

OptiMyst or PessiMyst?

This is a brief one-page acknowledgement of some of the biggest problems, with the 'Myst' series. Contrary to those who see me (Matthew Lyles Hornbostel) as an irrational optimist and crazed fanboy about the Myst games, I actually do recognize the glaring problems with the fantasy series! Still, my emphasis will be on the positive potential still existing in the series, and how the serious challenges and issues the series faces can be overcome.

This is not a well-organized document. I don't have time to check everything; I am busy with other things right now.

Problems with the adventure genre overall

The graphic-adventure genre is now a niche genre. I think this has a lot to do with the slow-paced nature of solving puzzles. Other genres appeal to a generation that has a short and still-shrinking attention span, while this genre's pace is comparatively glacial, and appeals primarily to a demographic 35 or older. That said, it isn't a dead genre, just one that needs new creative ideas that expand it beyond the trite and stagnant.

I recognize the financial failure of many genuinely innovative adventure titles in the 1990s, from the innovative "The Last Express" to the classic "Grim Fandango" to the underwhelming sales of some of the later Myst games, but I don't think that should be construed as the "death" of a genre which clearly still exists in some dormant form.

To put it simply, many of the design standards of the genre need to be thoroughly re-evaluated.

-Players getting stymied, stuck, on hard/obtuse/illogical puzzles. The excellent indie adventure game "Machinarium" gave players outright solutions to every puzzle, though these required players to complete a reflex-based minigame to unlock each solution. This meant that players had two ways to beat every puzzle; either figure it out (or) play the minigame. This multiple-paths-to-solve-puzzles idea is a good one... I credit 'Machinarium' and 'Dreamfall' for often offering several ways past obstacles. In one of the puzzle-adventure games I started making years ago – a train wreck of a production in retrospect – I had the game measure the time people were spending 'doing stuff' (exploring, clicking things, etc) in the game. A hint system would pay attention to where the player was (which puzzle they're stuck on) and how long they'd been unable to progress. The longer they were stuck, the more hints would unlock. This ensured that if players would just stick with it long enough, and keep trying things, eventually they'd be flat-out given the solution. Another, simpler path I've pursued on some projects was to make highly elaborate and visually inventive 'virtual tours' with no puzzles whatsoever... removing the puzzles entirely or, like the solution chosen by Telltale Games, making them generally rather simple and easy to solve. Yet, in my view, this should not be done at the cost of making puzzles simplistic, dull, and repetitive. The challenge, then, for the adventure game designer, is to make puzzles that are logical, interesting and creative, and solvable, often with several ways to solve them.

-Derivative low-quality design. This is not really an issue with the Myst series, but it's a serious problem with the adventure-game genre overall. I have seen a lot of poorly made adventure games. I do think one of the keys to bringing the adventure-game genre back into success is to make sure the level of quality and immersion is comparable to entries in other more successful genres. This is very hard to do nowadays given the public perception of the genre as dead or dying. Anyone attempting to create a polished adventure game now has to struggle very hard to get such a project funded, resulting in the same sort of headaches George Lucas faced while trying to get 'Star Wars' off the ground... despite the perception of science fiction as a niche film genre at that time.

That analogy is key, I think – the adventure genre needs another breakout hit to revitalize the genre and stop the self-defeating cycle in which games in this genre are poorly budgeted, poorly promoted, and then usually fail – providing justification for the truism that 'adventure games always fail, so we shouldn't invest much in them' which justifies the exact policies that caused the projects to fail in the first place!

A Solution?:

I see 'Portal' and 'Portal 2' as first-person puzzle games that draw a great deal of influence from the adventure game genre. But they were polished, well-made games with a really creative concept, logical and well-balanced puzzle design, and good storytelling. The essential thing to note here is that they were very successful games, because they were able to overcome the perceptions attached to more traditional point-and-click adventure games. Portal, in a sense, then, rebranded the adventure genre and brought it up to date, achieving massive success as a result.

I'd also like to point out the ongoing success of Telltale Games, with their strong emphasis on humor and good storytelling. Their puzzle design may need work, but they're clearly great at digging into the characters they adapt for their games and being true to the essence of the properties they work with, whether it's "Wallace and Gromit", or "Back to the Future", or reinventions of various classic adventure-game titles like 'Sam & Max' or the 'Monkey Island' series. My major complaint regarding (Telltale) is the frequently derivative and uncreative nature of the puzzles in their games.

