

Discovering Uru: Hard Fun and the Sublime Pleasures of Impossible Gameplay

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Introduction

Since 2004, I have spent many hours studying players of the game Uru, a Myst-based MMOG that has opened and closed several times since its initial beta in 2003. I have written a Ph.D. thesis, numerous papers and book chapters, as well as an entire book on the members of the Uru diaspora, players of the game who dispersed to other games and virtual worlds after its initial closure (2009). The closest I have come to writing an article about the game itself was a 2008 paper for the Future of Digital Games (FROG) conference in Vienna entitled “Spatial Literacy: Reading (and Writing) Game Space,” in which I analyzed the way players “read” story and space in Uru (2008). Although it was ostensibly “about” the game, it still viewed Uru through the eyes of its players. One of the reasons for this is that when I began studying Uru, the game no longer existed. Thus my initial experience of Uru was entirely as a ghost, a chimera, a memory of the lost “homeland” (their term) from which the community I studied had been expelled. I learned of Uru through their documentation and stories, as well its player-created artifacts and instantiations in other virtual worlds. I listened to them tearfully recount the last moments of their game, many reporting a sense of post traumatic stress from the experience. If anyone ever tells you a video game can’t make you cry, all I can say is, they aren’t playing the right games or talking to the right players.

Uru: Ages Beyond Myst was born the same year as World of Warcraft (WoW), the game-changer that brought massively multiplayer games (MMOGs) out of a niche market and into the mainstream. At its peak, Uru had less than one thousandth the players that WoW has at this writing. A massively multiplayer game based on the Myst franchise and the brainchild of one of its originators, Uru is the closest thing we have to a multiplayer variation on the adventure game, a genre that, in spite of its continued popularity, is considered to have been pronounced dead at the end of the last century.

Originally shut down by its publisher, Ubisoft, after a mere six-month beta test, Uru is and was, by any standards of commercial and critical success, an unmitigated flop. Reviews of the game are almost

nonexistent, and few gamers I talk to, including the majority of game scholars, have never heard of the game except through my writings and presentations, and to-date, I am the only academic researcher I am aware of who has written about it. For all intents and purposes, Uru would be one more corpse in the MMOG graveyard, alongside Ultima Online, Asheron's Call, The Sims Online, and a plethora of other ill-fated online worlds, all of which failed with a higher player count and public awareness than Uru. Except for one little problem: Uru's players won't let it die. Including its initial release, Uru has been opened, closed and re-opened in various forms (including a fan-run server system) four times to-date. At this writing, the game is running out of the offices of its developer, Cyan Worlds, which charges a small up-front fee for a "key" and takes donations to maintain its servers.²³ In between its various openings and closings, Uru-derived and inspired environments have generated across multiple virtual worlds, including There.com (which recently closed), Second Life, and OSGrid. Currently, an active fan-base of about 3,000 players in Europe, the U.S., Australia and South America, continues to explore Uru on Cyan's server, as well as inhabiting a variety of virtual worlds carrying the collective, self-identified moniker of "Uru Refugees."

The Enigma of Uru

This sustaining passion by a small group of (primarily Baby Boomer) gamers begs the question: Why? What is so great about this game that it has inspired an ardent contingent of fans to continue to revive and re-revive it in various forms over the past seven years, a trend that shows no sign of abating? Why has this game, which seemed to draw perhaps the smallest MMOG following in history, also managed to inspire one of the most passionate fan communities this side of Star Trek?

It was not until the game's third release, as *Myst Online: Uru Live*, under Gametap Originals, that I actually got the chance to play Uru all the way through. And it was not until its current release, which occurred while I was in the midst of working on this essay, that I feel I have even the most rudimentary understanding of the game itself to be able to write about it. But what I will say is this: I began as a fan of Uru fans, and I have now become one of them. In spite of its cult status, and its commercial failure, from the perspective of game design, especially in the multiplayer realm, as well as interactive storytelling, I believe that Uru is one of the best digital games ever created. Uru combines an evolution of the sophistication, and artistry and complex gameplay and storytelling techniques of *Myst*, whose 1993 appearance is still

considered a watershed in the maturation of the medium, with a complex and novel social sensibility that has held rapt its small but ardent followers for nearly eight times the duration of its initial release.

