Immersive Minds

As a young gamer my favourite games were RTS (Real Time Strategy), 2D and 3D FP (First Person) Adventure and Puzzlers. I could never grasp the attraction of Sports or Racing titles. Games such as Chrono Quest, The Secret of Monkey Island and Dizzy stole most of my gaming time until the release of the 'Command and Conquer' series and then 'Tomb Raider' and 'Myst'.

It's this last entry which has stuck with me the longest. A series of adventure games (and books) following the story of the fall of the D'ni civilisation. Myst itself was a profoundly engaging game but its sequel, 'Riven' was where I truly fell in love with the series and as an educator have gone back for countless learning experiences.

Here are my thoughts and experiences on using Riven in the classroom:

Riven as a game

Riven is a FP Adventure game. Played in the first person as though you yourself were on the island and looking through your own eyes. It is also a point and click adventure. As you navigate the beautifully imagined world, stunning scene by scene you are encouraged to explore the landscape and architecture through pragmatism and curiosity. Clicking on points of interest, textured scenery and objects and clicking buttons or pulling levers.
Riven is ultimately a puzzle game. A mystery to be solved.

Riven is available on the PC or on the Playstation 1 (PSOne). When working in schools I use the Playstation 2 (PS2) as the games are compatible and a PS2 is easier to get a hold of.

The world of Riven

Riven – Jungle Island Map

Riven is the name of an age and the main island in that age (No time to explain ages here but worth checking out). Gehn, one of the characters in the Myst storyline, referred to this age simply as his 'Fifth Age'. As a result, the number five can be found in many of the islands scenes and puzzles. including pentagonal-shaped architecture, the fact there are five islands and five is the point at which the D'ni numbering system changes. I'll explain the numbering system shortly. Riven is an unstable age. In a state of deterioration. Originally however, it was just one island. Over time, the main island of Riven split into five separate islands which continued to drift further apart. There was a network of footpaths to connect these islands, but with the islands continually moving apart they were unsustainable and so Gehn installed a mechanical transport system to connect the islands. Getting this system working is one of the first puzzles.

The world of Riven, like all of the games in the 'Myst' series are beautifully imagined. For its time (early 1990's) Riven was and still is hailed as a triumph in realistic world creation with almost photographic quality. Bringing to life a world that could only exist in our minds and making it look as though someone had actually visited and taken photographs.

Riven is about an adventure on a small archipelago consisting of five islands on which an ancient culture once lived. This culture, known as the D'ni have disappeared and their island world is in a state of deterioration. Through some video cut scenes and a written journal, you are charged with the investigation, and possible rescue of the D'ni people. Or at the very least, their culture.

One thing worth noting (without giving too much away) is that, aside from the occasional cut scene in which another NPC (non player character) appears, there are no other people in the game. No players to interact with, no battles with an evil-doer and nothing to run from. You are, for the most part, alone and at peace with the world. This, for me was always one of the great attractions in Riven and the Myst series. A freedom to explore out with the structure of expectation, deadlines and threat.

Each beautifully rendered scene has something to explore or observe which will, at some stage be a part of a larger puzzle leading you towards the endgame. The occasional animation of bugs flying, leaves blowing or a flickering candle only heightens the sense of realism about the world. It's this play on the senses that makes Riven so engaging. The imagery is not the only thing that stirs an interest in each scene. The game has been cleverly crafted to use ambient sounds such as wind, trees rustling and bug wings buzzing as you travel around. Sound effects are also deployed when you take action. Creaking doors, rolling stones on wood surfaces, old machinery starting up. Where you turn a rusting lever, you get a rough, creaking sound of metal on metal. Lighting mechanics also add a warm, refreshing feeling to the outdoors and a coy, candlelit feeling to the indoor scenes.
On top of this there is the D'ni language and the numbering system. Within the game players will come across symbols and sigils which are in fact a complete numbering system and written language. There is even a school house that you can explore and learn in.

All together, Riven has proved one of the most engaging games I have used to date simply because of the style of the game and the detail in its making. But there is more to using it in teaching than that. After a brief explanation of each of the islands I will cover some of the ways I've used it.

Temple Island:

Known as 'Allapo', this island consists of two smaller islands. There are a series of puzzles on Temple island which link to other island puzzles and the overall success of the game. This is the island you start on (link-in) and it contains the Dome that redirects energy to Gehn's Linking Domes(you need to power this), the Star Fissure, and the Beetle Room with prayers to Gehn and of course, the temple itself.

Jungle Island:

Also known as Village Island, this island is home to the only surviving Village where the vast majority of the surviving Rivenese population are hiding. The island contains a lagoon, where the school is located. You can learn the D'ni numbering system and alphabet in the school. Many of the trees on the island have been cut down to be converted into paper for Gehn's books on Crater Island.

