually gave some serious thought into the controls, rather than simply porting the console version like many developers sadly do.

The other major negative, at least for most people, is the lack of co-op play. I actually rarely play co-op in games, so it wasn't something I personally missed, but it's still a rather glaring omission. Now obviously adding co-op play would have made many encounters too easy, maybe even forcing Klei to have to redesign the game for co-op. But I think one of the reasons why the omission is so glaring is because throughout the campaign, a female ninja NPC actually follows you through each map. She is simply present to move the story along and does not help in combat, but the fact that a second ninja *does* exist in the game world leaves many players to wonder why a friend can't join them. The only multiplayer interaction in the game is via a leaderboard system.

If Klei decides to make a sequel - and I sure hope one is planned - adding co-op would certainly be the right move to make. *Ninja* has already pushed the stealth genre to new heights and adding co-op play would push it even further.

Though *Ninja* has some shortcomings, its positives far outweigh them. It's a game that succeeds as both a stealth game and a side-scrolling action platformer, thus appealing to fans of both genres. While the game features copious amounts of blood, the art is highly stylized to the point that I think most people can look past that, even if they generally don't like violent games. But it should be noted that the game is indeed rated M for Mature 17+ audiences, so it may not be a game that brings the family together. Still, *Ninja* allows the player to appreciate the tactical and intelligent side without requiring him or her to spill an ounce of blood if he or she so chooses - though playing that way is more difficult. If you like games that make you feel empowered and reward creative thinking, *Ninja* is certainly the game for you. If you like your games to have one and only one solution, look elsewhere.