

WIRED

(D)Riven

By Jon Carroll

Myst was so beautiful, so compelling, so revolutionary, that its sequel created impossible expectations - especially among its obsessed creators. Jon Carroll on the exclusive inside story of making Riven.

On my last evening in Spokane, after I had wandered *Riven's* caves and forests, after I had turned a dozen animated valves and seen a dozen *Mysterious* thrones and eaten of the five-lobed fruit, after I had lingered under the winking planetarium in the basement lair of the creators of the caves and forests and valves and thrones one last time, after I had brooded about landscape and memory and constructed lonely theories on the deserted high-way; after all those things, I revisited the place where the story began again.

In the corner of a strip mall on the northern border of Spokane, Washington, stood a mattress store called Comfort World. The only sign of its former tenants was a distinctive blue trim that ran along the roof line, a sort of deep aqua that people who work with colour might call cyan. I had been in that building one year before, when the company called Cyan had been occupying it. As tacky and ungainly as the building was, it was a step up from the old Cyan offices in the garage of the man named Chris Brandkamp. That garage (the walls of the conference room downstairs had been plastic, with tiny clattering space heaters that barely cut the chill - I could remember meetings in that office where all the participants looked as though they were about to mount the final push for the Pole) was in turn bigger and more luxurious than the basement of Robyn Miller's house, where *Myst* had been created. *Myst* was what kept me coming back to Spokane, *Myst* and its successor, *Myst II* (as it was called in the garage days) or *Riven* (as it is called today). *Myst* was the best story I had ever stumbled onto. It was an astonishing phenomenon, a computer game produced by some people in rural Washington, not near the Microsoft-shadowed Seattle but way over on the eastern edge of the state, near nothing else. And from this unlikely soil had sprung a game that topped the sales charts for years, a *Mysterious* nonviolent ruminative scary passionate CD-ROM experience like nothing the world had seen before.

When matched against, say, Vermeer or Melville, it wasn't much, but in the limited world of computer games, it was high art. It was Shakespeare. At the time I stood there in the parking lot, in May of this year, *Myst* had sold 3.5 million units. Figuring very conservatively, that meant something like US\$20 million had rolled into tiny Cyan, not counting subsidiary rights, sundry accessories, book deals, and T-shirts.

And the story behind *Myst* was even stranger than these figures. Its creators were two brothers, Rand and Robyn Miller, evangelical Christians who lived in the literal backwoods of eastern Washington, in homes surrounded by pine trees (Rand) or wheat fields (Robyn), in country that was not far from a fortified enclave called Ruby Ridge.

They made up *Myst* entirely out of whole cloth - strange cloth, cloth not available in the great centres of commerce. When I first met them in 1994, after *Myst* was a certified hit but before they had seen much money from it, they were about to cross uncharted waters. Money was about to come flowing in, money and prestige and temptation and pressure. They were about to become some version of the oldest American narrative: We believe in money, we believe that money corrupts, and we believe in corruption. We despise the cycle, and we rush to embrace it.

I walked across the puddled parking lot and peered in the windows: a panoply of products designed to provide gracious horizontality. I saw the dim shadow of the reception desk, minus the cut-glass bowl of hard candy that had been a Cyan tradition from the beginning. I remembered ...

April 1996: Bonnie Staub looked cold. Her nose was red. She was wearing a down parka and gripping a sheaf of papers. There is in every good office a person who acts as the hub and pivot, the person who can always find the things that are lost and forget the instructions that are unwise, who has such a good grip on the truth that she knows when to lie, who has a loyalty not often rewarded with a salary commensurate to her value. Bonnie was that person at Cyan; she returned my phone calls and gave me useful information; even her studied vagueness had content. And she seemed to be fighting some undefined strangeness, a peculiar gloom created from cramped offices and bad vibes and the lingering Spokane winter and something more. It all made me fretful. Something was up.

I had come up to Spokane expecting *Riven* (it had just been finally named) to be almost ready for beta testing. It was due out before Christmas, maybe as early as September. This date had not been officially announced, but that was what Broderbund (the distributors of *Myst*) had been telling people, because that's what they had been told. Rand Miller had discouraged me from coming up. There were deadlines, he said; there were people from out of town; there was no time right now to meet with the press. I had talked it over with Bonnie. I decided to come up anyway, to interview whoever was available, to sit in the lobby if I had to, to wheedle and snivel and tag along behind. There was much of my own ego in this - I was proud that I had written the first big story about *Myst* and the Miller brothers; I wanted to maintain my lead, cement my contacts, follow *Riven* wherever it was going.

I also wanted to see *Riven*, but there wasn't much to see. Some renderings, almost breathtakingly lovely but somehow immobile, unconnected. It was almost as though they had cooked something up to appease the gods of marketing. Even worse, no one looked happy. The Cyan offices in 1994 had been almost giddy, alive with the enthusiasm of creation. Two years later, the expanded staff sat morosely at their machines. On their screens were wireframe renderings of inconsequential objects - tiny pipes and curious pistols, rivets, and valves. It did not look like a project that was seven months away from huge glossy stacks of boxes in every computer superstore in the universe. One heard rumours, of course. The rumours might very well have come from people who wished the Millers ill, because the odd success of *Myst* had made a lot of high-powered gaming executives look dumb. But that did not mean they weren't true. The brothers were fighting, the rumours said. There had been a falling out. I felt oddly delicate about pursuing the rumours, as though the glare of my media attention might make a bad situation worse.

