The MYST PHENOMENON

The first time I encountered Myst was at the 1994 Digital World Expo in Los Angeles. A back room, away from the noise of the main convention halls, was lined with software booths where companies were promoting and hyping their latest products. Among them one vendor area stood out not for what it had, but for what it lacked: the lighting was minimal, almost dark, and there was no one to answer questions, not even a booth for that matter, just three white pedestals with computers on them, running the same program. The only signage was a white card that simply said “MYST” with no further explanation. Each computer displayed a different screen from the game, wherever the last participant had left off. Drawn by curiosity, conference attendees wandered into the quiet space and attempted to find out what exactly this low-profile piece of software was, an experience very much like the game itself, with no directions or obvious objective, just the free exploration of a contemplative landscape. And I (along with many others, no doubt) was hooked.

In 1993, the same year Jurassic Park brought photorealistic computer-generated creatures to the big screen and the World Wide Web became worldwide on computer screens, Myst appeared and quickly became the best-selling computer game of all time. (Of course, to call Myst a “game” implies a broad definition of the word, as Myst is perhaps better described as a single-user interactive virtual environment; there was no term to cover it at the time, and game was more specific than software.) Initially inspired in part by Jules Verne’s novel The Mysterious Island (1874), at least for its tone and setting, Myst was created by Rand and Robyn Miller’s company Cyan (now Cyan Worlds) and released by Brøderbund on September 24, 1993, for the Macintosh, with an IBM-compatible version available the fol-
lowing March. By April 1994 it had already sold 200,000 copies, a phenom-
enal amount considering that most CD-ROMs of the time were fortunate
to sell in the tens of thousands. By January 1995 Myst had sold 500,000 cop-
ies, and sales would reach a million five months later. By June 2001 it had
reached 5.5 million copies.¹ With continuing sales that kept it on the charts,
Myst remained the best-selling computer game until 2002, when The Sims
would overtake it with 6.3 million units sold.²

Nine years is an amazingly long time to remain number one in a
medium that is growing so fast, both aesthetically and technologically.
What accounts for Myst’s longevity? Myst was, at the time, a unique com-
puter game experience, and its lush (for 1993) imagery gave it a different
feel and more atmosphere than the typical video games of the day. Perhaps
as important was Myst’s crossover appeal. The success of many of the best-
selling games throughout video game history, including PONG (1972), Pac-
Man (1980), Super Mario Bros. (1985), Myst (1993), and The Sims (2000),
has been due in part to their widespread appeal and ability to reach people
outside of the typical audience in the video game market. Myst, like the
other four games just mentioned, was also nonviolent and easy to play, and,
unlike many games of its day, it was available on a variety of platforms,
including Sony PlayStation, Sega Genesis, Atari Jaguar, and both Macintosh
and IBM computers. Myst’s system requirements allowed it to be played on
a wide variety of machines; since its images were all pre-rendered, high pro-
cessor speeds and graphics cards were not as crucial as they were for games
that rendered their graphics in real time.

Myst’s approach to graphics was another reason for its success. With
all its imagery pre-rendered, Myst could offer beautiful graphics, allowing
Robyn Miller’s art background to come through in the play of light, shadow,
and texture, despite the constraints imposed by 8-bit color and dithering.
The rather limited use of animation and the slow, contemplative pace of
the game meant that the imagery would be more closely scrutinized than
it would in a game with fast action and quick-changing scenery, and Myst’s
images held up to that scrutiny. Four years later Riven: The Sequel to Myst
would raise the standard even more, and later versions of Myst, Myst Mas-
terpiece Edition and realMYST, featured graphical improvements that made
the original Myst graphics seem crude and static by comparison, making it
hard to remember just how groundbreaking Myst’s look was in 1993.

Not only did Myst have good graphics, it had more than 2,500 screens’
worth of imagery, which helped make up for their stasis. This profu-
sion became possible through the use of CD-ROM technology, and *Myst* became the first big hit to appear in the medium. For some people it was one of the main reasons to buy a computer with a CD-ROM drive. *Myst* was well suited to CD-ROM technology, due to the fact that the running of its program did not require continuous accessing of the CD-ROM, which is still, even today, a relatively slow process requiring pauses for loading to be worked into the gaming experience. *Riven*, with over 4,000 screens of pre-rendered graphics and video sequences on five compact discs, also worked the disc changes into gameplay by dividing its terrain into islands that could reside separately on different discs.

And finally, *Myst*’s longevity was also due in part to a price-reduction scheme that kept broadening its market and kept its sales on the charts. In its first year or so of release, *Myst* cost around $64, a price it would continue to command while initial sales were strong (see the figures mentioned above). In 1996 the price was reduced to $50, and in November of that year it was slashed even further to $25, an act that, coupled with interest in *Riven*’s impending release, renewed interest in the game and led to a surge in sales. Riven and *Myst III: Exile* followed a similar pricing scheme, and by early 2004 one could buy the *Myst 10th Anniversary DVD Edition*, containing full versions of *Myst Masterpiece Edition, Riven*, and *Myst III: Exile*, for under $20. On Amazon.com new, unopened copies of the original *Myst* were selling for as low as $2.55, and on eBay, used copies were selling for a penny each.

The success of *Myst* spawned not only revised versions and sequels, but an array of other merchandise as well: soundtracks for *Myst, Riven, Myst III: Exile*, and *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*; three novels based on the *Myst* storyline; *From Myst to Riven*, a coffee table book on the making of the games; the Prima and Bradygames “Strategy Guides” for the games (something of a misnomer, seeing as none of the games involves strategy); shirts available directly from Cyan; and even *Myst: The Puzzling New Board Game Adventure*, which curiously is not mentioned on the “Goods” page of Cyan’s website. *Myst* also spawned its share of imitators, none of which was able to match *Myst*’s success. Most importantly, though, was *Myst*’s raising of the bar concerning graphics, sound, ambience, and overall experience in the adventure game. *Myst* showed that puzzle-based games that favored contemplation over action were not only possible but could even be profitable, if the design was good and attention was paid to detail.

While I will be referring to *Myst* as a game, some may question its status
as such, but with its single-player environment in which the player explores, solves puzzles, and uses various objects and tools to achieve certain sub-goals, Myst’s main objective places the game squarely into the already-existing genre of adventure games (which fits it best, although Myst can also be considered a puzzle game). To fully appreciate Myst’s accomplishments, however, we should first consider its place in the history of the genre.