THE MEETING OF WORLDS: POSTCOLONIALISM AND THE GAME-WORLDS

OF *MYST*

By

Emily M. Klotz

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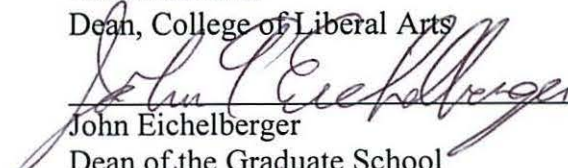
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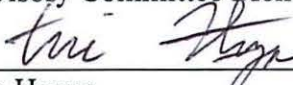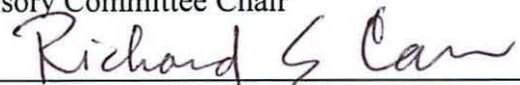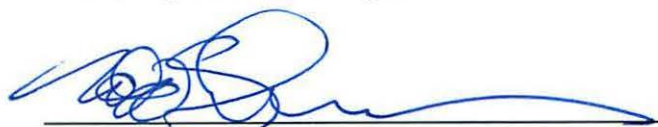THE MEETING OF WORLDS: POSTCOLONIALISM AND THE GAME-WORLDS

OF *MYST*

A

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty

of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Fairbanks, Alaska

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Abstract

Remembered for its lush visuals and its impenetrable puzzles, Myst (1993) was a groundbreaking series whose influence on the 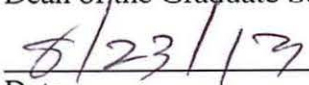medium of digital games can still be felt today. Weaving storytelling and puzzle-solving together, Myst constructs an elaborate transmedial family saga rife with issues of imperial conquest and subjugation—the joy of exploration mingled with the destructive forces that arise from the meeting of worlds. But while the narrative material alone is rich enough for analysis, it only becomes more significant when viewed in relation to the nature of the games. By avoiding all reference to their own *gameness*, and by situating the player as merely a pair of disembodied eyes within the environment, the games allow for deep immersion in a fantastical world with its own internal coherence—a world that offers the player the chance to become a virtual, bodiless tourist, venturing into a realm of infinite exotic landscapes to be visually consumed and conquered. Thus the appeal of the game itself is correlated with the postcolonial power-conflicts at the heart of the narrative—a connection that raises questions not only about the relationship of game and narrative, but also about the source of our desire for "Myst-like" games.

Dedication Page

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who never ceased to encourage me.

To my best friend Diana Lerich, who patiently endured all my repetitive complaining.

To Karen Grossweiner, who first gave me the idea to make my thesis more like a game.

And to the small but passionate Myst fanbase who continue to create, explore and dream, always finding new ways to express their love of these worlds and these stories.

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Introduction

Best remembered for its lush visuals, its haunting atmosphere, and its impenetrable puzzles, Myst was a groundbreaking series whose influence on the medium of digital games can still be felt today, twenty years after the release of the original game. Created by brothers Rand and Robyn Miller, founders of the small independent software company Cyan, Inc., *Myst* (1993) was completed on a modest budget and released with little media fanfare, but it rapidly became the bestselling CD-ROM game of all time—a title it would continue to hold for nearly ten years, until it was overtaken by *The Sims*. Even today, "Myst-like" is a recognizable description within the gaming community, expressing a great variety of qualities including (but not limited to) lavish exotic landscapes, unsettling solitude, meditative and unhurried exploration, nuanced storytelling, rich aural textures, complex mechanical contraptions, and maddeningly difficult, elaborate puzzles.

Weaving storytelling and puzzle-solving together over the span of six games and three novels, the Myst series constructs an elaborate transmedial family saga rife with issues of imperialism, conquest, subjugation, the struggle for freedom, the desire for power—the joy of exploration mingled with the destructive forces that can arise from the meeting of worlds, and the efforts of those worlds to recover after the clash.

