Myst and Riven

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Like Myst, the box for Riven shows sample images from the game, and text that extols the game’s advances (except for the “Collector’s Edition” box for Riven, which has a wood grain background and a primitive-style drawing of Atrus and the book falling). The main image on the cover, however, is from the game but curiously not from the Age of Riven itself; it is the rebel hive from the Age of Tay, which the player will not see until well into the game. Opening the box, one finds the album of five CDs that make up the game (except in the case of the DVD version, which is all on a single disc). Each CD has a jacket with what looks like a stained glass window of an event involving Gehn and his powers, which we later learn were created by Gehn to intimidate the villagers (we will see the images again inside the beetles in the Gate Room). The instruction booklet for Riven, like Myst’s booklet, does not reveal much of the game at all, though it does remind the player of where Myst left off, has details on installation and troubleshooting, four pages of credits (which also appear at the end of the game), and, at the beginning of the book, a “Please do not make illegal copies of this software” page. Little icons of animals are also present in the book (the ones that appear on the stones in the Moiety Cave), which already suggest that we will encounter more life on Riven than in the relatively lonely world of Myst.¹

Entering the game, after the studio logos (both of which are more grand in scale than the ones preceding Myst), we encounter the pretitle sequence. Atrus is at his desk in the K’veer prison room in D’ni, where we last saw him in Myst. He updates us on the story, giving us a journal (which contains more exposition on events leading up to the present situation), and a one-man prison book that appears to be a linking book back to D’ni, which the player is told to use to capture Gehn. Atrus then holds the linking book
for us until the image within it fills the screen, and then the title “Riven” zooms toward us with enticing title music. Arriving on Riven, the animation continues as the bars of a cage close into place in front of us, a guard takes the prison book, a Moiety scout shoots a dart at the guard and takes the book, frees us from the cage, and disappears. We are left to explore the world of Riven.

A complete description of the backstory requires the reading of Atrus’s journal, Catherine’s journal, and Gehn’s two journals, found in his workroom and bedroom, and is too detailed to be recounted here. Unlike in Myst, the Riven player clearly has two objectives: capture Gehn and rescue Catherine. From the beginning of the game, the story, in which the player takes part, runs roughly as follows: eventually the player will find the way to Tay, the rebel Age that Catherine has written for the Moiety, where the prison book will be returned with a note and journal from Catherine. With the prison book the player will have to find Gehn, who claims to have repented (thus setting up a situation similar to Myst, in which the player must decide whom to believe, although there is no other evidence in Gehn’s favor). Gehn takes the prison book, which he believes may be a linking book back to D’ni, and asks the player to link through first, producing the best moment of decision in the game, and the only one with something of a time pressure. Remembering how the prison books worked in Myst is helpful here; in the earlier game the player’s entering of a prison book could free the person captured within it. The player, then, must enter the book, and wait for Gehn to follow, which frees the player. Once Gehn is captured, the player then gains access to the island where Catherine is being held prisoner. Once she is rescued, the player need only signal Atrus by opening the star fissure, and the game ends happily. (Basically, you get to the happy ending by doing exactly what Atrus asked you to do.)

Of course every step of the way is much more difficult than it sounds; learning the lay of the land, how to get around, how things work, and how to power and turn on machinery is where the majority of the challenges of the game are to be found. The islands and their machinery are all interconnected, so solving the puzzles is more complicated than in Myst, where every Age contains all the clues for the puzzles of that Age (with the exception of the sounds indicating direction used in both the Mechanical and Selenitic Ages). But this is where Riven excels in its design; and furthermore, almost every puzzle is integrated into the game’s world and storyline in a plausible manner (some of their purposes become clearer after reading the
journals). The clues for the major puzzles of the game are so distributed throughout the islands that one has to explore much of the islands before one is able to unravel them. Turning on the power to the rotating domes, accessing the linking book to Tay, the opening of the star fissure, and other necessary activities all involve visits to multiple islands and the reading of the journals. Some of these interconnections will be examined in the sections to come.

_Riven_ also has 10 different endings. First, there is the happy ending mentioned above; trap Gehn, rescue Catherine, signal Atrus, and then everyone leaves Riven before it collapses (somehow, in the short time it takes you to link back to Temple Island and open the star fissure, Catherine, who had only a short head start, has ensured that all the villagers are able to get off Riven safely before its collapse). Next, there are two imperfect endings where you still get to leave Riven alive, but which are not as good as the happy ending. In one, you trap Gehn but do not rescue Catherine, then signal Atrus and leave Riven. As you fall, Atrus bemoans the loss of Catherine, and the ending is a sad one. An even more imperfect ending is one in which you open the star fissure and jump out at the beginning of the game. As Riven collapses (the same animation is used for all the “collapse” endings) the scene cuts to the jump into the fissure just as the sound of Atrus linking onto Riven begins, and the player departs without seeing anyone. Aside from performing a brute force search for the combination, this ending can only be seen by someone already familiar with _Riven_, since it requires a player to save a game before getting Catherine’s journal, to get the journal and find the fissure code within it, to know the D’ni numbering system in which the code appears, and then to restart the game in order to leave by the fissure without the prison book. The inclusion of this ending shows the Cyan team’s careful consideration of possibilities and outcomes in the game.

