



Guerrillas in the Myst

In *Myst*, brothers Rand and Robyn Miller have given us the first CD-ROM smash hit.

By Jon Carroll

The doorman at Arthur Siegel's office building thought he was the most dedicated lawyer in San Francisco. Siegel would work long into the night; sometimes he would walk uncertainly out into the gray streets just before dawn, toting a heavy briefcase and squinting against the glare. But Siegel was not doing legal work in his ninth-floor office.

He was playing *Myst*.

"It was addictive," he says, "but I knew it had an end. I was pretty sure, anyway. Most of the time. The only problem was when I began clicking on things in real life. I'd see a manhole cover and think, 'Hmmm, that looks pretty interesting,' and my forefinger would start to twitch. And then I'd realize, 'No, it's real life. Real life is the thing that happens in between *Myst*.'"

Myst is a phenomenon like no other in the world of CD-ROM. That's not a remarkable statement; CD-ROM is too new to have already had many phenomena. Mostly it's had complaints and dire predictions -- it's too slow, it's too expensive, it's too clunky. Junk has been hurled onto the market; every fast-buck artist with a pressing machine and access to fancy graphics has been throwing stuff against the wall and hoping some of it turns into money. As of the end of 1993, there were only about 3.5 million CD-ROM drives in private hands, according to InfoTech, a market research firm in Woodstock, Vermont. The *Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous Cookbook* is just not the computer application America is interested in.

But now there is *Myst*. The publicity at its launch was nothing special; the real selling tool was word of mouth, mostly on the Net. It won three major awards at the Software Publishers Association symposium in March (best user interface, best fantasy/role playing adventure program, critic's-choice award for best consumer program), and its reputation increased. Jon Katz gave it a rave in his *Rolling Stone* column; *Myst* games began growing legs and walking off the shelf. Hit! Major hit! Within four months of its release, *Myst* became the largest selling bit of software in the Broderbund line -- 200,000 units sold by late April 1994, and the curve is still rising steeply.

The reason for all the success was stunning in its simplicity: *Myst* was good. *Myst* was better than anything anyone had ever seen. *Myst* was beautiful, complicated, emotional,

dark, intelligent, absorbing. It was the only thing like itself; it had invented its own category.

And it was not from any one of the big companies -- any of the majors (Spectrum HoloByte, Electronic Arts, LucasArts Entertainment) who for years had been trying to create a game that adults could somehow relate to. Myst was created by a company called Cyan Inc., which had previously produced only a few well-received kids' games, including Cosmic Osmo. Nobody knew much about Cyan; people thought it was up in Portland, or maybe Seattle. Some kind of in-the-giant-shadow-of-Microsoft kind of deal.

The truth turned out to be a lot stranger.

I checked into the Spokane Sheraton at about six in the evening. Spokane is not the lush damp part of Washington state that everyone knows; Spokane is eastern Washington -- the high plains, hot in the summer and bitter in the winter. It is semi-arid, as close as you get to the Old West while still having cable.

My room was on the third floor, overlooking some large, ugly, and noisy ventilating ducts. I called the desk to get my room changed, and then I called Cyan.

"I'll be a little late," I said. "My room is right next to some ventilator ducts."

"Oh, we planned it that way," said the voice on the other end of the phone. "We wanted you to visit Ductland."

"Should I click on the ducts?" I asked.

"It's not that easy," said the voice on the other end of the phone.

The game of Myst starts on a place called Myst Island. The player is given virtually no information. No premise, no nothing. In a vague sort of way, the player understands the task: find out what happened.

There are buildings on the island -- a planetarium, a library, a clock tower, a log cabin, a spaceship. There are objects of uncertain import within the buildings. There are hints and allegations. There is the sound of the wind. For a long time, nothing seems to make sense. All of a sudden, a door of perception opens a crack. Information floods in, too much information. Entire universes become available.

It is a game because there are puzzles to be solved. It is also more than a game, because there is a story that unfolds within the puzzles. It is ultimately the story you must decipher; the endgame is all plot, no puzzles.

The game is remarkable for its sense of control and mood; it is internally consistent in a subtle and layered way. There are interlocking themes: sound, water, gears, energy. The interface is transparent and minimal; it works like a glove. There are no packs or bags or baskets; players carry almost nothing with them. They use what they find on the ground; mostly they just use their minds.

The textures in Myst are important: light reflecting off dull metal; door handles and wall hangings; the grain of the wood; the deep shadows in narrow passageways. There is lots of animation, but mostly it does not dazzle; it is like careful writing, always furthering the plot or the mood. There are no dialog boxes, no reminders of the hand of the creators. There is only the creation.