I wasn't really protective of the Millers; I was protective of *Riven*. I wanted to see it finished. I was exhibiting co-dependent behaviour with a computer game.

The office was open and casual; badges were not required; all the rooms were left unlocked. I would sit in empty chairs staring at people's family photos. Eventually I got

bored and leaned against the doorjamb of Rand's office. He waved me in; the room was tiny and almost entirely unornamented. Rand is the older brother, the one who was working as a programmer in a bank in Texas when the brothers' idea for Cyan first emerged. It had seemed to me all along that, in a sense, Cyan was a tree house Rand had built for his little brother. Robyn needed a venue; he needed an older brother's steadying hand. Robyn had been in Seattle, not going to class, drawing weird pictures, playing weird tunes; it was best for all concerned that his energies be channelled, as one might say, initially into the first Cyan games (*The Manhole* and *Cosmic Osmo*) and then into Channelwood and all the lands of *Myst*.

This was my speculation purely, and partly it was a process of elimination - Rand had said enough times that *it all didn't really matter, not any of it*, and that his priorities were elsewhere, by which he meant his wife and his children and the double-wide trailer where he lived on 20 acres of land at the end of a dirt road so far out of town that the moss grows on the south side of the trees, and by which he meant also the Lord Jesus Christ, about whom Rand will talk only when asked. You can bet he doesn't get asked much at the big software conventions, just as you can be sure they think he's joking when he talks about his double-wide. But it's not a joke, not any of it. "So suppose," I said, "that this project does not get finished in time for Christmas of 1996. How big is the trouble you'd be in?"

He smiled blandly. He has a poker player's face, open and guileless and opaque. When he didn't want to answer a question, he'd answer it anyway, in fine genial sentences that, when unpacked, turned out to mean precisely nothing. He was a wheels-within-wheels sort of guy, a *Myst* Island sort of guy. The buttons are all hidden

"We expect to have it ready on time."

"Of course you do."

"We'd be disappointed if it were not ready on time."

"It's only natural."

"But we didn't take any money from Broderbund, you see. We're living entirely off the profits from *Myst*. So we're not beholden." He liked that word; he said it again.

"Beholden. Our primary thing is to make this the best game that it can be. That is our only motivation, really. We want to be as cooperative with Broderbund as we possibly can be, but more than that we want the game to be right. There are expectations."

It was the expectations that were the problem that day; that was my guess. "Eagerly awaited" hardly began to describe the miasma around *Myst II* - it was as though the Miller brothers, having invented the wheel, were now expected to cure cancer. It was unreasonable and unreasoning; it was hard to bear. Robyn had drifted like a surly wraith around the office all morning. He was not available for interviews - might never be; hard to tell; crushing deadlines. He seemed wrapped in some kind of dark raiment; his huge open face was somehow shuttered, like a foreclosed farmhouse.

"Let's go to lunch," said Rand, and so we walked across the parking lot (the same parking lot where I would stand a year later and remember all this, or at least remember bits of it: Robyn the dark angel and the hard candies and Bonnie inside a deep jacket looking like someone out of a Dorothea Lange photo). In step beside us was Richard Vander Wende, whose title was vice president/creative director, and whose true function was to be the wild card, the new guy, the man who would take *Myst II* to the next level, take it to the *Riven* level.

He was the first break with the past, the first not named Miller to be placed at the heart of the project. He was the atheist who'd been given the keys to the kingdom.

We ate at the Red Robin, a stereotype-busting Spokane strip mall lunch joint, where the burgers could be made with chicken instead of beef if that was your preference, and iced

tea with ginseng and mocha shakes made with actual coffee were available. It's the '90s everywhere in America now, and our culture has caught up with itself in unexpected ways, plus - this is an absolute feature of Spokane in my experience, almost a legal requirement - real friendly waitresses. Just ... unnaturally friendly.

I sat across from Richard and just stared. He looked like an El Greco saint. His face was long and pale; his dark eyes sat like coals under his blank brow. He had no use for small talk; he had no use for me. He understood that dealing with the press was going to be part of his lot, but this was one of his first encounters and he looked forward to it as he would to gall bladder surgery. He would let the silences go on and on as he considered the answer to a question; he would rub his forefinger behind his left ear as though massaging the words out of the occipital lobe, and often the answer would be "Yes," which is not exactly a great quote.

Still, the story emerged. He had met Rand and Robyn at Digital World Expo in Los Angeles. He had just come off four years of working on *Aladdin* for Disney; he was unemployed and looking for a change. He was looking for a challenge. He was not looking for Spokane, but the more he talked with Robyn, the more he realized that he had found ... a soul mate? Not quite. A collaborator? Almost certainly. A job? Absolutely.

Richard's specialty was production design, with some additional expertise in and enthusiasm for animation, and animation was what the Millers decided *Riven* must have. *Jurassic Park* had changed the playing field for computer-generated imagery; anything as ambitious as *Riven* had to assume that the audience had changed. Not that Cyan had anything like a Spielberg budget, not that a CD-ROM had anything like the power to allow full-screen velociraptors to engage in intricate manoeuvres, but the bar had been raised. Robyn and Richard began talking about pushing the envelope. They began sketching things. As they talked, they realized they both admired the *Star Wars* movies and, unexpectedly, *Brazil*, the Terry Gilliam masterpiece of industrial alienation. Those would be the touchstones of *Riven*, that and a whole lot of elegant programming and modelling and animation and, oh yes, live action. Lots more live actors. Richard could direct, maybe.