In another three endings, the game ends with the player trapped in the prison book. If you trap yourself in Tay, the rebels find you and leave you in the book. If you trap Gehn in the book and then free him and trap yourself (in anywhere but Tay), he thanks you for freeing him and leaves you in the book. If you trap Gehn, take the book to Tay and then release Gehn in Tay, he leaves you trapped in the book, and worse, you are responsible for having led Gehn to the rebel Age, betraying the Moiety’s secret. Gehn says, with sinister overtones, “The Moiety and I will finally be able to discuss our differences face to face,” but since he is alone and without a boat and without
much knowledge of Tay, he could just as likely end up being at the mercy of the Moiety as well.

In the last four endings, the game ends with the player’s death. If you trap yourself in the prison book anywhere but Tay before meeting Gehn, Gehn has Cho (the guard seen at the very beginning of *Riven*) link into the book, sending you out of the book and into the cage in his office, and then Gehn shoots you and introduces himself as you gradually lose consciousness. If you trap yourself in the prison book anywhere but Tay after meeting Gehn, Gehn has Cho link into the book, sending you out of the book into the cage in his office, and then he congratulates you on finding the book for him (since he has seen you before), and then shoots you. If you refuse three times to enter the prison book when Gehn holds it up for you, he realizes you are trying to trap him and shoots you. And finally, in the last and worst possible ending of the game, you open the star fissure and signal Atrus without having captured Gehn or rescued Catherine. Atrus arrives and looks puzzled as to why you have accomplished nothing, and then Gehn arrives and, after a brief dialogue, shoots Atrus, and then Cho shoots you, as Riven is collapsing. After all the endings, end credits follow, with different pieces of music depending on whether the ending is happy, sad, or bad.

One ending that appears to be possible is to rescue Catherine without capturing Gehn; but this is not possible because Catherine cannot be freed without the combination for the barred door of the elevator, which is found in Gehn’s bedroom, and Gehn’s bedroom can only be accessed after Gehn is captured. Unlike the combination for the star fissure, which also can change, the combination for Catherine’s prison is not set until the player visits Gehn’s bedroom, so even if one tries all possible combinations Catherine cannot be freed unless Gehn is captured.

Although there is a prescribed order to the game’s objectives and some of its events, the majority of *Riven*’s gameplay is relatively open-ended and similar to *Myst*. The clues to different puzzles intermingle, and exploration and navigation are central to the experience. Still, even when faced with choices, the player may be more likely to move in a particular direction, an exploratory path of least effort requiring the least amount of puzzle-solving, which will determine the order (at least initially) in which things will be seen, and it is in this order that the following islands and Ages of *Riven* have been arranged (alternate names of the islands as they are colloquially known are given in parentheses, since the islands are not named in the game).
At the start of the game, the player links to Temple Island with the star fissure telescope in view. As soon as the opening animation is done and the bars are removed, the player is free to investigate it. It is present in the first view (see fig. 17), and no matter where you click you move closer to it (a long wooden walkway in the distance along the top of the screen also entices us with unseen destinations).

Without steam, the telescope does not function; the only movable parts are the button, the switch by the button, and the stop underneath that prevents the telescope from going down too far. Both the switch and the stop can be moved up and down, and in either case nothing happens, just like the marker switch one first encounters on Myst. Our experience with Myst, however, suggests correctly that this telescope will be used at the very end of the game. We have seen the idea of “beginning with something from the ending” several times in Myst; in four of the Ages, the locked or blocked entrance to where the Myst linking book is kept is right near the area where we arrive at the Age, and even the first marker switch we see, on the dock, is later used to obtain access to the white page at the game’s end. So the enigma of the telescope should be a familiar one.

The other direction available presents views of distant islands and tramlines between them (and the fallen guard, if we look down in the right place) and leads us to a stairway. Going upstairs we see the view from the cover of the instruction booklet, another long bridge, a stairway down on the other side, and the entrance to the Gate Room. In the Gate Room, with its foreboding ambience, we find golden beetles inside of which are the five stained glass images found on the CD jackets, images of Gehn’s versions of his deeds designed for the instruction of his subjects. Standing outside the Gate Room and pushing the button rotates the whole room, creating one of the best architectural puzzles in Riven, in which the two doors must be aligned and realigned to get from one place to another between the five entrances. The key to the puzzle, of course, is the secret door found in the cave, which allows the player to get to the room where the steam power source is, as well as open one of the locked doors. The door to the cave is locked, and so many people gave up on the locked door in Riven’s beta testing phase that the Moiety dagger on the ground was added as a clue. The solution involves the player crawling under the door, and it is an interesting reversal of the navigation in Cosmic Osmo: whereas the size of the implied
Fig. 17. The first two views encountered in *Riven*
spectator varied greatly in *Cosmic Osmo* such that the player could click on a mouse hole or drain and expect to go inside it, the consistent size of *Myst*’s and *Riven*’s implied spectator may have made the test audience unwilling to try doing something that involved crawling instead of merely walking. The lock on the gate also implied that a key was the solution to the problem, rather than another way around the door.

