

Thief in the Night

A game of stealth for two players

The palace is quiet. Most of the guards are asleep. A skilled thief could slip in, steal a priceless gem, and escape unnoticed. Yet, this is also an opportunity for the captain of the guard to prove that there are none so attentive and watchful—or so worthy of reward.

One of the two—thief or guard captain—will wake up tomorrow to a life of wealth and ease. The other will wake up in the dungeon . . .

Components

To play Thief in the Night, you will need:

1. A square playing area divided into boxes, 24 boxes on each side. (Graph paper is an easy way to do this!)
2. Tokens—about 60—to indicate squares with traps in them. (Coins are a good choice.)
3. A marker to represent a priceless gem.
4. Seven markers or miniatures, one representing the thief, one for the guard captain, and the other five representing the guards. All of these need to have at least one distinctive side that can be used to determine the thief's/guard captain's/guards' facing.
5. Two standard decks of playing cards, with the jokers removed.

Setup

1. Put the priceless gem in one of the four center squares of the playing area.
2. Take turns marking the playing area, turning it into a castle. During each turn a player can mark edges of squares as walls, ten edges per turn, or mark six squares as containing traps. Keep taking turns until the playing area has been divided into at least seven rooms, and at least 60 squares have traps in them.
 - a. No room can be smaller than 4 squares by 4 squares. Irregularly-shaped rooms are fine, but they must include at least one 4 squares x 4 squares area.
 - b. Note that you don't know whether you will be the thief or the guard captain at this point. It's good strategy to build an even playing field, so that you'll be ready to play either side!
3. Randomly choose one player to be the thief, and the other player to be the guard captain.

Comment [T1]: Thief in the Night began life as a miniatures wargame. I've been thinking for a while about a game that captures conflict between forces of wildly disparate quality, average troopers versus, say, a killer robot from the future, or the super-soldiers of Dan Abnett's books.

As I started work I realized that the gameplay that's likely to emerge in a situation where one player is greatly outnumbered was more suited to a stealth game. Eventually the stealth predominated, the combat dropped out entirely, and Thief in the Night was born.

Comment [T2]: I like having a few lines that set the scene at the beginning of an instruction manual. Having some context gives players a framework for understanding the rules.

Comment [T3]: Starting the rulebook with a component list is a shaky move for most board games. No one I know checks the stuff in the box against the list for completeness, so it just encourages people to start skimming—and potentially miss an actually important rule thereby. I would much rather each component be introduced visually when it becomes relevant, with a full listing at the end.

For a print-and-play game I feel that having the component list up front is a necessary evil, since step one for the player is putting the game together. It's still unfortunate, though.

Comment [T4]: 3D printing might mean that I'll soon be able to provide, not just rules for print-and-play games, but all the other components as well—dice, tokens, minis, etc. It'll be interesting to see what 3D printing does to the print-and-play space; I can see it enabling a lot of fascinating designs that don't have the commercial potential to find a traditional publisher, but I can also see it raising the artistic bar print-and-play games have to clear to get noticed. Adding 3D modeling to the list of skills print-and-play designers need to have might not be what we want.

Comment [T5]: Setting up a good playing area is the secret skill of miniatures games. It's vitally important to having a fun match, but most minis games address it only briefly and without detail. This leads to disconnects between the designer and the players, wherein the designer feels like everything is working right and the players feel that the game is unbalanced or even unplayable. It turns out that they're both right—for the tables they're playing on.

When I was envisioning Thief in the Night as a wargame I decided to address that issue by giving clear rules for how much terrain there should be and how it should be placed. That idea survived the shift from wargame to stealth game.

4. The guard captain places the five guards and the guard captain in any six squares. Each piece must face one of the sides of the square—not the corners.

5. The thief places the thief in any square along the edge of the playing area, again facing one of the sides of the square.

6. Shuffle the two decks. The thief takes one of them and deals a hand of ten cards. The guard captain deals a five-card hand for each guard and a ten-card hand for the captain. The two players can look at the hands they dealt, but not at each other's hands.

How to Win

The thief wins by moving to the gem, picking it up, and then escaping the castle by taking it back to any space along the edge of the playing area.