I asked him if he'd seen *Myst* before he met the Millers. "Oh sure. I loved it; everybody loved it." He threw in one of his pauses. "But so much has changed. So much more is possible. Not everything in *Myst* was perfect. I mean, that's clear."

I looked at Rand to see how that sentiment was playing. "Absolutely," he said. "It was very good for when it was and what it was, but even when we finally shipped it there were parts we didn't like."

"It didn't make *sense* sometimes," said Richard. "It was all very cool, but it didn't make sense." (A year later, Robyn would tell me: "I'm thinking of it now like Tolkien. First he did *The Hobbit*, which revealed to him the possibilities of creating a world. So then he did *Lord of the Rings*, which was infinitely richer and bigger and more held-together. It made more sense. *Riven* is our Lord of the Rings. I don't mean as good as, I mean that's its relationship with *Myst*.") Rand nodded. "We all feel like that. *Myst* is what it is. It could have been better. This has to be better."

"It has to be better real quick," I said.

Rand smiled blandly. "Of course." Richard's finger massaged his scalp.

On the plane home I considered the concept of the imperfect *Myst*. I had asked for this story in the first place because I was an unabashed fan; the piece I wrote for *Wired* 2.08 was a straight puff piece - intelligent, informed, delicate puffery, I like to think, but an A-1 humjob just the same. And so I considered the flaws in *Myst*, guided by Richard's words. I asked the game to justify itself. Were we supposed to believe, for instance, that

Atrus and Catherine lived for two decades on *Myst* Island with their two psychotic youngsters? Atrus in his creepy library all day with its even creepier basement; Catherine puttering in the cabin, dreading another cold snap because then she would have to turn on the heater and the damn tree would thunder boom-Boom-BOOM again - what kind of life was that? No bathrooms, no rubbish bins? Where were the *middens*? And even off *Myst* Island - Channelwood seemed to be a reasonably complete land, but Stoneship was, well, a ship in a stone. That's a whole age? One ship that didn't go anywhere?

I remembered that Channelwood had been built last; it was the part of *Myst* that made Robyn most proud. There was a sense in Channelwood that a real civilization had grown up there; that its eeriness was deeper and denser than the all-you-can-eat surf-and-turf high-spook combination of *Popular Mechanics* and *Scooby Doo* that lay close to the heart of the *Myst* Island experience.

But there was more than that. I had asked Richard in several ways what he thought he brought to Cyan; he gave me several answers, all of them hesitant, some of them almost whispered. One time he said that Robyn had wanted to make the characters very much black and white, either entirely good or entirely evil.

"But it seemed to me," Richard had said, "that the players should take responsibility for their judgments. The choices shouldn't be so easy. They should have to decide what their values are. That's the point of its being interactive; as a designer, you have that freedom." The introduction of free will into the predetermined universe of computer games - that's the Holy Grail. Other software designers have speculated that some sort of AI entity was needed, some botlike program that would allow the game to re-create itself according to the actions of the player. But Richard wasn't talking about that. He was talking about using the force of narrative to create the seamless illusion of free will, the way the force of narrative creates the illusion of death and resurrection. Great tragedy had that - the illusion of free will combined with inevitability of consequences, the certainty of a death foretold. Suppose it wasn't a technofix that took things to the next level. Suppose it was imagination.

November 1996: A British actor in a Cossack uniform stood in a blue room. He fidgeted with an object that looked like a cross between a cane and a pogo stick. He talked about his last job doing a commercial for Birds Eye frozen meals. "One day it will be computer actors," said Rand.

"They'll still be actors," said John Keston, the actor, thin as a stick, gaunt, and over 70. "Even if it's computer-generated, it'll be a model of an actor. There will be an actor somewhere."

"Or a programmer," said Rand, gently, not baiting him.

"If it's a programmer, then he'll be the actor," said Keston.

Rand thought about that. "He'll still be *pretending*," he said finally. "I'm not sure that's the same thing."

But of course it is. People pretending is at the heart of all art, and a programmer is pretending the same way a choreographer is pretending. Or a director. And taking the pretending seriously while remembering that it's pretending is the psychological challenge that faces all artists. Or so it says in my notes. There's a lot of waiting on a movie set, even if the movie in fact has more than 1,000 fragments (some minutes long and some hardly more than a second) to be dropped seamlessly into the world's most anticipated CD-ROM, now officially scheduled for release in summer 1997.

I asked Rand whether they would meet that deadline. "Define summer," he said.

"Long days, warm nights, baseball, corn on the cob."

"Is September summer?"

"In San Francisco it is."

"We might make September. We're trying real hard for September."

More than that he would not say. The shipping date had never been "official," anyway. The creative challenges had proved more challenging than had been anticipated.

Everyone at Broderbund had been very supportive.

"They pretty much had to be, didn't they? They didn't have a lot of leverage."

"What they think is very important to us."

"For a simple country boy, you sound a lot like a press release."

"I am very happy to be in your lovely city," he said.

The city was San Francisco. The blue room was part of a process called blue screen, which involves putting actors in CGI settings, the blue becoming invisible by a process I cannot begin to explain. It's old technology, anyway; every weathercaster in the Lower 48 stands in front of a blue screen, pointing at nothing while checking the map on the monitor.