Just because a puzzle is logical and solvable does not, by definition, mean it must be boring. A large key to the success of (Portal) was in its introduction of a novel game element which lent itself to genuinely creative and original puzzle design. Telltale's games, by contrast, are overly reliant on tired adventure-genre puzzle-design tropes such as inventory puzzles and dialogue trees.

None of the core elements of the adventure genre are dead.

Puzzles aren't dead – they just need to be made more interesting and original.

Storytelling isn't dead; it's everywhere.

First-person and third-person interfaces aren't dead either; they too are everywhere.

Beautiful, creative world and level design is likewise far from dead.

So why do we reinforce this perception of the genre as dead? This is a self-fulfilling prophecy... the genre is only a niche genre because there are few people willing to do it well. The challenge will be for the genre to transcend the current stereotype of the 'shoddily made low-budget adventure game'.

Note that even despite this perception, and the comparative dearth of quality games released in this genre, the adventure genre continues to account for 6.5% of PC game sales. That's rather impressive for a 'dead' genre.

Issues with the Myst series in particular

Although the Myst series did improve its use of technology over the years and indeed often was ahead of the curve visually – shifting to more realistic and immersive graphics and interfaces, and – with Uru – implementing a multiplayer format – there were also some basic problems with the core gameplay mechanics which were never adequately addressed.

Puzzle design issues

The Myst series itself, shifted from slideshow interface to panoramic to realtime 3d, and even multiplayer realtime 3d (with Uru) ... and always had great art direction and sound design... but the series was trapped in a pattern of difficult, convoluted puzzle design. The needed clues were always there, but they were subtle and hard to piece together. Each puzzle was a discrete challenge, and it was all too easy for players to get frustratedly stuck on one particularly tricky segment... because they couldn't – on that particularly complex puzzle - make the logical leaps required to reach that wonderful 'aha!' moment where suddenly the pieces fall into place and the situation makes sense. This sense of frustration and stuck-ness, which many players ran into at some point, is why the Myst series began losing players right and left.

It also didn't help that there were a few cases where bugs or clunky physics made things that much worse. Certain timed puzzles in Myst IV, and the Eder Gira basket puzzle in Uru, are particularly notable for not merely being conceptually difficult, but being really, really aggravating in terms of the motor skills and reflexes required for the solution. Some of the later Myst games tried to remedy the hard puzzles with embedded hint guides, or multiplayer functionality. This was too little, too late – most of the gaming public had already written off the genre as 'frustrating', 'boring'... and outdated.

That was one of the Myst games' failures and strengths, the puzzles were creative and diverse but that had a negative flip side. The puzzles were discrete, self-contained problems to be solved. They were standalone challenges for the player to figure out.

And that was problematic, because players could easily become hopelessly confused if they missed clues or key puzzle elements on certain puzzles... in every puzzle the player needs some sort of clue going into the challenge, something to give them direction... The Myst series has very subtle clues and puzzle elements which feel like they are part of the world and do not strongly scream 'puzzle!'.

A sound may be a clue. A mosaic may be a clue. A colored light, an animal, anything may be a clue. Puzzles are not necessarily obviously puzzles; they are integrated almost invisibly into the gameworld. Turning on a power generator, unlocking a vault, etc... all of these are puzzles, and the clues to the solution are not always evident at first glance.

This, while enhancing the believability of the gameworld itself, can be incredibly frustrating, especially when there's a big leap in logic that the player just can't recognize.

Aging games with compatibility problems

Part of this is the fact that pretty much the entire series of Myst games IS dated by this point. The original Myst, though brilliant in 1993, is now a relic with severely dated graphics and interface. The year-2000 realtime 3d remake "RealMyst" improves this significantly but even RealMyst has become outdated by this point.

Riven had amazingly realistic graphics for 1997 but was trapped in a 640x480 slideshow format. There is a current fan attempt to faithfully remake Riven as a realtime 3d game but this is a very slow process and will likely take years to complete, if it is finished at all.

