Myst and Riven

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In both Kadrey’s *From Myst to Riven* book and an interview in *Wired* magazine, the Miller brothers make the analogy that *Myst* is to *Riven* what Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* was to *The Lord of the Rings*. Likewise, the idea of Descriptive Books and linking books that link to alternate worlds in the Terokh Jeruth, the “great tree of possibility,” is analogous to the process of subcreation (since they are familiar with Tolkien’s work, it is quite possible that the Miller brothers are also aware of Tolkien’s ideas of subcreation).

*Subcreation* is Tolkien’s term for the production of an imaginary world. As both a Roman Catholic whose faith provided a background and a context for his work, as well as a philologist for whom language and verbal precision was important, Tolkien, while discussing authorial invention in “On Fairy-Stories,” wanted to distinguish between the kind of creation done by God and the kind done by human beings. Being created in the image of God, human beings also have a desire to create, but they cannot create *ex nihilo*, from nothing, the way that God can. Instead, they are limited to using the preexisting concepts found in God’s creation, and coming up with new combinations of them that explore the realm of possibilities, many of which do not exist. Tolkien notes that the separation of the adjective from the noun is one of the ways this recombining becomes possible:

> When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter’s power . . . We may put a deadly green on a man’s face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of
the cold worm. But in such “fantasy” as it is called, new form is made . . . 
Man becomes a sub-creator.¹

Thus the term subcreator means one who “creates under” the Creator and within the bounds and possibilities inherent in that Creation which He has made. As Christians, the Miller brothers likewise did not want to claim that the D’ni were creating ex nihilo, like God, and so as the D’ni mythology developed, instead of creating the worlds written in them, the Descriptive Books and linking books are said to connect to preexisting worlds, which exist before the D’ni books describe them and link to them. This was not originally the case, however, but was changed as the world of the D’ni and its mythology developed. The “great tree of possibility” of which they are a part is the same realm of possibilities that Tolkien describes, also using the concepts of language and writing to reach them.

To explain the change from “created worlds” to “preexisting worlds” diegetically, it is said that Gehn believed he was actually creating worlds (especially because he was able to develop his test Ages, books that linked to preexisting Ages that matched his descriptions), but that later on, after he had begun learning the Art of writing Ages, Atrus discovered that this was not the case (the revelation comes on pages 203–4 of paperback edition of The Book of Atrus). These changes, to bring Myst’s mythology more in line with Christian theology, are similar to the subtle changes Tolkien made to his world to bring it more in line with Christian theology.

Thus another important analogy arises here, in which we can compare the D’ni writers to the Miller brothers themselves. Both are the authors of the worlds or “Ages” found in Myst and Riven, and both are creating the media that can “transport” an audience into those worlds, either by the D’ni Descriptive Books and linking books or the Millers’ CD-ROMs and novels (the placing of one’s hand on a linking book image is analogous to the CD-ROM interface, which involves pointing and clicking on an image [and with a cursor shaped like a hand]). The CD-ROMs also contain the very precise descriptions, written in computer code, that give life to all the objects in the worlds they contain. Like the D’ni language, the computer code is unlike spoken language, extremely precise in its phrasing, and must be free of contradictions in order to avoid strange results or unstable worlds. The Age of Riven itself, then, is the point where these two types of writing overlap, since it is the product of both, one in the Primary World and one in the secondary world. Atrus, Gehn, Catherine, and the D’ni are
all subcreated subcreators, giving the world of the D’ni a nice self-reflexivity that allows it to discuss and comment on the very process that brought it into being. The expansion of the world of the D’ni, its roots and branches into the past and future, found in Riven and the various other games, novels, and so forth, is also the expansion of the underlying ideas and themes, as well as the storylines.

Riven is the story of Gehn’s desire to be a god, lording it over the indigenous people of the age, as he tries to reestablish the D’ni guilds and empire, of which he will be the ruler. His hold on the people of Riven is one based on fear, not on love, and some of the villagers have rebelled against Gehn, becoming the Black Moiety,² with their own Age, Tay, written for them by Catherine. Whereas in Myst the greed of Sirrus and Achenar was for material wealth culled from the various Ages, Gehn’s greed goes beyond that to desiring to be lord, owner, and (he thinks) author of the Ages. The D’ni books become a source of power for Gehn, whereas in Myst they were primarily just a means of transportation, a kind of portable portal. Imaging technology is another tool used for intimidation; Achenar’s temple in the Channelwood Age, with its holographic imager, is just a smaller version of Gehn’s temple and imager, which also uses the wahrk statuary and imagery as a means of scaring the villagers. Whereas the design of the bedrooms of Sirrus and Achenar revealed something about them, almost everything on Riven gives some insight into Gehn’s character. As an expansion of the Miller brothers’ subcreated world, Riven uses every detail to add to the world and enhance the player’s experience.³