John Keston had been hired to play Gehn, a name familiar to you only if you are a total *Myst* buff, a reader of the *Myst* novels. Yes, while you were off playing *Civilization II* or *Warcraft* and wondering if *Myst II* would ever be a reality, novels were coming out. *Myst: The Book of Atrus* sold 100,000 copies in hardcover and another 200,000 in paperback; *Myst: The Book of Ti'ana* sold a like number in hardback and will come out in paper very soon; a third book, *Myst: The Book of D'ni* is due for release at the same time as *Riven*. The first two books move backward in time, each a prequel to the last, even as the games are moving forward in time, *Riven* being a sequel to *Myst*.

The world of *Myst* is now as circumscribed by subsidiary media as the world of *Star Wars*. *Myst* is a science fiction phenomenon as much as it is a computer game phenomenon. Subcontractors overseen by the Millers (much like the subcontractors overseen by George Lucas) have created a back-story, a time before the beginning of *Myst*, and the past impinges upon and defines the future. The books themselves are standard-issue spin-off prose, as clunky and banal as the games are graceful and sophisticated, but they're still part of the universe. This shadow world forms an aesthetic paradox that no one quite wants to deal with, because the hardcore fans are vital to the success of *Riven*; they'll provide the Internet with the first word of mouth - and they can be intemperate in their disappointment. For the record: Gehn is the father of Atrus, who is the old guy in the cave at the end of *Myst*, also the guy who wrote all the journals in the library. Catherine - her name appears on a note, her corporeal presence not at all - is the wife of Atrus. Atrus is played in *Myst* by Rand Miller.

Gehn is also the son of Aitrus, another Aitrus, whose *i* was added late in the game to avoid the confusion you may be feeling. Aitrus the Elder was married to Anna, who raised her grandson Atrus in a place called The Cleft. Meanwhile, Gehn was down in D'ni (pronounced "DUH-nee"), the great underground ruins of the ancient race who created the linking books. Gehn has learned the art of making linking books. There was a struggle between Gehn and Atrus, father and son, as told in *Myst: The Book of Atrus*, and there's all sorts of strange hoo-ha, including the creation of *Myst* Island by Anna and Catherine, and finally, in *Riven*, the story continues.

It's all another kind of straitjacket, another thing for the game designers to worry about. There is D'ni language, written and spoken. There is an elaborate social structure. There are customs, inventions, plans, history. And people *care* about it, so that if the Fifth Age of Gehn is not like it was in the book, if Catherine is not as she was, if the fire marbles don't look right and the runic inscription on the wall says "Eat big snails, Bill Gates" instead of "Only the wise man enters J'Taeri," there will be newsgroup hell to pay.

No wonder Richard looked like death. This was the first time he'd ever directed live actors; he was as tightly strung as a violin wire. Rand was not much better - the demands of the plot were such that he had to reprise his role as Atrus. He had to sit in his rocky den, where the last game ended, and tell the players to charge forth into the world of Gehn and Catherine, into *Riven*. He hated acting. He had no choice but to act. It was like a Beckett play.

Robyn was not even there. Sometime between April and November there had been a certain division of responsibility. Some clarity had been achieved about the relation between art and commerce. Some things had been delegated. Robyn was up overseeing the building of the world of *Riven*, the actual CGI backdrops, thousands of them, that would pop up around every corner, each vista more breathtaking than the last, more *Mysterious*, more suggestive, more complete. In a sense, Robyn was the victim of his own success, the man who reinvented computer games being asked to do it again.

Which was unfair. Any artist has only one revolution within him. After Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, he didn't write *A Doll's House* or *Endgame*; he wrote *Othello* and *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. He may have dragged Western drama to a new level, but he didn't drag it to a new level every time out; it was his body of work that redefined the depth and subtlety of what a mere play could achieve. And yet the fans out there were expecting another revolution, something as profoundly shocking as *Myst* had been. And of course they wouldn't get it - same guy, same brain, only so much inspiration is allotted even at the high end of the scale.

I had tried to find Christian allegories in the stories of *Myst* and *Riven*; nothing obvious popped up. Both stories are about people who create worlds; both stories are about the moral seriousness required to embark on the task of creating worlds. So perhaps both games are about God, although they could equally well be autobiographical, since Rand and Robyn are themselves creators of worlds. I couldn't find Jesus anywhere (unless the player of the game is Jesus, come from outside time to save the world), and eventually I abandoned that line of thought. Sometimes a fire marble is just a fire marble, as Freud might have remarked.

I sat there thinking thoughts and noticing how cold it was. This story was reported in mittens. Richard huddled palely. Rand ducked into corners, whispered in his cellular phone. Tim Greenberg, an artist who worked closely with Richard, sweated the details. No reshooting was allowed. Whatever they got that week went into the game. *Riven* was designed as a game with many endings. There was only one magnificent sound-the-trumpets, victory-is-ours ending, but there were other endings, too, some of them mere cul-de-sacs. You could get some parts right but not others, and some good things would happen, but not all the good things. And of course there were really bad endings, too, where evil triumphed and you languished in a dark dungeon for eternity. (Like *Myst*, *Riven* is a game essentially without death - only banishment.) And there were really unlikely endings, things that only some obsessive game fan would try: "I'll bet they haven't thought of *this*," the fan would say, and lo and behold, there would be Gehn, saying, "Tut, tut."

So in addition to it being bigger, more coherent, and true to the intricacies of the D'ni culture - and in stores by September - *Riven* had to outthink every game guy on the planet. Perfect. Lacking anything else to do, I interviewed John Keston. Turned out he was a classically trained British actor and singer who was also the over-70 marathon champion, having run that distance in 3:00:58. He hoped to break three hours at least once before he died; he described his theories of training in some detail. He was not entirely clear what *Myst* was. He understood it was popular. He liked everybody very much.

