Game Narrative Review

Your name: Naomi Burgess

Your school: Carnegie Mellon University – Entertainment Technology Center

Your email: nburgess@andrew.cmu.edu

Game Title: *Riven: The Sequel to Myst*

Platforms: PC / iOS / Android / Mac OS / PlayStation / Sega Saturn / Pocket PC

Genre: Graphic adventure

Release Date: October 31, 1997

Developer: Cyan

Publishers: Red Orb Entertainment / Acclaim Entertainment / Sega / Mean Hamster Software

Narrative Designers: Robyn Miller / Richard Vander Wende

Overview

Riven: The Sequel to Myst is a direct sequel to the early 90s game *Myst* that continues the chronicle of the D'ni, a race of humanoids that learned how to travel to other worlds (known as "Ages") by describing those worlds in books (known as "Descriptive Books" and "Linking Books"). The game begins with a meeting between the player and Atrus, a quarter-D'ni man who the player last met near the end of *Myst*. During this meeting, Atrus tasks you with traveling to the decaying Age of Riven and accomplishing three things. First, the player must capture Gehn (Atrus' malevolent father) with the help of a Prison Book (which is essentially a Linking Book that looks like the genuine article, but in fact leads to a void with no way out). Second, the player must save Atrus' wife Catherine, who has been imprisoned by Gehn. Third, once those prior two tasks are accomplished, the player must somehow signal Atrus from within Riven so that he can come to the Age with a Linking Book and transport himself, Catherine, and the player to a safe place. And so, having given the player only a few shreds of information (and his journal) to go on, Atrus holds up Riven's Descriptive Book, prompting the player to touch the glowing panel on the book's first page.

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Doing so transports the player to the Age of Riven, landing them inside a cage-like contraption that immediately ensnares them. One of Gehn's henchmen stumbles upon the trapped player and wrenches the Prison Book they are carrying from their hands, only to be shot with a sleep dart and dragged off by a mysterious figure who is cloaked in black and white from head to toe. This figure then frees the player and disappears without a trace, along with the unconscious henchman and, perhaps more importantly, the Prison Book. The player is now free to explore Riven at their leisure, uncovering the past of the Age and its inhabitants along the way. While *Riven* contains multiple endings (many of them involving Gehn killing either the player, Atrus, or Catherine), achieving the game's most positive ending requires the player to retrieve their stolen Prison Book from the Age of Tay (which functions as a stronghold for an anti-Gehn rebel group known as the Moiety), trap Gehn in that Prison Book upon traveling to his 233rd Age, and release Catherine from her solitary imprisonment on Riven's Prison Island. Then, once the player signals Atrus by cracking open a tear in the fabric of Riven's reality known as the "Star Fissure," he arrives with a Linking Book as promised, and Catherine arrives on scene soon afterwards (having evacuated the remainder of Riven's population to Tay). The pair use Atrus' Linking Book to leave Riven, and as the Book falls into the starry depths below, the ground under the player's feet gives way and drops them into the Star Fissure as well. The game ends with the player gazing back at the spinning outline of the Fissure's opening as the disembodied voice of Atrus concludes that "the ending can never truly be written."

Characters

Individuals:

- **Atrus** – One of the main protagonists of *Riven*; Atrus is a quarter-D'ni man and a master of the Art (i.e. the process of writing both Descriptive and Linking Books), who grew up under the ruthlessly watchful eye of his father, Gehn. A calm and determined man, he appears to be in his mid-forties (although he is most certainly much older due to his D'ni lineage) and sports an unkempt beard, a worried brow, and tired eyes propped up behind a worn pair of circular frames, all of which hint at many nights spent without sleep. Up until the events of *Riven*, Atrus has been cooped up in his writing space (which is located in a sealed-off sector of an abandoned D'ni city), working almost non-stop to prevent the collapse of the Age that his wife, Catherine, is trapped in: Riven. He now hopes that his newfound friend (who the player embodies) will be able to both rescue Catherine from her prison and seal away Atrus' crazed father Gehn once and for all.