Myst III (2001) introduced a panoramic interface but its resolution was still low.

Myst IV improved things in terms of graphics and animation but suffered from a weak story and campy acting.

Myst V was realtime 3d but done on a rather rushed schedule. Some of the environments tended to look inadequately detailed.

Many of these titles, have issues with Windows Vista and/or 7. Riven, Uru, and RealMyst run fine on current PCs, at least if acquired through GoG.com or Steam (and not through an old boxed copy) but Myst 3 and 4 have issues. There has been some discussion between publisher Ubisoft and Cyan Worlds, probably regarding updating these titles to improve Windows 7 compatibility, and releasing them online as digital-download products for current operating systems.

Narrative problems with Uru

Uru... Uru has a thin story to the extent that the story is in the game itself, and more backstory than current story. When I say that Uru's story is partly not in the game itself, I'm referring to the various appearances by Yeesha, Bahro, DRC characters, etc... which took place at specific times during Prologue and MO:UL. If you missed them and weren't there at the time they happened, then you missed them. They were recorded as chatlogs and sometimes screen-recorded on video... but the fact that current Uru players cannot experience these past story events firsthand is very frustrating.

The sparseness of story development is common in the Myst series; Myst IV had more story content than most – almost an hour and a half of character scenes – but at the cost of frequently poor acting in said content. It is like the campy indie videos I've sometimes made, where I have too many scenes to record and inadequate time to record them... and though I get the scenes down in some form, the acting in them is uneven at best.

It also doesn't help that there are a number of holes and inconsistencies within the Myst canon, like the notable contradiction regarding the location of the Cleft. My suspicion is that New Mexico seemed 'more relatable' to Americans, so it was moved there for Uru – despite the fact that the available information (camels!) in the book of T'iana indicated a location somewhere around North Africa or the Middle East.

There are other noticeable inconsistencies as well; though the games clearly have a great deal of thought behind them – including a fictional language and base 25 numeric system, as well as extensive meta-fiction background... there are obvious problems which kill immersion, and remind us all that this is a work of fiction, a game, and not a real place.

Maybe it's the ongoing confusion regarding the rules of linking that most harm credibility. There are multiple cases in which linking rules that had been established earlier, were later contradicted. This is the case with trap books and certain abilities Yeesha seems to have.

The Myst series is an elaborate but flawed fantasy work.

Other strengths and weaknesses

Worse: Uru is a game first released in 2003, with some areas released later... with a somewhat clunky physics system, and a tendency towards overly obtuse puzzles that really require a lot of thought to solve on one's own.

This is not to ignore the strengths of the game; though the visuals are dated in places the art direction remains fantastic. The sound design is likewise superb, and the puzzle design, while difficult, is creative and diverse, and generally feels more like an integrated part of the world than a discrete puzzle. One of the more interesting comments I've heard was from a family member who asked 'where are the puzzles?'... after having been in Uru for a few hours. The puzzles are so well blended into the environments that they don't scream 'puzzle' in most cases!

The inclusion of social networking functions, avatar customization, and the basic components of an MMO also makes this more than your typical Myst game. It functions as a realtime 3d chatroom with minigames and challenges that can be solved cooperatively in groups.

I think there's something to be said for Uru's alternative to RPG game mechanics. Rand Miller, creator of the Myst series, stated, multiple times, that there was an intention to 'avoid repetition, avoid leveling... but entertain with actual content.'

This is a novel approach; there is no RPG-style stats or leveling system here. Progress in Uru is defined more by what areas you've accessed and what 'stuff' you've collected...

The problem is this: the audience and the financial base for this MMO has never been big enough to fund the continual, steady output of new content, that was envisioned. While Cyan Worlds wanted a new world or worlds added to Uru every month, that requires a large production staff to achieve, a staff which the small playerbase could never support.

This is why Uru has collapsed over and over in various forms. Not enough players, and not enough funding. The current game we see now, MO:ULa, is a large but stagnant game where little new is ever added.