April 1997: We were back at the Red Robin. Complete turnout this time: Rand, Robyn, Richard, me, and Kevin Kelly, an editor of this very magazine. Everybody was in a real good mood. The waitress was wearing a large button that said "Burgers of the Universe." On the button was a buttonlike representation of the universe in purple and black; in the middle a tiny red light blinked on and off.

"Great button," I said.

"Yes, indeed," said Rand.

"You want some?" asked the waitress.

"Sure," said Robyn. She went away and returned with a handful, enough for all of us.

"Put 'em away," she whispered. "I really shouldn't be doing this."

"They know me here," said Rand.

"So is that your newfound celebrity?" I asked. "Illicit buttons at the Red Robin?" Rand looked at me. "We run a tab here." "You're one step away from Eurotrash," I said.

Something had happened in five months. Perhaps the famous feud had been resolved, the famous feud that had hung so heavily in the air before. Maybe it was just a matter of timing, of the end being finally in sight, of a shared belief that they would meet the September deadline, and the game really would be on the shelves October 1. They'd had a run-through that they'd prepared for Broderbund; they'd had a zip-wowie-bam preview on videotape that they'd played at the TED conference; they still needed to beta the gameplay and render a few more objects and get all the animation in place and, oh yeah, the very end was not quite finished, but all things were possible. *Riven* was almost real. They believed again. They believed that it was good; they believed that it was over.

Both of those things were important.

After lunch, we drove back to the spanking new Cyan World Headquarters, 10,000 square feet of big-time software magnate fun, the chief extravagance of the much-richer-than-before Millers. *Myst* had by that point surpassed *Doom* as the Number One game of all time. The front portal was a large gate with surrounding brickwork that looked as though it had slid forward on hidden hydraulics. The mortar between the bricks looked old and crumbly; the repeated shape on the building beyond looked equally ancient. A bridge led across a dry moat; just inside the door, a large rusty lever, like the hand brake of an ancient threshing machine, seemed poised to bring the portal back to the building again, protecting Cyan World Headquarters from invaders.

It looked a little like a proposed design for the entrance to a *Myst* theme park - and the theme park idea had indeed crossed several minds at Cyan.

Behind the building was a planted hillside with a slow easy waterfall and lots of rocks for sitting. Cyan had family barbecues there every so often, and maybe in summer people ate lunch there, too. It was of course cold again, and the only outside activities I witnessed were the twice-daily games of Frisbee golf among the more vigorous employees. Inside the building was mostly unornamented and functional, with open cubicles in the Silicon Valley style. Downstairs, though, in the art department, the crumbling brickwork motif was picked up again. There's a fake planetarium in the centre of the room with an ovoid bench just for hanging out. I never saw anyone hanging out there - the bench is spectacularly uncomfortable - but designing playhouses is a tough job. Maybe it's enough if something looks cool.

Almost all the rest of the *Myst* money went into the necessities of the business, including four SGI Challenge L servers, which were already so maxed when I saw them that there are probably five by now. The 3-D rendering software needs a lot of tweaking, too, because the ambitions of *Riven* were far greater than anything Softimage (pronounced

"sof-tim-AHGE") was capable of. Indeed, Cyan employees wrote many new programs, most notably code for something called "shaders," although they do not necessarily shade anything. Two employees quit Cyan toward the end of the *Riven* project to produce advanced shader technology in a separate company. Oh, and Rand got a new truck.

The decision to not take Broderbund's money with the big strings attached was great for artistic freedom, but it didn't exactly improve the cash flow. If demand for *Myst* had suddenly plummeted, there could have been even more trouble. But it didn't, and there wasn't, and *Riven* was almost done.

I stopped by Bonnie's desk on the way in; we nodded conspiratorially. She looked happy again; even better, she looked warm. She asked me how lunch was, and I said it was fine, and we understood that fine was good, and better than before. She told me that she and her husband Josh had just bought a house out near the new high school. She told me what she paid for it.

Chickenburgers, ginseng, clear mountain air, and huge houses for next to nothing - Spokane! I couldn't get away from dealing with the town; it kept coming up. I couldn't decide whether I just noticed it because I was a stranger, or whether everyone in the office was wrestling with it on their own terms. The natives were living much as before, Rand with his wife and three daughters; Robyn with his wife and growing family (one infant, one adopted child 18 months old, plus an older son); their mother and father close by for frequent family gatherings. Dad was still pastor at Northview Bible Church, where Rand worked with youth groups. The town is surrounded by wilderness or close to it; backcountry enclaves and lonely ridgelines. When you're eating a chickenburger, Spokane can seem like just another part of America, but in fact it's close to the end of the national earth, a frontier village with its own rules, friendly and suspicious both.

And the work ethic dominated in the village. Whatever fantasies the huge influx of cash might have stirred in the Miller bosoms, they had been resisted, at least until now. The focus was on *Riven*.

The Millers, Richard, Kevin, and I sat in the conference room and talked; two of us were wearing our "Burgers of the Universe" buttons. Kevin mostly asked the questions. I drifted some, aware that I would have my own chance. My universal burger had made me sleepy.

I remember Richard talking about Walt Disney. He had a fascination with the man and a fascination with the company; he felt as though he had left more of himself there than he had wanted, had squandered too much emotional capital on what was in the end just *Aladdin*, another product with no context, no admirers, and centuries of shelf life.