While it is not particularly original to claim that a game is unique, *Uru* is, truly, like no other game before or since. It defies, indeed transcends genrefication, and one could argue, it may not even really be a game at all. It flies in the face of virtually every MMOG convention: There are no points, no levels, no combat, no character progression, no skills and stats, no armor, no inventory, and so forth. As far as storytelling conventions, it breaks every rule in the proverbial book. When I said earlier that *Uru* is “closest thing we have to a multiplayer adventure game,” I meant precisely that: not that it is a multiplayer adventure game, but that if you have to put it anywhere near a genre, that would be the one to which it lies closest. In some respects it is an anti-game, or at least an anti-MMOG, an approach that was very deliberate on the part of its lead designer Rand Miller, who sought to create a game that was the opposite of every other MMOG in every conceivable way.

It’s been said that writing about music is like dancing about architecture, and I would say the same hold true for games. In fact, I would argue that the better a game is at being a game, the harder it is to write about. However, as game scholars, it falls upon us to tackle this conundrum, regardless of its inherent absurdity. Thus I will do my best to describe the indescribable by walking the reader through a few carefully chosen areas in the game that provide but a glimpse into this enigmatic masterpiece.

The Cleft: “Tutorial” as Heuristic Device

A number of clues to *Uru*’s appeal can be found in its opening area, known as the Cleft. The Cleft sets the stage for the game and serves as both a literal and figurative liminal space between the “real world” and the imaginary *Myst/Uru* universe. The use of the word “Tutorial” in quotes here highlights the fact that it is barely a tutorial in the traditional sense, yet it provides players with all the vital information needed to play the game without resorting to didacticism. The Cleft follows the classic constraints of a heuristic device, a device that teaches about itself through its use. The word heuristic derives from the same Greek root as the word *Eureka*, an exclamation of discovery attributed to Archimedes. In fact, it might be said that discovery is *Uru*’s dominant emotional paradigm and its principle pleasure, enhanced by the extreme difficulty of achieving each discovery.

Cyan is notorious for baffling players, for sharply avoiding the standard devices of both game design and game narrative. No game in the *Myst* series ever explicitly tells you its goal. Stories are told without the use of cut scenes or expository. Although there is much text, it is oblique, confusing and riddled with gaps, hidden and double meanings, metaphors and clues, and some of it is inscribed in the made-up language and numerical system of the D'ni. Unlike most "narrative" games, the gameplay is not strictly sequential, although there are conditionals, such as an area that is unlocked only after a particular puzzle is solved. Characters seldom appear, and when they do, it is most often through forensic evidence. (Sound like the classic hallmarks of an alternate reality game, or ARG? There's a reason for that, which we'll get into in a moment.) Your identity is left somewhat ambiguous. *Uru* is the only game in the *Myst* series in which the player character, cast in the role of "explorer," is embodied in any way, through a customized avatar.

Uru begins in the present-day New Mexico desert with little explanation as to why you are there, and only a few oblique hints to help you on your way. I would classify this area, the Cleft, as the perfect opening for a game. It introduces all the major themes, ideas, and game mechanics in a way that is completely integrated into the story and the gameplay. Each element of the game is carefully introduced in its narrative context. From the location where you are initially spawned, one of the first things you see is patch of woven cloth, ironically posted on a "No Trespassing" sign. The fabric has a stylized symbol of a hand on it, suggesting that you touch it. If you click on this cloth, which any experienced *Myst* player will know to do, your avatar will press her hand on the cloth, and one portion of the symbol will illuminate with an accompanying sound effect. Eventually you will find that this "Journey Cloth" is the key artifact in the game. This is the first of seven Journey Cloths you will need to find to complete this and all other levels. Each subsequent Journey Cloth touched will illuminate showing your progress in collecting them until you have collected all seven. The hand itself, as well as its incremental illumination, is one of many techniques the game uses to convey instruction and information visually and through the gameplay itself.

Myst players are conditioned to explore any space they enter thoroughly, to literally and figuratively leave no stone unturned. As you explore the surface of the desert, which surrounds a small hill, you will discover some artifacts familiar to *Myst* players: a crashed rocket from the original *Myst* game, a skeleton of a creature seen in *Riven*, etc. You may also find more of these cloths. Throughout the level, you will also find

pages of cream-colored paper with green sketches of natural objects on them. This is another key artifact, as you will discover later, to be collected throughout the game.