But while the narrative material alone is rich enough for analysis, it only becomes more significant when viewed in relation to the nature of the games themselves. By seeking to avoid reference to their own gameness through the elimination of most nondiegetic elements and a distinct lack of instructions, situating the player as merely a

pair of disembodied eyes moving within eerily beautiful environments, the games allow for deep immersion in a fantastical world with its own internal coherence—a world that asks the player to forget that it is only a game. A world that offers the player the chance to become a virtual, bodiless tourist, venturing into a realm of seemingly infinite exotic landscapes that exist to be visually consumed and conquered through exploration and comprehension, while also experiencing a feeling of pleasurable unease at the illusion of the virtual gaze being reversed. The very qualities that make Myst an appealing game experience are correlated with the desires and anxieties of the tourist gaze, itself related to postcolonial power dynamics. Thus, the pleasures of the game experience reflect, complement, and complicate the conflicts at the heart of the narrative—a connection that raises questions not only about the relationship of game and narrative, but also about the source of our desire for "Myst-like" games.

This thesis is an exploration of the Myst series in its entirety, with a focus on postcolonial themes and conflicts. In addition, this thesis touches upon a broader issue in the field of game studies: the relationship of narrative and game, and whether these two forms of meaning-making can be compatible and potentially complementary. To match the unique storytelling process of the games, this thesis has been constructed as an interactive hypertext, encouraging exploration and curiosity, and constructing meaning not only through the linear arguments of each lexia, but also through the hyperlinks that connect disparate ideas across the text. Thus, this thesis is attempting—much like Myst— to create meaning more through spatial connections than through linear progression. And while many texts require no accompanying images for critical analysis, the Myst series is

one based entirely in its visuals. As such, this thesis is also rich in visuals—not only still images, but moving videos, to provide a true sense of the atmosphere and style of the games, and (more importantly) to provide necessary references for my analysis.

While this text covers a very broad range of topics, from travel writing and tourism to film studies, science fiction narratives, and scholarly arguments regarding the place of *game* in the field of literature, many of these topics are discussed only in a limited form—though the potential for exploration is nearly limitless. Although this thesis is far from exhaustive, my goal in casting such a wide net is more to pave the way for future studies, by opening up doors that have been thus far relatively unopened. First, I hope to suggest the true richness of the material found in the Myst series, its worth as a masterpiece of early digital gamemaking, and its potential for further study. Second, I hope to contribute to the ongoing study of the relationship between *narrative* and *game*, and to propose possible new approaches to studying games and their stories. And last, I hope to provide a glimpse into alternate ways of constructing a text, a story, or a thesis, and to explore some of the unique opportunities for meaning-making that can only be achieved with new media technologies.

Using the Hypertext

The following chapter includes brief instructions for using the DVD version of the "Meeting of Worlds" hypertext.

Insert the DVD into your computer, and open the folder to view the files on the disc. Open "Thesis Source Files." To begin the hypertext, choose the page labeled "START." It will automatically open in your internet browser. Mozilla Firefox usually works best, although you may also open it in Google Chrome or Internet Explorer if you prefer. You do not need an internet connection to view the hypertext.

Once the first page has opened, you may explore the text at your leisure. If a new link is not immediately obvious on any given page, then click around in the text or images on the page until one is revealed. Although you may use your browser's "back" button, the text is designed so that you may view every page without backtracking, so try to avoid the "back" button as much as possible.

Some links will take you outside the hypertext. All videos in the text must be viewed using Adobe Flash Player. You may be asked to upgrade your Flash Player in order to view them.

The Works Cited page, accessible through a link on the opening page of the hypertext, may also be opened directly from the same location as the "START" page. Under the folder "Thesis Source Files," the page labeled "Works Cited" can also be found along with the "START" page; open it in your preferred browser.

If you wish to open any specific page directly, all other pages, videos and images are accessible in the folder "Source Files."