The guard captain wins by catching the thief before the thief escapes.

How to Play

Play begins with the thief.

Playing as the thief

At the start of your turn, decide whether to move or to stay put. If you decide to move, discard a card from your hand. Any card numbered 2-10 allows you to move up to three squares. (Diagonal moves are permitted). Any face card allows you to move up to four squares. At the end of the movement, choose which side of the square you are facing toward.

You cannot move through walls. If you enter a square with a trap, you can either stop or discard a card one value higher or lower than the previously-discarded card to keep going. (Thus, if you discarded a Jack to start moving, you could discard a 10 or a Queen to keep moving through a trap. If you discard a 10, a 9 or a Jack would enable you to move through a second trap, etc.)

If you decide to stay put, you discard a card and then have the option of changing your facing.

Either way, draw one new card at the end of your turn.

Playing as the guard captain

When the thief's turn ends, your turn begins. During your turn you must move all five guards and the guard captain. Guards and the guard captain *cannot* stay put.

Comment [T6]: The thief was going to have two piles of cards, one for moving and one for escaping, with a separate hand for each and rules for swapping between the hands. The goal was to add some extra resource management. Eventually I realized that it really was merely "extra," and cut the whole two-piles structure as unnecessary.

Comment [T7]: There's a good argument for moving this further up, since—like the introductory fiction—it gives players context for understanding the rules.

Comment [T8]: Always tell players how to start the game!

Comment [T9]: . . . but only one, no matter how many you discarded. This means that discarding to move through traps is dangerous, since it permanently reduces the thief's hand size. My hope is that this will feed back into the terrain setup phase, with the players weighing how many traps will be too many if they're the thief against how many they would like to have as the guard captain.

Comment [T10]: Camping isn't going to be any more fun in this game than in an FPS, so the guards have to move around. This will create *zugzwang* situations, which I feel are an interesting element for both players—one person wants to create them, and the other wants to time moves so as to avoid them.

To move a guard, discard a card from the guard's hand. Any card numbered 2-10 moves the guard two squares in a straight line, or one square forward and then one square to the left or right. Any face card moves the guard three squares forward, or one square forward and then two squares to the left or right. Guards always end their movement facing in the direction they are traveling.

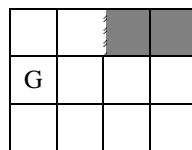
To move the guard captain, discard a card from the guard captain's hand. Any card numbered 2-10 allows the guard captain to move up to three squares. (Diagonal moves are permitted). Any face card allows the guard captain to move up to four squares. At the end of the movement, choose which side of the square the guard captain is facing toward.

Guards and the guard captain cannot move through walls. They are not affected by traps.

After each guard moves, draw a new card for that guard. After the guard captain moves, draw a new card for the guard captain. When all of the guards and the guard captain have moved, the turn is over and it is once again the thief's turn.

Capture and escape

Guards can see a 3 square x 3 square area in front of them. The guard captain can see a 5 square x 5 square area. Walls along the side of a square closest to the guard or guard captain block that square and all squares behind it from vision, as per the diagram below. Traps never block vision.



The guard is in the square marked "G." A wall where the hashed line is blocks the two shaded squares from vision.

If the thief moves into a square that one or more of the guards and the guard captain can see, both players create a hand. The thief makes an escape hand from any five of the cards in the thief's hand. The guard captain makes a capture hand from any five of the cards in the hands of everyone who can see the thief.

Example: The thief moves into a square that two guards can see. The thief makes an escape hand from the cards in the thief's hand. The guard captain can choose any five cards from the hands of the guards that see the thief to make the capture hand.

If the escape hand beats the capture hand, the thief can immediately move up to four spaces. During this movement the thief is invisible to the guards and the guard captain. If the capture hand beats the escape hand, the thief is captured and the guard captain wins! If the hands are tied, nothing happens.

Comment [T11]: Originally the guards would only move when the guard captain was nearby, another holdover from the early wargame design. I like the idea of the guard captain having to balance personally contributing to the search against overseeing subordinates, and would be interested in bringing that dynamic back if playtesting suggests the game would benefit from it.