Crater Island:

This small island hosts a boiler for making paper and books, as well as Gehn's original headquarters. Many clues to the demise of the islands and the population can be found here.

Plateau Island:

Also known as Map Island, it has a wide plateau with a miniature map of the Riven islands. Gehn used this island to study the deterioration of the Riven Age. The map forms part of a puzzle.

Prison Island:

The fifth island once held the massive Tree of Riven. Now the tree has gone. Cut down for Ghen's books. it now serves as a prison for Catherine (another of the main characters). The Prison Island has drifted far away from the other islands and is only reachable through Gehn's 'Age 233′.

Learning in another world

So, how can Riven been used in education?

As with many off-the-shelf games, Riven offers a wealth of curriculum and soft-skills learning opportunities.

Here are some examples of the learning I've drawn from Riven in the classroom:

Literacy -

Riven lends itself naturally to the development of literacy. First of all the game is designed to be more of an experience than a game. With interaction between characters at a minimum the game relies on the player becoming immersed in the environment. Sights, sounds and the puzzles themselves. To this end we have conducted writing workshops with pupils in which they use the game to develop different writing styles.

• Descriptive writing work that focuses on how the game look and feels. Pupils play portions of the game (we call them chapters) and write about what they saw, heard, felt and did.

Examples from a pupils -

"When I stepped out of the temple I felt the warm sun on my face. I knew I had to go back in to the temple but it felt cold in there and so I wandered out onto the bridge and stood in the sun for a while first."

"There was a winding path through the tall trees. There was thick undergrowth and I heard the buzzing sound of a small insect. It flew past my face and I noticed it was a scarab (I don't know if scarabs can fly) like the stone ones I had opened in the room at the start."

• Creative writing -

The entire basis of the Myst series is that the 'Ages' you visit such as Riven and Exile are written into existence. Everything that makes the worlds what they are is conceived and then written into a 'Linking book'. At various stages of development the writer can visit the world. However, this can cause issues if important things like gravity or oxygen have not yet been written in.

The ability to write a world is an excellent creative writing opportunity. From the science behind making a world inhabitable to landscapes, water and organic life. Weird land features, violent natural disasters, two-headed creatures, the details of a food chain, an ancient civilisation, airships, new energy sources, technology or a lack of. Anything goes.

This activity lends itself particularly well to blended learning opportunities with art, science, geography, history and design and technology.

Examples from pupils -

"Water flows up the way and so would we if we weren't wearing heavy shoes. There are tall creatures that roam around looking for strangers so you have to be quiet."

"The islands float in the air, above the ground. They can be moved if they float in the way using huge chains. They can also be held where you want them to be using the chains too. Like an anchor. People climb up onto the islands and build houses and shops on them. They are like small gardens and people grow things on them."

• Keep a journal -

Throughout the game you are encouraged to follow a journal from a past visitor to the islands and fill out your own. A great extension of this activity is to get pupils to develop their factual writing skills. To assume the role of the very character they play and keep a details record of each of the things they do.

A neat extension to this is to physically create the journal, tea stained pages, a decorated front cover and interested binding such as string.

• D'ni -

Writing in D'ni is difficult but learning it using the school in game and the internet can be a great exercise in literacy. Pupils can learn the D'ni alphabet first before forming whole words, sentences, paragraphs and even short statements or stories.

• E-Journaling -

Give pupils a platform to journal their experience as part of a games-based learning project.

• Reading -

Reading features heavily throughout Riven in the form of the journal entries you find as the game progresses. However, the game is also available in book format and can be read alongside the game.

History and Cultural studies

While exploring the Riven islands players are introduced to a new civilisation and their culture.

• How they live learn, travel, eat and work are all either explained or alluded to if you pay attention to the details of the scenes.

• Make direct comparisons to the cultures we know in real life. Their art and architecture, their language, religion, clothing and more.

Mathematics

The Riven numbering system offers a natural link to mathematics. The system (shown below from 0 to 25) is a unique system which can be used to bring a fresh interest in numbers to pupils.

• Ask pupils to decode the symbols and learn the numbering system.
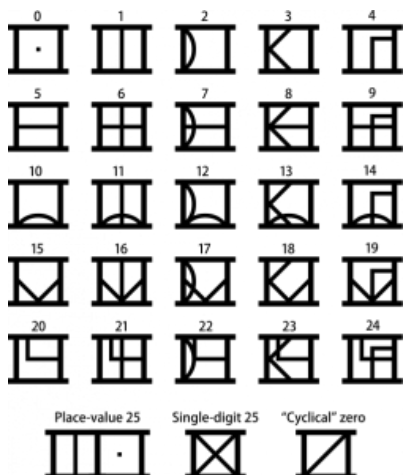
• Ask them what is so important in the system about the number 5?

• What happens after 25?

• Ask pupils to complete their times tables or answer math questions using standard numbers but answering in D'ni.