Everyone had told Walt not to do Disneyland. Big money sink, people had said. Big mistake. If you build it, they will stay away. But he did build it, and it was wonderful, and *nobody copied it*. For two decades, there was nothing else remotely as good as Disneyland; even today, there's nothing as good as Disneyland.

Richard made that analogy to *Myst*. And he had a curious complaint: Where are the knockoffs? If we're the best, why isn't anyone stealing from us? They kept checking through the new releases, waiting for the obvious copy - nothing came. *Doom*; yup, plenty of *Doom* copies. No successful *Myst* copies. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, where's the flattery? Three point five million units sold - where's the flattery?

Asked to define what they were doing, Rand used the phrase "immersive environments." None of them liked the word game anymore, because a game could be anything.

Checkers is a game; *Riven* is an immersive environment. And the environment, said Richard, had to be "familiar and strange." You had to feel that you had seen it before; you had to know that you had never seen it before. Robyn talked about how the world of *Riven* was both highly mechanical and highly organic. "You know the inside of the *Millennium Falcon*? You know how jumbled that all is, how thrown-together? It was a whole new kind of spaceship. That's the idea."

"I like a lot of corrosion," said Richard. "I like the colour; I like the feel. It's a great harmonizer; it makes everything more accessible."

Above the conference table was a big log suspended by metal straps. It might have been an ornamental battering ram. The wood looked newly stripped, almost blond. I wondered if it were inviting in the same way that corrosion is inviting. I wondered how many adjectives could describe the aesthetic Richard was outlining: old not new, rough not smooth, round not sharp, mottled not slick. I wondered how tightly secured the log was, and who it would kill if it fell. I wondered if perhaps certain executives from Broderbund were required to sit under the log in any conversation in which the phrase "inevitable delays" was used. Kevin was talking to Robyn about Christianity, a passion they share. Robyn expressed impatience with his co-religionists, at those in the small fundamentalist community in Spokane of which he was a member. "I find a resistance to art and science. It's very annoying. It's very blind. That's not in the Bible, not in any Bible that I've read. In other ages, Christians were at the forefront of science, the forefront of art. Now every one is so 'Oh no no no, why are you doing that?'"

So there was another pressure point, one that became more evident when the mood was calmer, when the deadline was doable: it's hard to work without the support of the people you care about, when what you're most passionate about was seen as a vocation somewhere between silly and dangerous. The isolation that helped so much in the first game, that made the Millers unaware of what was impossible or undesirable, too sophisticated or too quiet, was now beginning to grate a little. Spokane again, the unseen guest in so many rooms. The Millers don't really fit anywhere; they're like some wandering clan, better at the urban arts than the slickers, but rooted in the country, in an enclave, misunderstood and admired.

Must be lonely, up in Spokane, unsure of what the world thinks, all too sure of what your neighbours think. Must be like *Myst Island*, with the seagulls and the gears on the hill. Kevin left that afternoon. My hotel was in downtown Spokane; the spring rains plus the early snowmelt were making the river outside my window a surging torrent. It was a landscape I understood; I was raised in the west, too, and even in the cities nature was not far away.

The next morning I drove the long way to Cyan World Headquarters. I'd been on the same roads three years ago, wandering through the wheat fields looking for Robyn's house, carrying a set of directions that included the admonition "turn right at the Grange Hall."

The place was changing. There was a cluster of townhouses close to the main road; around the first turn, acres of cleared land with red flags marking property lines. There were silent bulldozers parked on gentle hills. Further, the new Mount Spokane High School was almost complete. There are more of us everywhere, and we own the earth, that's what the red flags meant. Within a generation, this vista - the one you could still see if you got far enough back and blocked out the high school with your hand - would be almost entirely forgotten even by the people who once walked by it every day. They'll see a photo and say, yes, I remember, back when Spokane was still friendly, back when ... but then nostalgia will crowd out memory, nostalgia and regret and fear, and the vista itself will vanish.

Maybe an "immersive environment" is nothing more than a story we tell ourselves about what we could have been.

Took me 20 minutes to get back to Cyan; by 10 a.m. I sat down and Rand punched a few buttons and there I was in *Riven*. It is unmistakably a *Myst* universe. There are elevators, walkways, tunnels, valves, and power plants, some functional, some not. There are machines that rotate; there are pulleys and levers. There are pipes; many, many pipes. The landscape is vaguely volcanic, with lakes in craters, sudden precipices, unexpected fissures. Over it all is a brooding sense of obsession.

Richard had told me about a book called *The Power of Limits: Proportional Harmonies in Nature, Art, and Architecture* by Gyorgy Doczi. It's an investigation of the repetition of certain proportional patterns in nature, a view of the world so narrow and intense it's almost mad. Doczi sets out to prove that everything harmonizes with his ideal shape. Those artefacts that do not so harmonize are evil or misguided or both. Somewhere in *Riven*, in time past or time present, there was or is a being just a little like Gyorgy Doczi. This person (to identify him/her more clearly would be to hint at the secrets of the game) was certainly unreliable; he was arguably nuts; but he was true to his obsession, and clever in finding patterns. One of the things that *Riven* forces you to do is consider the nature of obsession, because it is necessary to figure out the logic behind the looniness.