People do not die in Myst, nor are they killed; yet it is sometimes a very scary game. There is no way to get trapped in Myst; yet it can induce uneasy feelings of panic in the unwary. It's as harmless as a walk in the woods, which is to say, not harmless at all.

In a sense, Myst is a beginning. There are many things wrong with it, many things that the creators would change. But it is the first artifact of CD-ROM technology that suggests that a new art form might very well be plausible, a kind of puzzle box inside a novel inside a painting, only with music. Or something.

I drove due north on Division Street to get to Cyan's own little version of a World Headquarters. I passed mile after mile of fast-food outlets, brake-relining emporiums, gun shops, strip malls, big malls, multiplexes, apartment complexes, bait stores. Beyond all the commerce, I came to the open prairie again, scrub pine and tilled earth. I passed a sign that said "Knopp Taxidermy Studio-School. American Fur."

On top of the sign was a stuffed zebra.

Cyan World Headquarters was even farther along the road.

There once was a preacher named Ron Miller, who had four sons. Miller was a nondenominational preacher who journeyed from independent Bible church to independent Bible church, in cities and states all over the country and occasionally further -- New Mexico, Texas, Philadelphia, Hawaii, Haiti, Seattle, wherever the Lord needed him and a congregation was available to pay his modest salary.

Ron Miller did not believe in choking off doubt with prayer; Ron Miller believed in vigorous debate. His sons could speak any idea, test any belief; they were free to question, and they were free to roam.

Maybe that's why, in the end, they stayed close to home.

Rand Miller, the oldest son, spent his adolescence in Albuquerque, New Mexico. His high school was just a block from the University of New Mexico; after school he'd walk over to the computer science building, hack into the system, and play Lunar Lander.

The third of the four sons, Robyn, didn't care about computers. Robyn was seven years younger than Rand, more introverted. He painted and played guitar. In 1987, Robyn was at the University of Washington, telling everyone he was an anthropology major and spending a lot of time drawing sketches of fantastic lands. Rand, meanwhile, had gone back to Texas to work as a computer programmer at the Citizens National Bank of Henderson, which is closer to Shreveport, Louisiana, than to any Texan metropolis.

One day Rand called up Robyn, the younger brother he did not know all that well. He had an idea for a computer game for kids, and he thought maybe Robyn could illustrate it. Sure, send it along, said Robyn, not entirely clear what Rand was talking about. Robyn took Rand's narrative and turned it into an environment. "It's better that way," Robyn told Rand. Rand agreed. The older brother deferred to the younger brother. A partnership was formed.

The game became known as The Manhole; it won the Software Publishers Association award in 1988 for the best new use of a computer. This amazed Robyn; it was a "new use" because he didn't know any better. Rand and Robyn realized they had a profession. They set up shop in Spokane, where their father had a perhaps-permanent appointment as the minister at an independent Bible church. Rand (who is now 35) and his wife, Debbie, had some daughters; Robyn (who is now 27) and his wife, Beth, had a son. One

Sunday at church, they met Chris Brandkamp, who became their business manager and sound-effects wizard. Chris was also a carpenter and woodworker; he built Cyan World Headquarters, which is a garage-shaped building next to his house in the very corner of a rural subdivision.

Rand and Robyn started thinking about doing a game for adults. It had to be -- well, better than the other stuff out there. It had to be clean and tight. At about that time, the big rumor was that Nintendo was going to come out with a home CD-ROM system that plugged into the TV -- a technology some called "TV-ROM." They sold the TV-ROM rights to their as-yet-unnamed game to the Sunsoft Corp. of Aichi, Japan, and used the money to buy a few new bits of equipment. Nothing fancy -- they created the whole thing on a hypercard stack pushed and prodded in odd and unusual ways. Myst, the ultimate garage-rock, surrealistic eater-of-worlds, was born.

The TV-ROM thing didn't happen. Almost as an afterthought, the Millers sold the PC rights to Brøderbund.

Show time! Fabulous Facts About Myst:

The name comes in part from the word "mystery" but may also have been inspired by Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, which Robyn was reading when he and his brother started the project. The Verne influence can be seen in the Victorian trappings in several of the rooms -- most specifically the underwater library in the Stoneship Age, which looks very much like Captain Nemo's cabin.

The books in the library were all written by Ryan Miller, the younger brother of Rand and Robyn, who at the time was a senior at Spokane High School.

The tower on the island was originally going to look much more like the Tower of Babel, with a long path winding around and around to the top. Click, click, click, click....

The noise of the fire in the boiler in the log cabin was created by driving very slowly over the stones in the driveway at Cyan World Headquarters and recording the result. Why? A recording of a fire burning does not sound like a fire burning. But the coolest noise in the game, the sound the squares on the grid in the fireplace make when they are appearing or disappearing, is actually air being released from the compressor tank usually attached to an industrial-strength staple gun.