• Get pupils to consider how they would teach someone from the D'ni culture our own numbering system.

There are also opportunities in Riven to explore weight, distance and time through the puzzles found on the islands.

Geography -

As Riven is set on three islands which contain elements in the likeness of our own world (mountains, water, population), it offers a great opportunity to explore geography.

• Explore how islands are formed, how water plays a part in the formation of landscapes and our survival as a population.

• Give pupils tasks based on the following questions: Why do islands and other landscapes deteriorate? What would happen if the sea levels were to rise? How do weather conditions and location on earth affect the formation of the islands. What kind of world (globe) is Riven a part of? Where on our earth would the islands be situated and why?

• Map the islands. There are several maps available online but it is a great exercise to get pupils mapping the islands as they play. The maps can be rendered digitally or on paper. Grid references, axis, scale and a key or legend all make for a great end result. The maps can be used to guide others through the islands next time you run a Riven project.

The best map I saw was on grease proof paper (taken from a chip shop), tea stained to look old with the solution to each puzzle mapped out onto it in earthy watercolours. An absolute work of careful planning and art.

Science -

The islands of Riven are filled with opportunities to explore the sciences.

• Explore the physics and chemistry of creating such a world and the biology of the plant and animal life found on the islands.

• Look at bio-diversity, the food chain, evolution (or not! – see Religious and Moral studies below).

• Explore the physics of energy used to power the islands and the transport system.

• Create circuits that could power a small vehicle along a track from makeshift, desktop islands.

• Get pupils to create a 'Table of Elements' from the Riven universe.

Religious and Moral Education -

Running through the Myst storyline and prevalent in Riven is the subtle suggestion of a lost race trying to survive the wrath of a god-like figure who is at once the creator and the threat. Of course, we know it is a human with the ability to write worlds into existence but to the D'ni it is a spiritual being made real only by the ancient, beautifully documented history found scattered across the island. Stained glass windows, old books and etchings tell the story of their religion.

• Compare this story to that of religions we know in the real world. Without giving too much away there are some similarities in both the story and the way the civilisation respond.

Outdoor Learning -

Outdoor learning is something I try to promote in as many ways as I can. Riven lends itself nicely to some opportunities to get pupils out of the classroom.

• After playing elements of the game get pupils to explore areas outside, near the school as though they were strangers to the world.

Get them to pay close attention to the detail in colours and textures. Taking sketches, rubbings or photographs for use back in class.

• Bring stones from outside back in to the classroom for classification and weighing. Reflecting one of the in game puzzles.

• Do a mini-beast hunt then classify the beasts. Get pupils to design their own mini-beasts based on a the Riven world and our own.

• Using outdoor materials, design and build a D'ni island. A mini map on a small hill works well or a larger construction using sand or dirt.

• Design puzzles using materials found outside.

• Using materials gathered from outside, recreate one of the puzzles found in the game.

Art -

The game is a visual feast and so art is an obvious extension of playing the Riven. Linking the art work to the writing work has always been a success for me when using Riven in class.

• The game is designed to look like a series of photographs and videos of a real world. Using digital or mobile cameras, get pupils to take pictures of their own locale in such a way that it looks surreal, beautiful and even alien to others.

• Ask pupils to paint the world they see or imagine their own. This is particularly useful when linked to a creative writing element.

• Using Photoshop (if you have it, www.pixlr.com (free) or any other good graphics packages, get pupils to manipulate digital images of the real world to look like a different world. This is the essence of the imagery in the game from the textured rocks to the clouds in the sky.

• Create a physical journal from paper or other materials. Examples we have seen from pupils have had wooden covers with string binding and one with a cloth cover and hand made paper inside.

Design and Tech -

The islands of Riven are the result of some clever design and held together by some amazing familiar and unfamiliar technology. Exploring mechanics, engineering, architecture and puzzle design will give you a wealth of Design and Technology opportunities.

• Explore the transport system and how it was engineered. It seems both futuristic and outdated at the same time.

• Explore the architecture used on the island and how each building was designed a created.

• There are limited resources on an island and so the natives of Riven must use their materials in a sustainable way. Have they? If so how? If not, how might they start to consider a more sustainable approach?

• The puzzles in Riven are cleverly designed. Some on a desktop, others a whole island structure and others spanning multiple islands. Get pupils to design and craft their own puzzles.

Skills for Life, Work and Social Mobility -

As with all digital games there are soft skills being developed the entire time during play. Here are some of those Riven will promote:

• Problem solving

• Planning

• Team work

• Assessment and Reflection

• Decision making and Judgement

• Communication

• Digital Literacy

I would recommend you play Riven yourself before running it with your class. It can take a while however and is the kind of game you can become immersed in even when you get lost and things are unclear. Here is one of the clearest and shortest walkthroughs I have found. Use this is you want to race through the game and see all the elements unfold:

Riven Walkthrough