That's the real game in *Riven*. There are puzzles, much more varied than before, and more numerous. ("The two complaints about *Myst*," said Rand, "was that it was too hard and too easy. We're trying to make *Riven* better for both kinds of players.") The puzzles are maddening and specific in a way that will seem very familiar to *Myst* fans. But the puzzles are not the *Mystery*. People who do not like puzzles like to wander around *Myst*. There's a lot more of *Riven* to wander around (they're trying to bring it in at five CD-ROMs), and a lot more to see, and a lot more operatic spectacle. There's more variety of scale, more complexity of function. And everything is a clue. *Riven* is not unpopulated. There is a culture there, and the nature of the culture is the nature of the basic mystery. Solve one, solve the other.

It's very late Victorian - like Jules Verne, whose *The Mysterious Island* gave *Myst* its name; like Tolkien, a late Victorian trapped in the 20th century. It was the age that created the amateur detective - Sherlock Holmes is Victorian to his fingertips - and celebrated the amateur adventurer, Sir Richard Burton and Mungo Park and both Stanley and Livingstone. The look of the machines in *Riven* might have come straight out of the railway museum in London, all gewgaws and filigrees with the works themselves open for inspection, like one of those pocket watches with the glass backs. And the impulse that drives the game is Victorian, too. The player must be a talented amateur archaeologist. The player must view every artefact and ask, "What is that for? What does it do? Which physical principles are being employed? What biological urge is being served?" Speculation is not just encouraged; speculation is necessary.

There are also animals. One reason that Richard was such a perfect fit for Cyan is his work at Disney; it had been clear to Robyn all along that the next *Myst* had to have animation. Not animation like Mickey Mouse, but animation like *Jurassic Park*, which uses the same principles but strives for believability rather than comic effect. Richard was fascinated by that stuff; almost everyone at Cyan had described Richard's house as being littered with intact animal skeletons, like geometric notations of life itself.

Not that the animals found in *Riven* can also be found on Earth. They are new species. One is a combination of a whale and a shark (in-house name: wahrk); one is a sort of thin walrus with the long, Loch Ness-monster-like neck (in-house name: hippoheimer); one is a useful, froglike creature (in-house name: ytram).

The origin of the ytram deserves its own paragraph. In the first days after Richard arrived at Cyan, when Chris Brandkamp's garage was still serving as world headquarters, there was an annoying frog living behind the drywall next to Richard's desk. Also, there were constant phone calls from a guy named Marty O'Donnell, who kept bugging the Millers about doing sound effects for *Riven*. He was a nice guy and all; he was also a pest. So when the guys were searching for a convenient name to call *Riven*'s not-frogs, Richard suggested ytram, which is Marty backward. Marty knows about all this and thinks it's funny; says he does, anyway. PS: He got the job.

The animals are more than pleasing distractions. The world of *Riven* is very much a deist world; everything is there for a reason. God does not play dice with the universe. Deist and dualist, too - the word *riven* means "split apart." Atrus, whose instructions set the game in motion, comes from *The Cleft*. There is light and darkness, the seen and the unseen. Behind it all, there is a hidden struggle where fissures are both paths and clues.

Myst's famous textures are improved in *Riven*. Because of the teeny technology that *Myst* used and the Mac's limited memory, a lot of the textures were tiled - that is, created and then repeated over and over. The praise that the richness of surfaces in *Myst* received was mostly a function of the poverty of the competition. But in *Riven*, there is little tiling. Many of the textures were scanned in from a three-day photo trip to Santa Fe taken by Robyn, Richard, and Cyan graphic artist Josh Staub. They found the rock surfaces, washed adobe walls, and twisted tree bark irresistible; they also found junkyards filled with machinery that was corroded in the desirable manner. Once scanned, the surfaces were manipulated in ways that I am not competent to describe. As an example, the palm of Richard's hand was scanned in and then manipulated to make the "leather" for a bed cover.

These textures were then wrapped around modelled three-dimensional objects created using Softimage. The models onscreen look as though they had been created out of chicken wire. The jargon for the shapes of these three-dimensional objects is "the geometry." There are also "patch objects," which are created by manipulating "splines," which are curved lines that can be used to describe complex shapes. Splines allow designers to get away from using lots of tiny straight lines to describe curved objects - using such lines creates that "computer art" feel that destroys the care-fully composed reality of the images.

Riven's music, like that in *Myst*, was entirely composed and performed by Robyn, using three synthesizers. The music was one of the last things to be laid in; most of the game I saw was silent. In *Myst*, the same music plays in the same way every time a player enters a room or scene. Robyn thought some of the repeated music in *Myst* was annoying, so in *Riven*, the game remembers if you've been there before, and gives you a stripped-down version of the melody.

What else? Four thousand images, more or less. Two hours of film, not counting the simple animations, like valves turning. The number of polygons in the game is uncertain - polygons being the building blocks of CGI - maybe 10 million, maybe twice that. There are a few inside jokes in the game. The basalt towers found everywhere in *Riven* are also found everywhere around Spokane. Cropping up like sentinels along freeway off-ramps. Late in the game, in a curious context, Richard's wife Katherine appears in a surprising speaking role. Except for Rand's Atrus, all the other performers are hired actors, none famous. Like *Myst*, only more so, *Riven* is insanely overgenerous with its images. It's profligate, brazen, unnecessary; you can sense why it took so long, why the Millers renounced up-front money to do it right. It's a gift that borders on obsession; it makes you grateful and nervous at the same time.

I saw all there was to see. I got up from my chair; I stumbled around the offices in that numbed stage where the mousefinger clicks every time the eye fastens on something. I do not have an opinion about the commercial possibilities of *Riven*. That depends on the what the market wants, where the market is, price sensitivity and box design and the state of the economy. I think though, that *Riven* fulfils the promise of *Myst*. They kept their word. Whether anyone remembers the vow... well, that's show biz. Not everybody cares.

