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The Book of Myst in the Late Age of Print

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Book of *Myst* in the Late Age of Print

Steven Jones



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The *Myst* Age

My point of departure is the fact that the 1993 Broderbund-Cyan CD-ROM game *Myst* has sold an estimated two million copies to date, making it among the most widely experienced hypertexts (if not, strictly speaking, hypertexts) in our time.¹ Only the Web as a whole has allowed more users to follow more forking paths to unexpected if not indeterminate ends. Even if we grant the phenomenological differences between a literally textual and a graphical environment, theorists of hypertext would do well to pay attention to *Myst* and what it reveals about the place of the Book at this late moment in the history of print culture. When the stand-alone CD-ROM game is situated in the context of cultural production (in this case, materially, the publishing enterprise), the world-making impulse figured in the very structure of the game, as successive or parallel “ages” or technological regimes, tellingly gives way to messier arrangements in the social nexus—extraneous networks, intertexts, contradictory modes of production, overlapping markets of users, hybrid notions of genre, sparse or tangled, end-less webs of provisional links. *Myst* and its production makes a text worth reading, in part because of the way it reminds us of what we know but are continually tempted to forget: that no text—much less hypertext—is an

island.

Despite its graphical interface and its being marketed as a virtual reality game, *Myst* is fundamentally a hypertext product. It was developed in the early, quintessentially hypertextual software, HyperCard,² and one navigates the spaces of the game by clicking through successive cards in a series of stacks; it's just that the cards contain images rather than verbal lexias. Besides, as others have noted, *Myst* has deep (sub)cultural roots in command-line games like *Adventure* and *Zork*, with their virtual environments the player manipulates by way of raw text.³ ASCII commands—**turn left; open trapdoor; pick up torch**—are replaced in *Myst* and its species of game with mouse clicks through a lushly rendered series of images (over 2500 in this case). In effect, such hypermedia games translate hypertext into pictures. Another way to put it is that they amount to nonverbal renderings of what Michael Joyce once articulated as the ideal hypertext experience, in which “movement” takes place as a series of “yields” to the touch of the hand of the user.⁴ In this case, the user's hand holds a mouse and the onscreen cursor is the familiar tiny-hand icon. Trial and error, experimental wandering, is the only way short of an “external” hint book to learn which objects or paths “yield” to a click. When frustrated or trapped—in the dead-end tunnel of a maze, for example—one is at first tempted (as the documentation warns us) to give in to unproductive “thrashing,” clicking wildly on every possible feature of the scene.

Viewed more positively, this potential for frustration looks like freedom. The lack of directions and paucity of verbal clues in the game are precisely what most reviewers have praised.⁵ Like stumbling into someone else's dreamscape or stepping into a quiet surrealist painting, the general opinion runs, this game encourages the suspension of disbelief in one's freedom to navigate. The paths fork and you must choose, but there is no default motion sweeping you along: you stand still until you click. And since, as the publicity for the product repeatedly makes clear, no one dies in this game—*Myst* is an antithesis to the maze game *Doom*—the user tends to relax into the rhythm of aimless

wandering, a *flâneur* without the crowd, strolling, alert and yet dreaming, ready to respond with a forefinger click of focussed attention to any phantasmagoric object or scene. By far the most promising objects, however, those that yield instant transportation to other “ages,” turn out to be the enigmatic, backlit, fetishistic, leatherbound books that are everywhere you turn in this landscape.

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