Beyond the Gate Room lies the golden dome, accessible to the player who has mastered the workings of the Gate Room, although this part of the island is only accessible later in the game, when the island is approached from the other direction. Around and within the golden dome are stairways, walkways, and an elevator that the player must figure out how to navigate in order to get to the fire marble press that powers the dome, the rotating domes where the 233rd Age linking books are located, another steam power source for raising the walkway, and the walkway to Book Assembly Island. At present, the player can only go behind the golden dome and turn on steam power to two of the walkways; the other areas cannot be reached. Eventually, the rest of the machinery surrounding the golden dome has to be figured out before the player can link to Gehn’s office in the 233rd Age. The layout of the walkways and machines does seem more complicated and difficult to navigate than it would be if Gehn had designed them for ease of use. It is also unclear why the power is off or how Gehn gets back to his office without the linking books, or why we do not run into him in the game until the power is turned on; but, of course, if the power were already turned on when the player arrives on Riven, several of the game’s good puzzles would be eliminated.

The player desiring to see as much of the islands as possible without stopping to solve the puzzles early on in the game will likely leave the Gate Room for later and take the walkway over to the other side of Temple Island (the walkway is so long and so high above the ground that it seems at first that you are traveling to another island, rather than remaining on the same one). Here one finds a tunnel in the rock with a door that leads into a room with a chair (colloquially nicknamed the spider chair) and the recording apparatus for an imaging device. On the wall are two viewscreens of areas the player has not yet seen, and one of them features a switch for raising and lowering a door. Following the tunnel, we arrive at the temple to which the spider chair’s image is sent and where the door seen on the viewscreen is located. Even though the door from the tunnel to the temple is camou-
flaged, neither that door nor the door to the spider chair room is locked, so one would think that eventually one of the villagers would discover the spider chair room and Gehn’s trickery, but from the offering left by the wahrk statues, this apparently has not happened yet.

Outside the temple is the first maglev station the player encounters. You must be facing the maglev line when you push the blue button to summon the car; if you go up the steps, turn around, and then try to push the button, you will be resituated with a view going around behind the stone structure that supports the maglev line, where two more islands can be viewed in the distance (perhaps this was done so that the view would not be missed). Entering the car, one can take a thrilling roller-coaster ride to Jungle Island that ends with a CD-ROM change (unless one has the DVD version of the game). After viewing static scenes with a few integrated animations, the ride is enjoyable for its full-screen video and fluid movement through space on the z-axis, which helps to take the sting out of the intrusion of the real world into the game in the form of a CD-ROM change.

**Jungle Island (Village Island)**

Arriving on Jungle Island, on the way to the stone staircase in the tunnel, we pass one of the rolling “eyeballs” on the island. These balls associate sounds with symbols, which we later learn are animal sounds and D’ni numerals. In the tradition of Myst’s audiovisually redundant clues, the association can be made purely visually; if one stands at the right place, an outline of the animal appears with the eyeball situated where the animal’s eye would be. The puzzle for which these sound/numeral combinations are clues is the five-animal sequence that gives access to the Tay book in the Moiety Cave. Granted that these eyeballs might have been installed by the Moiety as clues for the other Rivenese villagers who wished to join them (though it seems a rather inefficient way to do it, and one that Gehn could discover just as easily), how and why did the animal outlines (except for the Sunners, who don’t get an outline) get integrated into the very rock of Riven itself? Did the Moiety carve them, and if so, why would one of them, the fish, be visible only from Gehn’s viewer on Survey Island? (Perhaps this is just another one of those things that one accepts for the aesthetics of the game, like the fact that there does not appear to be much in the way of bathrooms anywhere in the worlds of Myst and Riven.)³
Much further along, the stairs take us past a blue-green button on a pole, the kind used for summoning the maglev. It is far removed from the station, unlike the other button on Temple Island, suggesting that it was placed here to avoid including an extra animation of the maglev arriving at the station. A few steps more and we are out of the tunnel, on a landing where stairs extend up and down, both somewhat steeply. Faced with such a choice in real life, more effort would be needed to take the stairs going up, but in the game either way is just a matter of a few clicks, and perhaps both are equally likely to be taken by the player. In our first view of the two staircases, the down staircase has three times as many steps visible as the up staircase, so perhaps we are subtly urged to go in that direction. On Jungle Island particularly, the player is faced with so many choices of which way to go, that there does not seem to be a prescribed way to encounter the island.

Taking the down staircase, we pass the Sunners lying on the rocks, who eventually see us and swim away (how quickly we approach determines when they are scared away). Another eyeball can be found on the rocks in this bay as well. The Sunners and other creatures and people that inhabit *Riven* add greatly to the verisimilitude of the world, and perhaps even a slight feeling of potential danger (though nowhere near what is encountered in a game like *Doom* [1993]). The path continues around the Sunners’ bay, through another tunnel, and out near where a guard in a tower sounds a siren signaling the player’s arrival, which always happens when the player nears the village, so that one can never approach its inhabitants (just like the Sunners). This fear of strangers is even worked into the storyline, and is a clever way of including a village without all of the messy interactivity that would normally have to be programmed along with it all. The path next leads into the inland sea, and down ladders to another eyeball, and down again to the place where we would board the sub if it were raised, which of course it isn’t (another place to be remembered and used later).