Characters are also more developed in Riven. This is due to the backstory provided by the novels, as well as the journals and the details in the game itself. In Myst we learn about Sirrus and Achenar from the red and blue books, their bedrooms and notes, and what Atrus has to say about them, but in Riven we learn much more about Gehn through similar means. His buildings, the temple, throne room, schoolroom, Gate Room, workroom, office, and bedroom, all convey insight into Gehn’s character. While most of it suggests a dark megalomania, Gehn’s bedroom, the most private room that the player gains access to late in the game, conveys a more vulnerable, emotional side. Here we find images of his wife and father lovingly displayed, and a moving image sequence of his wife preserved on an imager. In his journal we find, “It’s late and I cannot sleep. I’ve lost so much in my life. My people, my father, my son, and you, my wife—Keta, you were the only true kindness I have ever known. Watching you flicker in the imager . . .
I sometimes wonder if you were real. If I could restore your life with my pen, I would do so in an instant, and leave the rest of the world to their own wretched fate.” As Stewart Bradford has pointed out, the handwriting is also unusually shaky, revealing an emotional state, and a tiny round water stain on the page appears to be a tear. Looking at Gehn’s journals, Gehn is evidently losing his grasp of English or is a bad speller; in the workroom journal he uses “discreet” where he means discrete, and in his diary he has “whark” instead of wahrk, and “who’s ignorance” instead of whose ignorance.

Just as in Myst, a father-son relationship is the source of the conflict in Riven. Gehn and Atrus, as father and son, have much in common; both desire to restore D’ni, to marry Catherine, and to save Riven from its inevitable demise and collapse. It is in their motives and methods that they differ. Both fail in their attempts, although Atrus does marry Catherine, and Gehn’s mock guilds get far enough that Catherine is able to write an Age. Interestingly, it does at first appear that Atrus is harsher with his sons than Gehn is with him; while Atrus burns the books that are the one-man prisons containing his sons at the end of Myst, Gehn does not kill Atrus but imprisons him in the room below K’veer, and even gives him access to Riven. To be fair, it is later revealed that Atrus did not kill his sons, as they return in Myst IV: Revelation, and Gehn does kill Atrus (or at least shoots him) in some of the bad endings of Riven. Gehn is pride-filled, arrogant, and self-centered, while Atrus is humble and more concerned with doing what is right or best for others. Atrus, however, is not without flaws, which are alluded to on the Myst IV: Revelation website. On one webpage a picture of Atrus appears and in voice-over he refers to what he did to his sons: “I do not discuss my own actions that day or the rage that I felt when I burned the two linking books that ensnared them. Some people believe my sons died in those fires, but the truth is, they did not.” It could be, too, that a loophole has allowed the story of Sirrus and Achenar to continue, even though Myst seemed to have closed off these possibilities.

The expansion of the Miller brothers’ subcreated world also takes place graphically. Riven had more images (4,000, compared to Myst’s 2,500, according to Cyan), and higher resolution imagery (608 by 392 pixels, compared to 544 by 332 pixels for the original version of Myst, and oddly enough, 544 by 333 pixels for Myst Masterpiece Edition). Like the later versions of Myst, Riven also had greater color depth, and with more color gradations (along with higher spatial resolution) greater visual depth on the z-axis could be achieved.
And *Riven’s* imagery does contain staging in depth, even more than *Myst’s* imagery did. In the view from Temple Island in figure 16, for example, one can see Jungle Island in the distance, desaturated to give a feeling of aerial perspective. Three maglev tramlines can be seen at varying distances, the farthest away one visible only as a series of support towers rising from the water. Although *Myst* featured staging in depth (for example, the library and tower can be seen through the trees from the far side of the island by the clock tower), distances were limited by the fact that each island is in a separate Age. Views in *Riven* often include one or more of the other islands in the background, requiring greater depth and more render time for views (fortunately, the imagery is all pre-rendered) due to more computer modeling within each view (one of several reasons why we probably will never get realRIVEN). The effect on gameplay is greater detail, depth, and sense of interconnectedness in the game’s world, and a more immersive experience.