- **Catherine** – *Riven's* second main protagonist; Catherine is a woman of Rivenese descent who Atrus met upon escaping from under his father's thumb to the Age of Riven. As a pupil of Gehn's, she quickly formed a bond with Atrus over their shared talent for creating books, and eventually conspired with him to trap Gehn on Riven. After succeeding in this endeavor, Catherine fled with Atrus to the Age of Myst, where they settled down and started a family together; she would not return to her home Age until years later, when her two (now adult) sons tricked her into traveling to Riven. This led to her capture at the hands of Gehn (due to her involvement with a group of rebel Riven

natives know as "the Moiety"), and she is now being held in solitary confinement on one of Riven's most far-flung islands. In terms of personality, Catherine is both individualistic and selflessly caring; these traits are reflected in her actions (she absolutely refuses to kowtow to Gehn, and she strives to ensure the safety of her fellow Rivenese at all costs), as well as in her appearance (she wears her pitch-black hair long and free-flowing, and she dons a lovingly embroidered brown robe emblazoned with images that are reminiscent of undulating plant life, which tell us that a) Catherine is not one to be contained, and that b) she possesses a visceral link to the life energy of both her home world and her people that cannot simply be unwritten). In short, Catherine defiantly stands for everything that Gehn, who is entrenched in order and selfishness, stands against.

- **Gehn** – The main antagonist of *Riven*; Gehn is the father of Atrus and the man behind the Age of Riven's original Descriptive Book. Long before the events of *Riven*, Gehn almost succeeded in killing his own son (i.e. Atrus) for rebelling against his tyrannical teaching and parenting methods. This sparked a chain of events that resulted in Atrus and Catherine successfully trapping Gehn on the Age of Riven, which he has been unable to escape (until recently) for a number of years. In terms of appearance, Gehn is always dressed to the nines in what appears to be a uniform of D'ni origin, lending him an outward air of propriety and stuffiness. Moreover, Gehn's facial features clue us into the danger that seethes beneath that layer of decorum. Indeed, meeting with Gehn at once dredges up feelings of unease that are similar to those associated with *Inglourious Bastards'* Hans Landa: the unnerving diagonal lines of his sweeping hairline and hawk-like nose, coupled with his piercingly analytical bright blue eyes, at once give the player the impression that Gehn is planning something insidious, something that cannot possibly end well for the player.

Factions:

- **The D'ni** – An ancient race of human-like beings whose civilization has fallen and has been all but decimated, the D'ni learned how to write books that establish links to other worlds, which allow individuals to travel to each of those worlds by touching the front-most pages of their corresponding books. While some D'ni (like Atrus) treat the worlds they construct links to with the utmost respect, other D'ni (like Gehn) view those worlds as their own creations and lord over any peoples they encounter as if they were gods.

- **The Rivenese** – The native people of Riven; their main settlement (a conglomeration of spherical pueblo-like structures) lies on the largest of the Age's isles. As a people, they appear to be incredibly cautious, especially around strangers (all of the player's few encounters with Rivenese result in the sighted individual either sounding an alarm, running away or slamming a door's viewing slot in the player's face); this skittishness is quite understandable, considering the character of the man who now fancies himself the ruler of their land. Additionally, while the Rivenese greatly respect all of the fauna that live alongside them, they bear an especially high level of reverence for the whark (a

massive creature native to Riven's seas that resembles a cross between a walrus and a whale), a reverence that Gehn leverages to scare the Rivenese into submission.

- **The Moiety** – The Moiety is a group of Rivenese that formed and split off from the main thread of Rivenese society due to their shared hatred of Gehn (who they consider to be a false god) and all that he did to their land. Operating from their base in the Age of Tay (the link to which Catherine constructed in the hopes of providing the Moiety a safe haven), they aim to thwart Gehn's efforts at every turn and, eventually, overthrow him.