Backtracking to where the staircase goes up and down, we take the one going up and cross over a bridge into the clearcut area where we are faced with three paths; two into other parts of the island and one into a cart traveling in an underground tunnel to Book Assembly Island. Taking one of the island paths, we come to a wooden door with a golden beetle on the doorpost, which we can examine up close before it flies away. Early in the game, the Sunners, the beetle, and the other animals do not stick out as clues, but seem just a natural part of the rich detail of the world, one of the strengths of *Riven*’s design.
Taking the path behind the wooden door, we go down through a forest and past one of the big daggers on Riven, near which another wooden eyeball can be found. In a short tunnel (which is under the rotating dome) the path forks. On the left it goes past a chasm of fiery magma, and up to rejoin the other island path encountered earlier. On the right it goes down to the wahrk totem, an imposing wooden statue, the mouth of which opens up to reveal stairs to a secret elevator.4 The blue-green button on a pole hints at the presence of another maglev station. Taking the elevator down, we are confronted with a wall with a seam down the middle, like metals doors that will not open; the trick turns out to be that the exit is behind us. In real life, air currents and directional ambient sound might have made us immediately aware of the opening behind us, but it provides a nice little puzzling moment in the game. A maglev station is present there at the bottom level.

Taking the elevator to the top level brings us to walkways over the jungle. These go to the rotating dome (the first one we can see up close), a phenakistiscope-like viewer through which we can see the rotating symbols on the dome, and a bridge to the golden wahrk throne, where the floor of the wahrk gallows can be opened. The wahrk and Gehn’s use of it in his religion as a means of intimidating the villagers is well established by now, although it does seem that the Rivenese people could also get the behind-the-scenes view of things that we have had, especially the Moiety who seem less afraid of Gehn. The rotating dome can be opened by clicking the button atop the phenakistiscope-like viewer either at the right time or randomly a few times until one gets the right timing by chance. The dome opens and a linking book can be seen locked within it. It will be some time before the player can find the combination for the domes (one of three combinatorial solutions that can change from game to game), but the player receives a step in that direction by at least seeing inside the dome. This is another good element of the game’s design, that clues and connections between things are parceled out over time to give the player a constant sense of achievement and a sense of always inching closer to unraveling the puzzles.

Returning from the wahrk totem, to take the island path leading to the village, we encounter one of the pleasant surprises of the game: a little girl stands on the path looking at the player, and then turns and runs off down the tunnel (she cannot be followed, however). After getting used to being the only person around, the moment can be a startling one, even though it is only a child (a similar occurrence happens in Gadget [1993]). Such sudden appearances happen a few other places in Riven: in the temple, when
you return to it by the main door when it is closed, Gehn’s image appears in the imager; and underground in Survey Island a scribe appears in a tunnel, whom you can chase and see leaving on a maglev car.

On the way to the village we pass through a rock tunnel where there is a drawing on the wall of a figure (Gehn) feeding the wahrks, another intimidating image. Upon arriving outside the village we see an animation of the distant villagers running away to hide; a mother comes and picks up a child sitting on the dock and runs away. We can explore only a little bit of the village and knock on one of the doors (which is answered only after five knocks; one can see how Gehn worked the number five into other aspects of the island, but how did the number five get worked in here?). The village is perhaps the one area in *Riven* where the player would most like to move around and explore things, and is not permitted to do so. The short walk through the edge of the village to the cliff where the submarine is parked is only enough to whet our appetite, and the rest of the village remains tantalizingly off limits. All the player can do is lower the submarine (you can sit in it before lowering it, but none of the controls work), and you can’t even get to it without going all the way back around the island (again, normally the submarine and its station would have been designed for more convenient access, but it all adds to the difficulty). From the village dock to the Sunners’ bay, however, you can keep the cursor on the exact same place on-screen, just right of center between the middle and the bottom of the screen, and it takes 39 clicks to get there (with zip mode it takes 17 clicks for the same distance, but the cursor has to be moved around).

Once you are in the submarine, the locations around the village lake can be explored. The only place you can go at first is the room with the five switches, for raising and lowering the ladders (another place for the sake of making the game harder; there seems to be little practical purpose for such a place, especially since raising the ladder for the stop you are at would not allow you to leave). The next stop is the schoolroom, which Gehn uses to indoctrinate the villagers, and teach the D’ni language in order to build his mock guilds. Here we see such details as the spelling test where the name *Gehn* is misspelled, and the only machine to use here (and source of clues) is the wahrk gallows toy that teaches counting by D’ni numerals. This is the first piece in another type of puzzle found in *Myst* and *Riven*, which could be described as a series of connected codes. In *Myst*, the dates in the tower were connected to starfields in the planetarium, which were connected to constellations in the library book, which were connected to the plaques
around the fountain and the combination for raising the ship. Here, the toy connects numbers to D’ni numerals, which are connected by the wooden eyeballs to animal sounds, which are connected by the animals themselves to the images of the animals, which are connected to the icons of the animals on the stones in the Moiety Cave and the combination for accessing the Tay linking book. Another such puzzle, with two series of connections, is involved in the powering of the big golden dome and the smaller domes containing the linking books. Each rotating dome is in a particular place on each island; the locations are connected to the geography of the islands as seen in the map on Survey Island; the map locations are connected to positions on grids representing the islands, which provide the correct positions for the fire marbles in the press in the big golden dome. The correct colors of the marbles have a chain of connections of their own: each of the islands’ domes is connected to a circular symbol (the one that is used to stop the dome from spinning); the circular symbols are connected to colors in the viewer in the underwater wahrk viewing room; and the colors are connected to the fire marbles in the press.