No one is exactly sure what's in the box in Achenar's hidden chamber in the Mechanical Age. Its graphic artist, Chuck Carter (he also did the Selenetic Age), put it in during the final deadline crunch, and no one bothered to ask. It's a dark furry thing with odd highlights; Carter later said it was "a rotting monkey's head."

Robyn Miller wrote and performed the 40 minutes of music that goes along with Myst.

The correct dates on the console in the planetarium do have significance; the 1984 date, for instance, is Rand Miller's wedding date -- except he got the year wrong.

Most people never even see several scenes among Myst's more than 2,500 rendered images and don't know that you can walk all the way around the fish-shaped mazaecraft in the Selenetic Age; you can take the elevator to the top of the tree and get a lovely view of Myst Island. They are both cul-de-sacs in terms of the design of the game, but the view from the top of the tree is very lovely.

Myst is designed to be played in 40 hours by the "average" first-time player. Rand Miller once did it in two hours.

The Millers refer to the planetarium as "the dentist's chair room." The noise the console makes when the dates are changed -- that whirring camera-like noise -- is in fact the slightly distorted sound of a dentist's drill.

The give-away white page at the beginning of the game was originally going to be hidden in the forest, within a specific tree; the puzzle would have required serious directional skills. The idea was abandoned because Robyn didn't want to draw 80 more views of trees.

In the Stoneship Age, the buttons were originally located in the stern of the vessel; the telescope was in the prow. It was changed partly because all those boards over water looked so neat.

When the large ship is raised, sea gulls can be seen to fly through the mast. In the language of computer programming, this is called a "mistake."

The maze in the Selenetic Age is the most complained about of all the puzzles: it, like so many of them, is thematically related to the Age itself, but people usually don't make the connection. Instead, they make a very very big map.

The last addition to the basic scheme was the underground chamber by the dock. Test groups of players were finding the beginning of the game too difficult, so the entire superstructure of extra initial hints was added. The chamber was born of the necessity to dumb Myst down a little.

Major bugs persist in the Mac and PC versions of the game -- and different bugs. In the Mac version, the tower in the Mechanical Age does not rotate to the third island. In the PC version, the text on the two halves of the note that eventually lead you to the white page describe the procedure exactly backwards. (If you're having trouble with those bits -- or with anything else -- the Brøderbund help line at +1 (415) 382 4700 would be happy to help.)

Rand Miller looked instantly familiar; it took me a few moments to realize that I had seen his face in Myst itself -- he portrays Atrus, the father, the maker of Myst. It took me a minute more to realize he also plays Achenar, one of the two Mystian brothers. In person he has an open, pleasant face, a perpetual squint, a lazy manner.

As for Robyn Miller, he doesn't have his little GenX goatee any more but, yes, he's SIRRUS, brother to Achenar.

"We're kind of embarrassed about it," said Rand, speaking with a hint of Texas drawl. We were sitting in the Cyan World Headquarters conference room, one wall of which is a huge sheet of opaque plastic. The homemade table wobbled when one of us leaned on it too hard; a space heater whirred and coughed. Out the window were about 50 million trees.

"We're not really actors, but we didn't exactly have a lot of money or time when it came time to record the videos. So we just did it ourselves," Robyn said. He's taller than his brother and more intense; even in the quiet of rural Washington he seemed to vibrate slightly.

"People have said, you know, you're two brothers and you wrote this game about two brothers, so that must mean something. To be honest with you, it never occurred to us. That seems dumb, but it didn't. So it probably does mean something, but we don't know what it is."

The question "What could it mean?" merely prompted Rand and Robyn to look at each other.

Rand began: "Originally -"

"Originally," Robyn continued, "we were going to have a bad brother and a good brother, you know. But it seemed," he picked his words carefully, "less interesting." The brothers smiled at each other. I had no idea what they meant.

As we talked about the sensation the game has caused; it was clear that they have not really processed it. They have no real plans about what to do with the hundreds of thousands of dollars they have already earned; words fail them. A new vehicle? They've already gotten their high-powered SGI machine with the SoftImage graphics program: it can redraw an entire room from any perspective including upside down at the touch of a feather; it can animate 32 spheres falling from the Space Needle in a hurricane; it can ... Words don't fail them as they talk about what it can do.

"We're really isolated up here," said Robyn finally. "We're real glad, you know, that *Wired* came up here. We fight over the new issue when it comes in."

"Maybe you can afford two subscriptions now," I said.

They looked at each other. "That would be an idea," said Rand. They laughed at the concept, soon-to-be millionaires dipping into the corrupt world of multiple subscriptions.