Breakdown

Riven's narrative varies quite a bit from the narratives of most other games in terms of its construction. While the player spends the vast majority of the game in a mode of self-defined exploration that places an emphasis on uncovering backstory, the physical drama of the game is split up into five distinct moments. Those moments include *Riven's* opening, a short sequence in which the player travels to the Age of Tay and recovers their stolen Prison Book, the player's face-to-face encounter with Gehn, the player's face-to-face encounter with Catherine, and *Riven's* ending (which varies both in content and placement within the story, depending on how the player behaves during their encounters with Gehn and Catherine). Due to this combination of semi-linear narrative structure and branching, it would likely require a whole other paper to step through and analyze each of *Riven*'s beats. Therefore, for the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on unpacking the tool that *Riven* mainly leans on to tell its story: environment.

Indeed, the game leans heavily on color and texture to get its story across. *Riven's* environment is painted with a palette that largely consists of dull browns, greys, and greens; the rough, cracking textures that those colors are then applied to give the player the impression that almost every element of *Riven* has been used, broken in, or forgotten. Rust covers almost every inch of metallic surface, water-based surfaces are coated in a thick layer of untamed algae, wooden surfaces are weathered and warped, and plant life either grows in patches or not at all (sometimes due to human activity).

Furthermore, *Riven* sometimes contrasts its usual palette with brighter colors and smoother textures whenever the game wants players to pay special attention to a particular area or room, and that is exactly what the décor of the Gate Room (which the player encounters early on in the game) is meant to do. The sheer richness of this room's royal blues and golds, combined with the slick shine of its metallic inlays and columns, is the player's first real introduction to the man they have been sent to capture. At once, the extreme opulence of the Gate Room (which, for the record, is covered in prayers to Gehn and stained glass artwork depicting his godlike and magnificent deeds), in contrast with the stark destitution of the rest of the world, gives players the sense that Gehn has a couple of major flaws: number one, he cares a whole lot more about himself than anyone else; number two, he depicts himself as all-powerful and all-knowing, and yet the world he claims as his own (for Gehn was the individual who wrote Riven's sole Descriptive Book) is falling into decrepitude around him. Indeed, *Riven* not only uses color and texture to depict the physical decay of the Age of Riven, but also uses those same devices to illustrate both the mental decay of the game's primary antagonist and the decay of the

family unit (the Gate Room also contains at least one image of Gehn casting his own son into the Star Fissure).

When *Riven's* environment does choose to tell the game's story through more direct means, it mainly does so by way of journals that players acquire over the course of the narrative. This use of journals as major storytelling devices reinforces *Riven's* narrative structure surprisingly well, working to reassure players that it is perfectly fine for them to take as much time as they need in piecing together the game's story. However, the game qualifies this message a bit through music: throughout *Riven*, semi-ambient tracks punctuate the game world with an undercurrent of snaking marimbas and harpsichord-like instruments, suggesting to players that something bad could happen at any moment. This creeping sensation (which jibes well with the ever-constant tension generated by *Riven's* minimal use of visibly physical dramatic action) transforms *Riven* into a game that not only is about taking your time, but is also about being very, very careful, as you have no idea what lurks just beyond your line of sight (a lesson that may come back to haunt the player when they must anticipate Gehn's behavior in order to entrap him).

In short, *Riven* does an incredible job of tying each of its environmental elements up into a meaningful story, a feat that lays the foundation for the game's strongest element.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Riven's* narrative is by far its fantastically clever use of context. Indeed, unlike the scores of other puzzle games that are built upon puzzles with no tangible connection to story and/or environment, Riven tightly weaves its puzzles and interactions into the context of the game's world.

For instance, one puzzle involves getting up to a metal catwalk that is (at first) unreachable because the ladder leading to it has been pulled up. This means that the player must find another way up, and they do so by lowering a trapeze-like device from the top of a forbidding structure decorated from top to bottom with animal bones; the player then must close the gaping hole in the floor of that structure (which sits above a pool of particularly deep water) so that they can reach the lowered trapeze in the center of the structure and ride it to the top.