The company that made it – Cyan Worlds – peaked at a team of 50 employees. Now they're a remnant of what they used to be – 14 people, some of them interns, and only a fraction of that team is working on MO:ULa. The rest are trying to tread water by releasing a stream of cartoonish little iPhone apps such as “Stoneship” and “Bug Chucker”... which, while not terrible, are something of an embarrassment coming from a studio that used to make A-list games.

It seems to be a struggle for the few thousand current players to donate enough to keep the gameworld online, much less fund any significant amount of active development of it.

Current development

Most of the real progress has been towards open source; the CWE (Cyan Worlds Engine) and world creation tools are now available for free... which means that technically minded fans can now, legally, set up their own Uru servers (called Shards) and add custom-designed content to them. There are some fan-made worlds which are technically very innovative.

Ahra Pahts, for instance, is absolutely enormous; it is an entire city built out of enclosures connected via roads and bridges. The secret to Ahra Pahts is that segments of the world are dynamically loaded and unloaded depending on the location of the player, which, in the future, should allow players to create gigantic worlds in high quality.

Another standout technical achievement is Relativity, based on the M.C. Escher artwork of the same name. It uses subworlds to create variable directions of gravity. In effect, players can walk on walls and ceilings.

There are also some visually stunning worlds in the works, like the large and beautiful Brelmur, or Yinfara... as well as some smaller but really nice-looking spaces already finished, scattered amidst a large number of decidedly low-quality worlds which were done with earlier and more limited tools, or by age creators who lacked the requisite experience and skill to do anything better.

Simply put, if the players do not support Cyan Worlds' Uru fund more solidly than they've done so far, we won't have much in the way of new, high-quality official content. But even if we don't get anything more from Cyan Worlds any time soon, we'll still be likely to see steady progress in fan development of the game. I think that by the end of 2012, a lot of the Myst fan focus will have shifted over from the official server to the currently emerging wave of fan shards.

Public Image problems

I still recall people at the time Uru was released, being surprised when they realized that it was a Myst game that was in realtime 3d and multiplayer. There was an assumption that if it was a 'Myst' game that it would be “a prerendered slideshow”. The constant image problem for the “Myst” name is that it is forever associated in most peoples' minds, solely with a game from 1993... and no matter how much the series develops technically and creatively, or how many other Myst games, or novels, there are, the public generally is mentally stuck on the first game. When you mention the attempt to make a “Myst Movie” - this is what one studio is trying to do - by default people think it's based on the first game. It isn't... it is based on a Myst novel.

Influence

The ideas it and the genre Myst belongs to – some of the story concepts... the ambient, atmospheric sound design, and the imaginative surrealist-fantasy art, and many of the random bits and pieces of “Myst” have probably had an effect on the entertainment world. I know that they affected my art style significantly. Moreover, I don't think the Myst saga is over. The Myst franchise retains a pop-culture legacy; 'Myst' was referenced in a 3d episode of 'The Simpsons', it was played by some 10 million people, it helped launch the CD-ROM format into the mainstream, and it is one of a short list of video games featured in a recent Smithsonian exhibit about the art of video games. Even almost two decades after the game's release, a port of the original Myst was able to surge into the top ten best-selling iOS games list. I remember being at the end of middle school and seeing a classmate with a Riven T-shirt... early on, at least, the series was very popular. It had a place in pop culture... but the popularity of the first game or two did not translate into a popular series. The later entries, though generally well-made, never achieved the success the first game did.

The Collapse of the Myst series

Then came the Ubisoft era, and their weak, poorly targeted promotion of the games. Ubisoft's box art for Myst IV, for instance, managed to take a visually stunning game and create bland box art for it.

Ubisoft also managed to grab defeat from the jaws of victory with Uru; the game was listed as one of Time magazine's top ten games of the year – among other positive reviews – but it was a game with high system requirements, poor marketing, and with an extensive single-player component, extendable to multiplayer... many players didn't hear about the game, many who did could not run the game on their computers at the month of release, and those who could, during that first launch thought they should 'finish the single-player first'... only to find that by the time they'd completed it the multiplayer element had already been shut down. (Prologue was shut off just three months after the game went on shelves... beginning an absurdly convoluted string of reopenings and recancellations that included UU (Until Uru), two expansion packs, MOUL, and the current free-to-play, donation-supported MOULa.)