When is *Myst II* coming out?

"We don't know," said Robyn. "We're not going to rush it. People might want that, but it's going to take as long as it takes. Besides, there's the novel first."

Rand explained: About halfway through the writing of *Myst*, it became clear that the brothers would need a document to keep the story and characters straight. The document grew more detailed. A lot of the unexplained things in the game (the maps and the needles in one of SIRRUS's cabinets; the weird cage in one of ACHENAR's secret rooms; the black ship; the parrot with the crank; the rambling narratives in the books in the library; the holograms littering the landscape) relate to what Hollywood calls the "back story," everything that happened before the movie started. The back story of *Myst* slowly grew to novel length; after the game was in the stores, the brothers turned the story into a manuscript. Now they want to publish it. They are not yet quite sure how to go about it.

Not much is known about *Myst II*, not even its true name. It will take place in a land called Equiquay, pronounced "equa-key," which is definitely not an island. There will be other lands as well. There will be more characters and more animation. Catherine may appear; SIRRUS and ACHENAR definitely will not.

"They're not dead, you know," Robyn said suddenly. "We were always very clear about that. They're just permanently trapped. No one dies in *Myst*."

"That was very important," said Rand. "We wanted to do something that didn't depend on violence. We have children. We have things that are important to us. We didn't want anything...." His voice trailed off. He looked at Robyn.

I thought I knew what that look meant. These are preacher's sons who still go to church every Sunday; they don't smoke or drink or cuss. They don't preach either. They didn't want to come on too strong with the values stuff, particularly to the guy from *Wired* who probably had somewhat complicated ideas about the sovereignty of Jesus Christ.

In my notebook I had a question from Kevin Kelly, the executive editor of *Wired*. It was not a question I had planned to ask, but many unexpected things had happened. "How has designing a whole world changed your idea of God?"

Rand puffed his cheeks and blew. "Well, we could talk about that for hours. We thought about it a lot. I guess the simple way is to say that we know how much work it took to create *Myst*, and how puny and unreal it is compared to the real world, and therefore how miraculous all of creation is. Matching our experience ... it just makes us realize how great God is."

Robyn grinned. He believed what Rand had said, and yet he believed something else, something not quite as pious yet also true: "And sometimes late at night, after I had done something really cool, I would look down on my creation and I would say, 'It is good.'"

After our meeting, I followed Robyn back to his house to look at the fancy new hardware he'd gotten. The woods and the subdivisions fell away; we drove on straight roads through farmland, plowed earth soon to be planted with wheat and beans. Mount Spokane rose on the horizon; snow covered its summit. There were few other cars; there were few other creatures anywhere.

I thought that things keep changing, that the engine of democratization sitting on so many desktops is already out of control, is already creating new players in a new game. It's not just Silicon Valley anymore; it's not just MIT and Berkeley; it's not just anything. Anyone with guts and talent can be a player; lines of code don't ask about religion, political opinions, taste in clothing or music. We are used to the idea that rebels can find the cracks in the new systems; we are not used to the idea that rebellion doesn't matter anymore. It's pure imagination now, unfettered by trend or anti-trend; it can happen anywhere the hardware lives.

Moral co-evolution; that's one thing that's happening. Like others before them (Dante, Milton, Blake), the Millers encountered their dark sides even while searching for the light. They discovered the fascination of danger and disgrace. The universe of *Myst* may be miraculous, but it is not benign. The tale embedded in the game of *Myst* has several endings; the official "right ending" represents the triumph of The Good Father, but it is ultimately not very interesting. The "wrong" ending is much more fun and much more cathartic. Soon there will be another world to create, and the lesson of Dante will still apply: Paradise can get tiresome; Inferno is where the action is. Was there art in Eden before the apple was eaten? Maybe not.

The road plunged into a low pillow of hills; a sign on the right said "Pavement Ends." Robyn took a sharp right and bumped up a steep driveway. I followed and parked next to the long, low house. Sheep were grazing in the

front yard. It was, in a curious and perhaps deceptive way, almost heartbreaking. This small family on the edge of nowhere, teetering on the brink of fame, money, expectations, doubt, temptation, and the loathed and desired object of all American

tales: success itself. If this whole movie was an inspiring tale of values maintained, what did the sequel look like?

I stood and stared at the sheep; they stared back. Robyn came up and stood beside me. The wind rattled the stand of ponderosa pines near the house.

"Sheep," I said.

He said nothing.

"What does it feel like," I said, "knowing that so many people are inside your mind, following the trail you set, trying to learn to think like you?"

"I don't know," he answered.

*Jon Carroll (jrc@well.sf.ca.us) is the author of *Near-Life Experiences*, a collection of his columns from the *San Francisco Chronicle*.*

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