The combination, however, does not mean anything until one has found out where it is to be used. Another stop for the sub is the wahrk gallows, which the player cannot step onto unless the player has already found the wahrk throne overlooking the village bay and closed the gallows floor. Stepping onto the gallows floor, the player can then pull the handle and be raised up on a kind of trapeze to the walkway by the prison door (the walkway also has a ladder that provides a shortcut back down to the path). The man we see in the prison disappears when we open the door, indicating a secret exit (the man also serves as a watchman who warns the Moiety that we are coming, resulting in our capture when we arrive on Tay). A quick search reveals the hidden door, which leads to the Moiety Cave, and with the five-animal sequence, we are able to access the Tay linking book.

The Moiety Cave is the most difficult place to access on Jungle Island: to get there, we must have closed the wahrk gallows floor (and thus have already been up on the walkways over the jungle, which requires using the wahrk totem elevator); we must have used the submarine, which requires us to have been on both sides of the island around the village bay, one to lower the sub and the other to board it; we must have learned D’ni numerals in the schoolroom; and we must have seen the five animals and heard their sounds, including the frogs that are on Book Assembly Island, where the fifth eyeball is with its number (or the player could have seen the fish
outline through the viewer on Survey Island, and figured out that this is the missing animal). Of course, even without the information from the other islands there is enough information from Jungle Island alone to narrow down a brute force search of the combination, though it would still take some time to find it that way. With the naturalization of so many clues into the background of the world (the animals and their noises, the numbers on the gallows toy, and so on), these puzzles are some of the best ones in *Riven* and in the adventure game genre in general. Once the chain of clues reaches the stones in the Moiety Cave, one is finally able to watch the beautiful effects of water flowing in the channels of the walls in the Moiety Cave and link to Tay.

**Tay (The Rebel Age)**

Linking to Tay, the player is finally rewarded with the view that appears on the *Riven* box; the rebel hive that looks like a huge tree on an island, in the distance across the water. Tay is only seen with a dusky, darkening sky, which helps to keep it shrouded in mystery. There is only one place to go, and that is into the cave at the bottom of the cliff behind us. There a linking book back to Riven is held by an effigy of Gehn. All we can do is walk forward to it, and before we get there, we are turned around as we are ambushed and darted by two of the Moiety. The whole visit to Tay is more video footage than exploration, a kind of interlude during our mostly solitary travels. The next clip shows the point of view of the player slowly gaining consciousness and fading again, just enough to see the rebel hive from the canoe taking the player there. A native in the front of the canoe points to the general location of the prison room in the hive where the next scene will occur. We awake in a small, almost bare room, with nowhere to go but the hallway to the locked prison door. Through the door we see the inside of the hive, a series of ball-shaped huts amidst branches of the great tree, joined by walkways, overlapping into the distance. Four embedded animated sequences hint at the activity going on there.

As with the village, we are prevented from exploring the beautifully detailed and rich environment, even though the hive and the village are the very places we would most like to see. Such places are important to the fantasy genre, either as imagery or as descriptions in a book; there must always be faraway places on the horizon of which we receive only a tantalizing glimpse, leaving the rest to our imagination. If the entire subcreated
world can be explored and known to the smallest detail, the world will have become too small, too familiar, and all sense of vastness and mystery, the feeling that there still remains much we have not seen, will be lost. Left to wonder and speculate, we can never be certain of what lies beyond what we can experience, and we can therefore keep reimagining it, keeping the world alive and fluid instead of exhaustively known and fixed. Enough detail must be present to make the world believable, and a skilled subcreator will know just how much detail is needed for players to feel they know enough about the world to speculate about what they do not know or see in it, while blurring the line between what is actually there and what is imagined.

Returning to the cell and looking out the back window (we can see the small dock where we originally linked on to Tay) and then turning around again triggers the next video clip. Nelah returns the prison book to us, along with Catherine’s journal. Our inventory bar beneath the screen now holds three books. In the next video clip, Nelah brings out a linking book for the Moiety Cave, complete with the crystal slice that powers the book. We have no choice but to return (apart from trapping ourselves in the prison book, which would result in the ending with the Moiety leaving us in the book, as discussed earlier). Any subsequent visits will leave us stranded in the cliff-
side cave, with nothing to do but view the hive across the lake, examine the effigy up close, and link back to the Moiety Cave again.