All of the elements of this puzzle hold an important place in *Riven's* story. The way the game prompts the player to start thinking of the trapeze device as something to be lowered is through a wooden children's toy that the player finds inside a schoolhouse for young Rivenese. The toy consists of two human figures that each appear to be hung from a rope by their feet, and one monstrous figure waiting below with open jaws. When the player touches the toy, it randomly generates a number and spins the monster so that it lands underneath one of the hanging figures; it then lowers that figure by a certain number of clicks corresponding to the number the toy generated. Indeed, this toy helps illustrate that the structure the player is operating isn't solely meant as a mode of transportation from lower level to catwalk; it's meant to function as a gallows of sorts that lowers victims into the jaws of a creature waiting in the waters below (indeed, later on in the game, the player comes across a room from which they can monitor the deep pool below the gallows structure, and sure enough, they are able to both see and interact with that creature). The story surrounding this puzzle becomes even more filled out when we consider the regal, throne-like chair from which the player must lower the bone

structure's trapeze and close the aforementioned hole; from the bright colors and smooth textures that adorn it, we can tell that the chair most likely has ties to Gehn, which hints that he may be the one lowering people to their deaths.

In short, this single puzzle has taught the player a bit about the culture of Riven's people, has taught the player a bit about the relationship between Gehn and the people he lords over, and has even primed the player for learning *Riven's* number system (which happens to be an element that is crucial to solving other puzzles throughout the world). Indeed, it is this manner in which *Riven* squeezes every last drop of story out of its world and interweaves its many puzzles seamlessly into a cohesive whole that elevates *Riven* from an especially thematically-conscious game to a piece of media that is borderline brilliant.

Unsuccessful Element

One element that *Riven* could have handled more carefully is the absolute glut of lore that the game dumps onto the player. Most of the time, this is not an issue. *Riven* spends a good amount of energy in connecting the player to the game world as it exists presently, and often makes sure to keep the gap between the amount of lore associated with a given object and the amount of information players need to solve puzzles involving said object as minimal as possible. However, *Riven* sometimes lets that gap balloon much larger than it should, burying clues to several key puzzles in a mound of extra information that the player doesn't need in order to solve the puzzle at hand. For example, when attempting to capture Gehn, the player must recall that the Prison Book Atrus gave them can only hold one person at a time, and therefore will spit any current occupants out when another individual tries to use the book. However, the game only briefly alludes to this fact in a couple of places: *Riven's* opening sequence, and Atrus' journal (which places the sole line of text addressing the nature of Prison Books between multiple pages of backstory that abstract away from the current storyline players are inhabiting). This could prove needlessly overwhelming for some players, an issue that could be amended by paring down any journal-based exposition that does not tie into the game's puzzles.

Highlight

The highlight of *Riven's* narrative occurs during the player's encounter with Gehn on his 233rd Age. Upon traveling to this Age, the player materializes inside of yet another cage, which is located at the center of Gehn's latest base of operations. The player can then signal their arrival to Gehn by sounding a horn-like device, and once he arrives, he launches into a monologue about how he has mended his ways. Suddenly, Gehn notices the Prison Book that the player is holding (provided that the player has retrieved it from Tay), and asks for it. With the book in his hands, he pauses to flip through several of its pages for a nail-bitingly long beat. His brow furrows, and he telegraphs a look of slight confusion; something about this book is apparently not sitting well with him. Throughout all this, the player can do nothing but hope that Gehn will take the bait and attempt to use the Prison Book to escape Riven; the player's straining

hope butts up against Gehn's wariness, causing the scene's tension to steadily build until Gehn breaks his silence.

He walks over to the player, and holds open the Prison Book before them. "Perhaps it would be best if you went through first," he says, his calculating blue eyes boring through the player's forehead. This offer raises the stakes to a point of no return that constitutes the climax of *Riven's* narrative; the player must make their decision incredibly quickly, and if they wish to emerge from this encounter unscathed, it becomes increasingly apparent that they must enter the Prison Book of their own accord. Doing so lands the player in a realm of infinite darkness, and for another long beat, they are left to stew in their own fear. Finally, Gehn opens the cover of the Prison Book and stares down at the panel. He pauses for one last long beat, quickly shoves what looks like a weapon of sorts into his coat, and carefully reaches his hand down towards the Prison Book. When Gehn touches the Prison Book, he is sucked in as the player is ejected back into Gehn's office. The warm, welcome sound that signifies one's arrival in a new Age plays, acting as an auditory sigh of relief. "You've done it," the game says as it releases a hefty portion of its narrative's tension. "You have beaten Gehn."