It grew late. I interviewed the three men separately one more time. I asked them each the same two questions. Rand was first. His office was upstairs; the diffuse northern light bathed the pines outside in a wintry haze. I asked what the most frustrating time was in the course of the development of *Riven*.

"There are always frustrations. There was a lot of detail work that I just didn't see the necessity of. I'm not an artist; I've said that a thousand times. If we'd run out of money, we might have gotten divorced as brothers. It was tense. But we were lucky; we didn't run out of money. And there was this pseudo-commitment on dates. It wasn't publicly announced or anything, but I asked Robyn when it was going to be done and he said, well, Christmas of 1996. So I went to Broderbund, I put my good name on the line, and then it didn't happen, and it was like..." His voice trailed off; he was unwilling to complete the simile. "So I had to say, this time the date is going to be real, right? RIGHT?" His hands were out and encircling an imaginary neck. "Right?" He relaxed, recovered his unflappability.

So what about the future?

"I think we'll all take a break, and then I think we'll all do something together. I hope so, if you want to know my preference. But I'd be happy either way. Cyan could become a skeleton kind of thing, and I could do that. But Robyn is a world-builder; that's what he does. I'll wait and see what world Robyn wants to build."

Sure. But let's suppose worst-case scenario. Let's say this thing sells 50,000 copies total and we all have to get real jobs, what then? When times are tough, it is easier to love the Lord my God with all my heart, and that is the most important thing. I've said that before. And I know. I will know no matter what that *Riven* is the very best that we can do." He leaned back and laced his hands behind his head. "Is that cool, or what?"

Robyn was next. His office was in the basement, mostly underground, dim and cavernous. The space in front of the visitor's chair was littered with half-formed clay animals. Behind him, running along a shelf, was a large collection of plastic *Star Wars* toys.

I asked him about frustrations, and he knitted his brow, almost like a comic strip character demonstrating concentration.

"Well, this last push to get the walk-through ready for Broderbund; that was terribly frustrating. It just seemed like we were never going to get everything right. Everyone worked late, and we kept going over the same stuff. I know there were other frustrating parts, but that's what I remember. Now it feels like the end is in sight. We may actually do this."

He grinned. "All the time. *All the time*. Two years into this project, we had absolutely nothing to show for it. I'm sure that bothered Broderbund quite a bit. I read somewhere that *Star Wars* was the same; that halfway through they had nothing they could really show anybody. I love *Riven*, though. It's the best thing I've ever created in my life. I think it's good, in all the senses of that word. But there is still a problem as long as the

main character, the protagonist, is the player of the game. In the middle of the climax - our great message to the world - our main character might walk out of the room!"

And what about the future? Will there be a *Myst II*?

"Not with me involved in it, that's for sure. No sir. Not that universe again. We've done that."

Rand said that you like to build worlds, maybe that you need to build worlds.

"I'm not sure that's true. What I do know is that I don't just want to entertain people. I know it's possible that art can change people's lives. That's what I want to do."

Richard was last. His office was the mirror image of Robyn's, but much starker. His visitor's chair was ancient, wooden and uncomfortable; he bought it during his texture-hunting trip to Santa Fe. It does not encourage anyone to stay long.

I asked him about frustrations.

"Well, first you have to realize that this was the best working experience I ever had. That doesn't mean I want to stay in Spokane, because I don't. I think all the imports had a hard time adjusting here. But this was still a great place to work.

"When I was at ILM, before I went down to Disney, I worked on *Innerspace*. I really worked hard on it, and it was a piece of junk. I worked really hard on *Willow*, too, and then somehow when they started shooting the picture in London, hardly anything of what I did was used. It was hard for me to work on little pieces of film; I never knew what would end up in the movie. So if you want frustration, that's frustration. There is a level of... seriousness and sincerity that I found here that I haven't found anywhere else. Maybe being in Spokane was part of that, much as I hate to say it. Maybe this will turn out to be the best three years of my working life."

He stopped and stared at his desktop. His finger rubbed that place behind his left ear. The silence went on longer than silences usually do. Perhaps he was thinking about what we had just said and what that meant for his life; perhaps he was thinking about a wholly different problem.

"The frustration came halfway through. I realized that, in this method of story-telling, it is just very hard to evoke an emotional response. This is a very peculiar form, very nonlinear, obviously nonlinear, and it just does not lend itself to real narrative. It can't make you cry. I don't care if it's *Bambi*, a movie can make you cry, and then it can provide resurrection and exalt you. That's something we can't do."

Can't do or can't do yet?

"I have no idea. I might move to Northern California, to the wine country maybe. Or back to Los Angeles. I'll move, anyway. But beyond that, I have no idea."

It was almost dark. I put my notebook in my bag, walked up the back stairs, past the receptionist's desk with its bowl of hard candy (same bowl, I think), out through the trompe l'oeil portal, out to the car. Ten minutes later I was at Comfort World, the old Cyan offices where, a year before, I had encountered the twisty darkness in which some of *Riven* had been created, and had seen evidence of what may have been a rift, in which two brothers quarrelled while making a game whose name means "split." I was not sure why I was there, peering into the front window in the fading light.

The glass was hard and cool against my forehead. I felt the wind curl around my neck. I listened to the buzz and roar of traffic. I felt as though I'd watched someone else's dream, some long night of revelry featuring Jesus and fire marbles and polygons and burgers of the universe, and it was over now. But look, they seem to have left a message...

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