The visit to Tay rounds out our experience in *Riven*; since we visit Gehr's office and workroom, and hear his side of the story, meeting the Moiety gives us both sides of the conflict. Apart from a few frightened villagers, it also provides contact with characters midway through the game, which is nice since most of the contact comes at the end of the game when we trap Gehr and rescue Catherine (or fail to do so). And now, with the prison book in our possession once again, we are ready to confront Gehr (or return to see him, if we have gone there already).

**BOOK ASSEMBLY ISLAND (CRATER ISLAND)**

From Jungle Island, the player can travel to Book Assembly Island via the mine car, or Survey Island via the maglev. As the maglev station is hidden and the mine car is not, the casual player is more likely to travel to Book Assembly Island before Survey Island. The ride in the mine car ends with a surprise; after a moment's pause we slide out of the cart, down a chute, and out into Book Assembly Island (we can climb up and back into the cart again as well for the return trip).

Right near the ladder we climb down is a kind of chipper-shredder, used for making the paper for the books. It runs, but is not useful to the player. The next machine we encounter is the boiler, which is turned on (this is apparent even at a distance, since rows of little blue flames are visible under the boiler). This, in itself, is a clue. Machines in *Myst* and *Riven* typically require us to change whatever state we find them in, so more than likely turning the boiler off will be part of the solution to the puzzle (compare this boiler to the one in the cabin on *Myst*, which we find turned off). As it turns out, we must turn the boiler off, drain it, and go inside (the door opens with a nice animation of the bolts unscrewing) and crawl down into the drainpipe. Before going through the pipe, we could turn the water power to the third pipe that leads to the other side of the island, to avoid backtracking. Curiously, the mechanical door of the boiler still works even when the water power is diverted elsewhere.

Going through the pipe, we must click four times in total darkness, a completely black screen (similar to the unlit stairway of the Stoneship Age). We climb a ladder inside the pipe (why is there a ladder inside the pipe, anyway? And how did the water drain out earlier if the pipe goes uphill?)
and fall out the end of it onto the hillside. We cannot climb back up into the pipe, making it one of the few one-way passages in *Myst* and *Riven*. A path takes us over the hill and onto the balcony, where a manhole gives us access to a ladder to the ground, which the player can use to return to the switch if water was not diverted to the third pipe.

Opening the doors, we go down the walkway to the frog-catching apparatus. After learning to operate the trap, the player can view three different animations of the frogs (they are called “ytrams” in Gehn’s workroom journal) after they are caught. Beyond that is the question of what to do next. Some of the best moments in games of the *Myst* series are when there does not appear to be anything to do, when the player seems to have hit a dead end. In this case, finding the next place to go is a small but clever puzzle, like the melting ice in the Rime Age. Given only a few objects with limited usefulness, what can be done?

The answer is simply to close the doors, even though it seems we are only closing ourselves into the cave. Behind the doors are two tunnels, and the one on the left goes to another rotating dome. A peephole reveals the location of the viewer used for stopping the dome, but it is unclear how to get to it. The solution is one of the few instances of humor (if you can even call it that) in *Riven*; it is the same exact trick used a second time. Close the door of the room with the rotating dome, and another tunnel is revealed, with leads to the viewer.

Back at the double doors to the cave, the tunnel on the right leads out onto a walkway on the cliffside. The walkway goes past Gehn’s workroom (locked, of course), through a tunnel, and out over the water all the way to the golden dome on Temple Island (which we can reach, if we had the good sense to turn on the steam). Here the player can finally access the areas of the golden dome that were previously inaccessible, and extend the curving walkway in the dome and open the door to the Gate Room, to provide full access later in the game.

But on Book Assembly Island there is still the question of getting inside Gehn’s workroom. Eventually the player will notice the power line that turns off the fan. Once the fan is off, the player must figure out that one can climb into the air vent and crawl through it (this is foreshadowed by the crawling through of the pipe from the boiler, but at least there a ladder invited us to descend into the pipe). Accustomed to a realistic implied size of the player, it may take a while before the player thinks of climbing into the air vent. This is, after all, more like something we might try in *Cosmic*
Osmo, where we might even be able to ride the frog trap down into the chasm (perhaps these things are more common in the “Osmoian Age” that Atrus mentions in one of the library books). After all, the space on either side of the bar across the diameter of the vent does not seem large enough for a person to crawl through, yet it is (see fig. 19).

On the other hand, there is something of a tradition of crawling through air vents in the movies, especially in spy films (villains’ hideouts in the early James Bond films always have air vents big enough to crawl through). In any event, this is how we get inside Gehn’s workroom.

If we arrive earlier in the game, before meeting Gehn, his pipe and gun are left lying on the table; otherwise they are gone. It would have been nice if the player could have taken Gehn’s gun, and it certainly would have changed the rest of the game, but the player can’t do anything with it. On the five sides of the workroom are two doors and three tables, with implements for making books and for making a smoking extract from the frogs. A burned linking book can be found in the stove in the center of the room. Gehn’s journal is the main source of clues here, including the combination for the rotating domes (which can change from one game to the next). Gehn’s workroom has a wealth of interesting detail, though sometimes we

Fig. 19. The air vent does not appear to be big enough to crawl through, but it is.
might wish there was even more; you can only open the top drawer in the chest of drawers, unlike in Myst, where you could open all the drawers in a cabinet, even if they were empty. Gehn’s workroom, along with his office and bedroom in the 233rd Age, gives insight into and acts as an externalization of Gehn’s character (just as Sirrus’s and Achenar’s bedrooms did in Myst), and the journal gives a voice to his thoughts. The overall effect makes Gehn a more well-rounded character, and even sympathetic, to a point.