However, *Riven* does not end this mini-sequence there. Once the player has successfully captured Gehn, they are free to explore his office and living quarters. Throughout the humble little abode, the player discovers trinkets from Gehn's past: a timepiece that his mother gave to him, a holographic recording of his departed wife in which she honestly affirms her everlasting love for him, a faded picture of his father. Here, we learn that Gehn was not simply a man filled with anger, but a man tormented by the loss of all whom he held dear; instead of settling with portraying Gehn as just a really bad guy, *Riven* has chosen to complicate matters by kneading some moral ambiguity into him. This prompts players to ruminate on a couple of particularly profound questions ("Did I really do the right thing? How can I possibly reconcile this person's actions with the obvious good that existed somewhere within them?"), which skillfully turn an incredibly triumphant note into something much more bittersweet.

Critical Reception

- **Adventure Gamers (Heidi Fournier): 4.5/5** – Fournier raves about the depth of *Riven's* story, declaring that the game's initial setup of rescuing Catherine and capturing Gehn "barely scratches the surface of what … you will find when you arrive in Riven." She goes on to praise the sheer breadth of the virtual civilizations Cyan has crafted, calling attention to the incredible cohesiveness of the game world's "religion[s], culture[s], language[s] and myth[s]."

- **GameSpot (Jeff Sengstack): 7.8/10** – Sengstack also notes that much of *Riven's* story is built upon environmental clues that players must pick up on; however, he adds, those clues are not as widespread and as subtle as one might think. In addition, while Sengstack does give the story points for its cohesiveness, he slightly knocks *Riven* for sticking fairly close to its predecessor's interface, calling the game "only an evolutionary improvement over Myst."

- **Adventure Classic Gaming (Philip Jong): 4/5** – Jong praises the intricacy of *Riven's* puzzles, especially when it comes to how well they are integrated into the game's environment and story. As he puts it: "To say that Riven is just a pretty slideshow is an insult to its designers. All the puzzles in the game are devilishly clever. They are so well woven into the game that the player will not distinctly feel that puzzles are being solved." However, Jong also notes that the game's heavy reliance on journals as modes of narrative delivery is a "cruelly" ironic choice on Cyan's part, "given that much of the sophistication of Riven lies on the richness of its culture." He expands on this statement a few sentences later: "Reading over 50 pages of text on screen is a daunting task for any impatient gamer, especially with the dreaded script handwriting of Catherine."

Lessons

- **Lesson 1: Integrating puzzles within the context of a world renders those puzzles infinitely more enjoyable and immersive** – By grounding its puzzles firmly within the context of its environment, *Riven* allows players to piece together the game's story through the very act of puzzle solving, which goes a long way towards helping particularly intriguing areas of the game world (such as the gallows area) come to life.

- **Lesson 2: Presenting players with too much non-essential information (especially in a written format) can hinder their experience of a game's story** – *Riven's* journals contain a lot of information, and only a bit of it is directly tied to puzzles within the game world. This could cause players to get lost in pages of abstracted backstory that are either difficult to read or not much help in progressing through the story at hand.

- **Lesson 3: Villains with morally ambiguous tendencies allow for intriguing narrative turns** – While Gehn could have been portrayed as an unfathomably evil man with no redeeming qualities, the revelation that he genuinely loved his family before it was torn apart complicates matters for the player, throwing an unexpectedly poignant haze of sympathy over the lenses through which they view the character.

Summation

Overall, *Riven* is an amazing piece of work that weaves environmental storytelling and gameplay together with a degree of elegance that games seldom achieve. While the amount of content present in the game's various journals could be simplified and/or further focused, and while the game may prove a little too similar to *Myst* for some, *Riven* still stands tall as one of the classics of early PC gaming.