Comment [T12]: It's probably not OK that the guard captain moves as fast as the thief. My thought was that the guard captain's player should have a piece she could see as her avatar on the board, just as the thief's player can identify with the thief. Looking at it now, maybe the vision advantage is enough to accomplish that.

Comment [T13]: Diagrams are always vital for line-of-sight rules; in a game rulebook, where every added word brings more complexity, having a picture that's worth a thousand words is a very big deal.

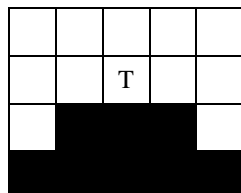
Comment [T14]: Is this diagram enough? I feel like it is, but am interested in hearing others' opinions.

Comment [T15]: Allowing the thief to move after a near-capture is intended to encourage the players to interact, with the thief using the guards to leapfrog around the playing area while the guard captain tries to space the guards so as to prevent it.

I'm torn about whether it's necessary to explain here that the thief still can't walk through walls, and how traps interact with this. The lawyer in me says not to let ambiguities go by, but it might be unnecessary padding that makes the text as a whole harder to follow.

Comment [T16]: This additional rule allows the thief to escape multiple guards whose vision covers a broad area. It might be too advantageous to the thief, however; if it proves difficult for the guards to surround the thief, a better reward might be in order.

If a guard or the guard captain moves so as to be able to see the thief, check whether the guard is behind the thief using the following diagram:



The thief is in the space marked “T.” Spaces in black are behind the thief. Continue the same pattern to determine whether spaces further away are behind the thief.

If the guard (or guard captain) is *not* behind the thief, determine whether the thief is captured using the normal rules.

If the guard (or guard captain) *is* behind the thief, make the capture hand as normal. Then choose at random as many cards from the thief’s hand as there are guards (including the guard captain) that can see the thief. The thief must use those cards when making the escape hand.

Assuming the thief escapes, the thief must discard three of the cards used in the escape hand and draw three replacements. The cards in the capture hand are all discarded, and new cards are drawn to restock the relevant guards’ hands (including, if necessary, the guard captain’s hand).

Picking up the gem

The thief picks up the gem by moving into the space where the gem rests. The gem moves with the thief for the rest of the game.

Other rules

Use standard Poker rules when determining whether the escape hand or the capture hand wins. Aces are high in Thief in the Night, and there are no wild cards.

Discarded cards are public information. Both players may look through both discard piles at any time.

If either player runs out of cards, shuffle the discarded cards to form a new pile.

The thief draws ever closer to the gem—but all escape routes are blocked. Only with quick feet and quicker wits can the thief escape the guard captain’s net . . .

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Comment [T17]: Again, line-of-sight always gets a picture.

Comment [T18]: This doesn’t explicitly say that the rules controlling the *results* of the attempt to capture are also used—for example, that the thief can move if the escape hand is higher than the capture hand. My feeling is that that’s pedantic, but I might be wrong.

Comment [T19]: This sounds like it’s great for the guards, but could end up being a little weak. It’s likely that the first guard will move into sight range—the thief will move out of sight—the next guard will move into sight range—the thief will move out—etc. Pinning down the thief and getting multiple eyes on him will require good use of walls and traps. That might be OK, or it might be asking too much.

Comment [T20]: Finding a middle ground between allowing the thief enough control over his hand to make informed decisions and allowing the thief so much control that he’s unstoppable is tricky. This is my first attempt; it would need to be the subject of focused playtesting.

Comment [T21]: The gameplay is in the thief and the guards interacting, not in the thief lifting a rock. Since this isn’t where the interesting decisions are coming from, there’s no need for complicated rules here.

Specifying that the gem moves with the thief, as opposed to being placed off to the side somewhere, future-proofs against variants where the gem can be dropped. (Perhaps multiple thieves?)

Comment [T22]: Somebody’s going to want to throw down the Dead Man’s Hand. This could do with more filling out.

Comment [T23]: As in *Over the Next Dune*, I think it’s worthwhile to allow players willing to invest the energy to judge what their odds are in light of the cards that have already gone by. That could also be achieved by memorizing the cards played—but memory is not the skill this game is meant to test.