Leaving the second door of the workroom, we stand on a patio with a three-view triptych (clicking to the right and to the left) of three of the Riven islands in the distance and the means of transportation connecting them. And stairs lead down to the station for the maglev car going to Survey Island.

**Survey Island (Map or Garden Island)**

Depending on how the islands are traversed, the player will enter Survey Island at one of the two maglev stations, both of which lead into underground tunnels. The player who first visits the island via the maglev from Book Assembly Island will get to see the animation of the golden elevator rising out of the water. If you leave the elevator raised up out of the water and want to see what it looks like coming down to its other position, you would have to travel by maglev back to Book Assembly Island, take the mine car to Jungle Island, then take the other maglev to Survey Island, and go down the hall to the lower elevator stop—only to find it is already there, as if someone had summoned it while you were gone. In fact, it is impossible to watch the elevator arrive on the lower level, and there is no animation for it. That Riven is consistent and complete enough that such gaps and omissions seem surprising is testament to the success of Cyan’s subcreation.

The lower-level hallway connects the maglev stations and also leads to the Wahrk Throne Room. On the way there from the golden elevator, we encounter one of Gehn’s scribes, who runs away. Fortunately, we can follow him, and the next animation around the corner shows the scribe escaping in the maglev car. It is the only time in the game that we can see the maglev leaving the station instead of just arriving, making our experience of it more complete; we have pretty much seen it do all it can do, from inside of it as a passenger and outside of it as a bystander.

The Wahrk Throne Room, which changed during the design process from a closet in the original design to a grandiose high seat in a huge under-
ground chamber, features two machines of Gehn’s. On the left is a viewer with two buttons; the left button shows a fixed camera view of Catherine’s prison (although the player may not recognize it as such right away), and the right button shows a rotating view of the village bay, which includes the fish’s outline. While this room seems an out-of-the-way place for such a viewer, the machine on the right-hand side justifies its subterranean location. The wheel is mainly used for matching colors to the six circular symbols (five of which are found on the rotating domes), and one of the buttons will light an overhead light and summon the wahrk. Four animated sequences of the wahrk can be viewed, the last of which has an angry wahrk head-butting the window. The wahrk looks like a cross between a *whale* and a *shark*, which is where the name comes from as well (and may be why the name is misspelled “whark” in Gehn’s journal). The fact that the animals have been spread throughout the islands (the wahrk here, the ytrams on Book Assembly Island, the rest on Jungle Island) helps keep the game from becoming too static and solitary (it is perhaps no coincidence that the islands and Ages without animals are the ones where people talk to you).

Returning to the maglev to Book Assembly Island, one can rotate the car so as to get out on the other side of the station as well, where stairs take us to the upper levels of the island. There we pass through jagged rocks jutting from blue-green waters, and up through a cleft passing through large-scale models of Riven’s islands. An elevator takes us up to a balcony for an overhead view of the island models, complete with a controller that raises mounds of water on them (though only one can be done at any given time). Because the island models and the mounds of water atop them can be seen through the cracks in the rock during the elevator ride, four different elevator ride animations are needed (the smallest island cannot be seen during the elevator ride), and it is likely that most players will not see all four versions of the ride, or even notice the need for different animations.

Getting out of the other side of the elevator, one finds the island’s rotating dome and its viewer, and directly ahead, the round map room with the pinscreen topographical imager. Whatever island is pressed on the control on the other side of the island appears in the imager. One can then select a square to get a high-resolution topographical map of that area. This imager allows the player to note exactly the positions of the rotating domes, so that the positions can be used for the fire marbles in the press in the big golden dome. Each of the 25 squares of the map have five animations each, four for rotating 90 degrees from one position to the next, and one animation of
the pins going up or down (the same animation can be played in reverse for
the opposite movement). This means that there are 125 animated sequences
needed to animate the map, and this might be one reason why Survey Island
is much smaller than the others. It could have been bigger, though, as the
fourth Riven CD-ROM also contains a 138.4-megabyte folder containing a
demo of The Journeyman Project 3: Legacy of Time. A look at the demo of
the game, and how relatively lacking it is in the area of production design,
reveals how far Riven was ahead of its contemporaries. Legacy of Time’s
computer-generated models are simpler and less textured, its lighting flatter
and less nuanced, its camera movements too stiffly geometric, and its
video more roughly integrated (and sometimes overacted), showing just
how good Riven was by comparison. For example, compare some of Legacy
of Time’s Atlantis footage (by viewing the movies in the AR folder called
ARDO.mov and ARDP.mov) with the dramatic monologues delivered by
John Keston playing Gehn in the video sequences in the 233rd Age.

