Erin Fernandez
Game Design Class
Spring 2007
Essay 1

The Miller Brothers: Constraints and Design—a Case Study

Myst was the best selling computer game of its time soon after its release. It sold millions of copies, and its successor, *Riven*, was perhaps the most heavily anticipated computer game before its release in 1997. Although *Riven* enjoyed remarkable success in its own right, it achieved only a fraction of the success that *Myst* did. Reactions to the two games differ sharply. Although *Riven* has far superior graphics and was made on a much larger budget, many game players seem to prefer *Myst*. Popular opinion is difficult to justify and explain, but the marked difference in the two games' levels of success (and, arguably, quality of design) highlights fundamental differences between the games' development cycles. The amount of money and the level of technology available for the production of *Riven* yielded a game that is very detailed and complex, yet not necessarily superior to its predecessor.

Myst was made under a number of restrictions that *Riven* did not have. The game was literally a garage project, made by two brothers on circa 1989 computers with graphics and rendering programs that are rudimentary by today's standards. The financial and technological restrictions on the project limited the quality and quantity of its assets. *Myst* is notably thrifty in its use of animations, and its sounds often loop noticeably. The scope of each of its rendered worlds is also limited; the sheer size of *Riven*'s rendered world, which takes up five discs, could never fit on *Myst*'s single CD ROM, at least not without significant reduction in graphics quality.

While *Myst*'s limitations prevented the Miller brothers from creating the complex game play and the hyper-realistic world they originally imagined, often the restrictions served as an impetus for clever design solutions, rather than a hindrance. In one notable example, the final

puzzle to the game, the white page, was originally going to be hidden in a fully rendered forest. The idea was abandoned when Robyn Miller, the youngest brother and the game's illustrator, simply "didn't want to draw 80 more views of trees" ("Guerrillas in the Myst"). The original idea, while more technically elaborate and challenging, lacks the narrative elegance of the finalized ending. In order to finish *Myst*, the player returns to the beginning of the game in order to find the final page, to discover the final page lying in the base of the first marker switch all along. The restrictions placed on the game's assets forced the designers solve their problems with elegant solutions. On first blush, the idea of a fully-rendered forest isn't bad. It might have had some interesting puzzle possibilities. But it would have taken the player out into the middle of nowhere, out of the narrative of the game. The ending they used added circularity to the narrative, and a sense of completeness and finality that the alternate ending would not have.
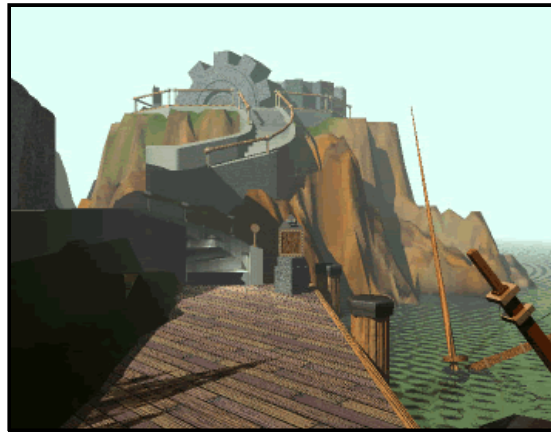
The Beginning (and the End) of *Myst*

To contrast, *Riven*'s structure seems to be born from an over-availability of time and technology, and in effect, a lack of limitations placed on its scope. Because the game has so few limitations placed on it, it sprawls across five CD ROMs with few definite ends and beginnings. By the end of the game, the player may feel that the game, like the island itself, strains under its own weight. *Riven*'s puzzles are difficult to solve and navigate due to its size and complexity.

Riven's endgame is far more complicated than *Myst*'s, with at least ten possible scenarios. There are several ways to partially beat *Riven*, because there are multiple goals that can be accomplished or failed. Because of the possibility of partial success, the goals of the player are not as defined as they are in *Myst*. The multiple endgame possibilities in *Riven* are a direct result of the complicated structure of the game itself. It is very telling, both structurally and thematically, that the game has ten possible endings, and that every one ends with the world itself—all five islands, all five disks—falling away from its center and into oblivion.

At the root of all the differences between the two games is the presence or absence of technological constraints. For the time that Myst was released, it pushed the boundaries of gaming computer graphics, and its limitations guided the simplicity of its worlds. None of its ages seem truly livable, yet they are fascinating nonetheless. In fact, part of the success of *Myst* may lie in the fact that its worlds are so surreal by our standards. The game has rough edges; the worlds created by the Miller brothers were not fully realized, and so they are novel and unique to the player's experience. In this case, a well-designed facsimile is preferable to a fully-rendered reality. Often a sketch of a world invites more delight and imagination on the part of the player. The Stoneship age is hardly imaginable in Earthly terms, and the Selentic age certainly isn't. Just the same, the devices and fixtures in these worlds are more engrossing than the realistic ages of Riven and Channelwood, because they present novel and strange ideas for the imagination to feed on.

In thinking about these two games, I find it helpful to frame their differences in terms of types of play. Roland Barthes examines types of play and pleasure in his work *Pleasure of the Text*, and he identifies the pleasure of a text that visibly jars with reality as a "pleasure in pieces." He then juxtaposes these texts to texts that evoke pleasure through careful mimesis, i.e. "texts

that come from culture and do not break with it" (51, 14). This distinction is perhaps at the heart of the difference between *Myst* and *Riven*. While *Myst* cannot help its technological limitations, and instead works with them to create a productive game experience, *Riven* cannot touch bottom with its possibilities and therefore cannot find constraints to work around. As one of *Riven*'s first players noted, its level of concern for detail is may be more realistic and immersive, but "It's a gift that borders on obsession; it makes you grateful and nervous at the same time" (Carroll). Instead of resting in its ability to entertain its audience through the value of play itself, the game becomes obsessed with its ability to mimic reality, and loses the gamer in the process.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. tr. Richard Miller. New York: Farrar Straus,
      Giroux, Inc., 1975.

Carroll, Jon. "(D)Riven." http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.09/riven.html.
      "Guerillas in the Myst." http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/2.08/myst_pr.html.