Conclusion

This hypertext, constructed as a web of interconnected concepts and arguments, has no definite end—as such, it resembles the "curiosity games" that I speak of in my discussion of game genres in the DVD: a maze without an exit, in which the goal is not to reach any end but to simply see all there is to see. The Myst games, though not pure curiosity games in this sense, do often strive for an open-endedness that I have sought to replicate in this thesis. However, for the sake of closure, I will here include a brief summary of the overarching ideas behind the project, and how the three chapters of this thesis ("Storytelling Games," "The Myst Narrative," and "The Player Gaze") tie together under the umbrella concept of "the meeting of worlds."

The title of this thesis refers not only to the clash of fictional worlds that take place in the Myst narrative, reflecting the real-life conflicts of colonialism and imperialism in reality, but also to the meeting of the worlds of *game* and *narrative*. Myst is a series which brings together storytelling and game-play, drawing from both the legacies of literature and the possibilities of digital media, to create a transmedial storyworld that seeks to fully immerse the player in its virtual realm. And in an appropriate parallel, the storyworld that Myst creates is one built around the conflicts, dilemmas, disasters and (finally) the hope that can arise out of encounters between different worlds and cultures. The colonial/imperialist themes in Myst's overarching narrative are inextricably and significantly connected to the ways that Myst functions as a game, and what makes it appealing to many gamers. Additionally, the popularity of games like Myst, as well as the hunger for lush visuals and exotic spectacles in cinema,

books, and tourism, raises significant questions about our cultural mindsets and tendencies—is it a natural compulsion to seek "virtual Elsewheres" as a way of re-establishing our center in the world, or is it a culturally-influenced habit of "tutoring the tourist gaze"? While Myst does play to the desires that drive the tourist gaze, offering a game experience that successfully meets the player's need for consumable other-worlds, the narrative simultaneously works as a cautionary tale against the dangers of allowing such desires to go on unexamined.

While my primary goal is that this thesis may demonstrate the Myst series' value as a piece of elaborate transmedial storytelling, and may encourage further analysis of the games and the narrative, I also hope to suggest some fresh new approaches to games generally as objects of study, and to continue exploring how games might function as storytelling devices in a way distinct from traditional narrative media. The field of game studies is rife with possibilities, and a great number of games deserve to be considered works of art worthy of deeper analysis. There is much more left to be said. As the oft-repeated catchphrase of the Myst series goes, as far as this research is concerned, "the ending has not yet been written."

Appendix
Emails from Tony Fryman, Cyan Worlds Legal Department, regarding the use of copyrighted materials

Legal <legal@cyan.com>
Jan 8

to me
Hi Emily,

[...]

We have no problem with your proposed Thesis. There has been one other student who also used the Myst IP in his Thesis although I don't recall his exact perspective. Regarding Assets, I am happy to be very liberal in their usage. Images are ok, sounds ok, video clips are ok, music may require additional approvals however. For planning purposes you may disregard the restrictions from the website. Plan for the best way to present your thesis and let me know what your are planning. I can approve at that time.

Myst III is interesting. Ubisoft does own the game assets and copyright. If you right to them I imagine they will tell you to contact Cyan. If this is the case I have no problem with your use of the assets as proposed but you would need to reach out to them first. My current point of contact at Ubisoft is Virginie, virginie.gringarten@ubisoft.com, and she has been very helpful. She has been out on maturnity leave but she may be back now.

Rand would be available for interview/discussion with advanced notice.

Let me know how you would like to proceed.

Cheers
Tony Fryman
President
Cyan Worlds, Inc.

Tony Fryman <tony@cyan.com>
Jan 24

to me
Hi Emily,

[...]

Because you are not publishing your thesis (for profit) I believe you should be able to use any of the material and even bits of the Music under the "fair use" provisions of copyright law (with appropriate acknowledgement). http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html

If you want to pursue specific permission then you can try Gregory at Ubisoft gregory.carreau@ubisoft.com for Myst 3 rights. Robyn Miller robynzoobreakgunclubcom for music in Myst and Riven. Cyan will grant permission for Myst, Riven and Uru images and music from Uru.

If you need to interview Rand, it is best done via email questions. If it needs to be a verbal interview, you can work with me on an exact calendar date but I ask that you have your line of questions prepared.

Cheers