THE 233RD AGE (GEHN’S OFFICE AND BEDROOM)

After figuring out all the puzzles pertaining to the domes, we can travel to
the 233rd Age and confront Gehn. According to the journals and the novels,
Gehn was in his thirties around the time when he was trapped on Riven,
where he has been for another thirty years. The 233rd Age is his first suc-
cessful attempt at writing an age while on Riven, so the other ages must
have been written before he was trapped on Riven (unless he named and
numbered his failed attempts). Supposing that he was at least in his teens at
the time he wrote his first age, that means that he had at most some 20 years
or so in which to write over 200 ages, which means he would have to write
a complete age every five weeks or so, continuously for 20 years to get them
all done. Considering the difficulty in the writing of ages and the way in
which Gehn pieced his ages together from phrases in other D’ni books, this
at first sounds rather hard to believe; but Richard A. Watson has explained
how this is possible:

The majority of Gehn’s Ages were very short as he tested the effects of
various phrases that he was copying from other Books.

As page 123 of The Book of Atrus explains, a Descriptive Book will
[connect] to an Age once the very first word is written. It’s just that the
more detailed your description, the more the Age will match what you
want. If you just write the word “island” and use the Book, you’ll link to a complete Age, but the only thing you’ll know about it before you get there is that it will have an island. Everything else will be filled in “at random,” meaning the Book will just link to one of countless Ages that matches your generic description. You don’t even know if it will have oxygen or not. Not a good idea.

So many of Gehn’s Ages would have just been a few paragraphs to cover the safety kinds of things and the particular phrase he was trying to test. (Similar to the test Ages that Atrus writes at the end of *The Book of Atrus*.)

Ironically, these shorter Ages of Gehn’s are much more likely to have been stable, as they were too short to have many contradictions in them.

To use the programming analogy for the Art, many of Gehn’s Ages were simple, such as:

```
10 PRINT “Hello”
20 GOTO 10
```

The 233rd Age, certainly, is much simpler and smaller than Riven. We get an overview in the linking book’s descriptive image right before entering, and all we have to explore once we get there are two rooms, Gehn’s office and his bedroom. Gehn’s desk is one of the most beautiful settings in the game, with the austere elegance of burnished metal and marble, glass, leather, wood, and stone. The office does not allow us to do much, except for lowering the cage, powering the linking books, and playing the cannen (Gehn’s music recorder). The cannen, on which Gehn recorded himself playing the maral-obe, is the first indication of Gehn’s more sensitive side, which we learn more about in his bedroom. As we descend into Gehn’s bedroom, we go deeper into his personal life, motivations, dreams, frustrations, and even regrets. The bedroom is one of the most beautifully and delicately rendered rooms in *Riven*, and the one with the most emotional content. His journal bears his private thoughts, like the ones quoted earlier in the discussion of character development in *Riven*. On the wall are pictures of his father Aitrus and his wife Keta, and on Keta’s picture there is fine handwriting that reads, “To Gehn my husband and my salvation, I dedicate myself to the love that rescued me.” The 233rd Age is seen at sunset, and that mood pervades both rooms. One can easily imagine Gehn sitting alone in his room as night falls outside, writing in his journal and experiencing profound loneliness, alone on a desolate mountaintop in an uninhabited Age.
His desire to see the D’ni civilization reborn suddenly seems less a lust for power and more a need to be with others and an attempt to regain what he has lost. Even if we do not believe his claims of having reformed, we can at least understand and have sympathy for him at this point.

Gehn is the most interesting character in the Myst series, and perhaps the most well rounded. At least the player is not asked to kill Gehn but just to capture him in the prison book, which means that he could very well return in some future Myst game just as Sirrus and Achenar return from their prison books in Myst IV: Revelation. Whatever the case, it is Gehn and his ambitions that drive the narrative and design of Riven to a degree found in no other game, and that make the game an artistic success.

PRISON ISLAND

Gehn’s office is also where you find the linking book to Prison Island, where Catherine is held captive. You can visit Catherine at the point in the game after you meet Gehn and before he is captured, but the bars of the elevator door prevent you from entering her room. She gives a few hints and words of encouragement and sends you off again.

Once Gehn is captured, the player can go to Prison Island and release Catherine. The island is quite small, with only three locations; the rotating dome outside, the elevator that goes up to Catherine’s room, and the room itself, which we can look into but never enter. The game ensures that the player will have to have at least visited Gehn’s bedroom, and thus be exposed to the depths of Gehn’s character, before Catherine can be rescued; the combination for the Prison Island elevator is found in the timepiece on Gehn’s nightstand, and no code is set for the elevator until the bedroom is visited, so that even a brute force search for the combination will not work.

When Catherine is freed, she takes over in a series of animations, as she leaves in the elevator with the player, thanking the player and explaining how to signal Atrus. She then runs off down the hall and disappears on her way to the rotating dome, and we cannot follow her until she is gone. When we return via the linking book to the 233rd Age, Catherine has torn out pages from all the linking books except the one to Temple Island (and, as it turns out, there is no longer any way to get off Temple Island). All that remains to be done is to open the fissure, and players will always have the combination with them because you can never drop any of the books you carry in Riven (apart from linking into the prison book).