It wasn't just Ubisoft that botched this. None of the later publishers knew what to do with the series. Mattel grabbed distribution rights to (RealMyst) and put it in a pink box as if it were another Barbie product. (Ick.) Turner, the owners of Gametap, incomprehensibly aired their ads for Myst Online: Uru Live on a children's TV show on the Cartoon Network. There was a sort of idiotic assumption that if a video game was non-violent, it should be aimed mostly at small children. This made no sense with the Myst games, as they were difficult, smart, sophisticated, and, well, adult – and small children were not a logical target audience.

In short – flaws inherent in the games themselves, public views of the genre, incompetent promotion or lack of promotion by publishers, and a number of other factors, caused the Myst series to implode.

Where are things headed now?

There is still an active group of a few hundred fans in the Guild of Writers, developing Uru and attempting to update and expand it, in their spare time.

The fact that the game engine is now open source will also allow many people to do creative non-Myst-related things with it... such as a simulated Mars colony currently in early development.

The fact that Cyan Worlds made the game engine, their own in-house plugins, the server code, and the game itself available for free is actually rather generous. I hope the players will be similarly generous, and support the MOULa project. It's not even generosity, really, as the players will get something in return; all the cash in the MO:ULa fund is dedicated to maintaining and developing the online game. That status of MO:ULa as a non-profit project is what enables Cyan Worlds to

accept donations for it.

If there are enough players – the number of Uru player accounts is actually growing gradually over time - and enough of those players are supporting the game at \$1 or \$2 or \$5 or more per month, I think that development on MO:ULa will start to accelerate. We already are expecting a few notable fixes to be implemented any time now... such as the sparklie puzzle fix.

I expect there will be occasional small updates on the MO:ULa server for the next year and more substantial updates on fan servers with fan-made worlds. There are already well over a hundred fan ages made for Uru and typically at least one or two, and often more, new fan-made worlds are released each month.

Where did Cyan Worlds want them to head?

The original vision for Uru was that it would be a continually changing, expanding set of worlds, in multiplayer, with continually evolving storylines. There'd be large additions, i.e. a large world or large area, every month, small expansions (A new Relto page, a small new area, clothing items, etc) every week, minor changes and story events every day. There'd always be something new for players who logged on.

The problem with that was that it was expensive; it required a large development staff to churn out content that fast. Cyan Worlds had (50) full-time employees at the time they first tried to launch Uru... and when we consider not only midrange salaries but electricity, hardware, and software... it may have added up to somewhere close to a million dollars per month at the peak of production.

Possible synthesis of Cyan Worlds vision with fiscal reality

It is, however, much cheaper to meet these sorts of goals if much of the work is done by unpaid fans or, low-paid fan interns. I am altogether in favor of this; if Cyan Worlds paid me a bit above minimum wage to develop worlds for the game I'd definitely consider doing so... it would be preferable in some ways to the unreliable and limited online income I'm now dependent on.

Cyan Worlds has pulled staff from the fanbase in the past – and I'm talented enough to do something. There are a lot of Myst fans who are doing amazing work unpaid, in their spare time as a hobby, and could probably be pulled into full-time fan art if they were given the option.

Collaboration between core Cyan Worlds staff and unpaid or low-paid fan artists and programmers, could be a key to ramping up development on Uru for relatively minimal cost.

That said, unless Cyan Worlds makes me an actual offer, which I'm convinced they won't (they seem to be actively discouraging applicants) I'm not really planning to develop more Myst fan ages any time soon. I need to focus on something that has real income potential and unpaid fan art doesn't fit that goal.

So anyone who wanted me to finish “D'ni Temple: Area Two” or Nay'eleh, or some other fan age... it probably won't happen any time soon.

Although I am a Myst fan, I also want to earn a living... which is why I am not spending any time on fan art (for the time being) and have mostly stopped logging into the game. Quite frankly, there's not much happening there, I'm bored, and ready to move on.

Sorry, Uru fans. The good news is even if the progress of individual fan artists is slow, there are enough fan artists, and musicians, and programmers, that new fan ages emerge rather often.

That's key... perhaps a few hundred fans working in their spare time, can achieve something close to what Cyan Worlds had hoped to do with fifty full-time staff.