Designer Rand Miller told me in an interview that the Cleft was a new concept in Myst games, serving as a transition from the real world to the imaginary world of the D'ni (Pearce, 2010). This was an experiment, and was the first time a Myst game actually made reference to the real world. In fact, the launch of the original game was accompanied by a very early alternate reality game (ARG) that included

Figure 1: Touching a Journey Cloth in the desert.

physical artifacts in the actual New Mexico desert. One of the original members of the Uru design team went on to work at 42 Entertainment, the pioneering ARG company that created *The Beast* and *I Love Bees*, which employed many similar storytelling methods.

The intent of Uru's designers was that players would enter the world as themselves, another innovation for the series. Miller wanted to avoid the archetypal (and one might say clichéd) fantasy roleplaying paradigm of other MMORPGs. In fact, the name Uru is a deliberate double entendre meaning "you are you." Many Uru players took Cyan's lead and created avatars loosely based on their own appearances. My research indicated that having an embodied representation of themselves and each other in the world greatly enhanced players' sense of presence, which contributed to the strong bond that players formed with the game and their identities within it (Pearce, 2006; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009).

In the Cleft you encounter two of the three central characters in the game, and the only one who appears in flesh-and-blood form: This is Zandi, an unassuming middle-aged man sitting by a camper with a radio playing a Peter Gabriel song. Zandi explains "She's left a message for you in the Cleft...Listen to her, find the journey, and then, enter the tree." If you approach him a few more times during the level, he may throw you a few more hints.

The Cleft itself is a womblike cave dwelling nestled within a fissure on the desert surface. At the far end is a tree whose base is in the bottom of the Cleft, and which is the main entrance to the rest of the game. The tree is another allegorical symbol that pervades throughout Uru, as is water, which appears in pools at the bottom of the Cleft, as well as in a number of the Ages.

Figure 2: The Cleft in the desert, and the entryway to the lost city of D'ni Ae'gura.

Beside the Cleft is a broken windmill. Windmills are a common theme in Myst games, as are machines that need to be turned on. You climb down a ladder into the Cleft, a compact, though abandoned, cliff-dwelling style compound. This introduces the affordance of climbing. The Cleft has a number of planks and handmade bridges. If you cross one in particular, it breaks, dropping you safely into a puddle a few feet below. To ascend again, you will need to jump up to another level of rocks, where you will discover that the broken bridge can now serve as a ladder, thus adding the jumping affordance to climbing.

Figure 3: Descending into the Cleft: introduction of climbing.

Figure 4: A broken bridge serves as a ladder.

Eventually you find yourself in a room directly under the windmill (you may not figure that out right away), where you can unclamp something, which turns out to be its bottom stem. Once the brake is opened, you can return to the surface and push the windmill until it starts up, thereby powering all the contraptions in the Cleft below. This is a very common spatial conceit in the game: the placement of interrelated mechanical parts in separate spaces that turn out to be adjacent to each other. A new mechanic is introduced: powering up machines, environments and contraptions. Once the power is on, you will be able to do some other things in the space, including operate a sliding door that reveals another Journey Cloth, and activate a holographic projector.

Figure 5: Powering up the Cleft by activating the windmill.

This is a classic Myst-style puzzle. It also serves as an introduction to virtually every other mechanic you will use throughout the rest of the game—exploring, climbing, jumping, touching things, pushing buttons (usually active buttons are illuminated in blue), pulling levers, turning on machines, pattern-matching, finding Journey Cloths (the hand-inscribed cloth described above), picking up Relto Pages (the cream-colored paper with the green drawings), reading text, interpreting icons and symbols, including glyphs in unfamiliar languages throughout the game. The Cleft also introduces a pervasive game mechanic: the powering up, turning on and restarting of old machinery, which becomes progressively more complex in other levels of the game. It is literally and figuratively, a holograph, a microcosm of the entire gameplay within a

small and relatively easy mini-level. All this is done without the use of cut scenes, expository or explicit instruction of any kind.

The Cleft uses a classic device of Myst games, one that I have previously termed the “interactive backstory” (1997; 2002). This technique uses forensic evidence of past events, allowing you to piece the clues together to construct a whole narrative in your mind. The Cleft is abandoned, but you can see that someone lived here once, possibly more than one person, that they lived somewhat of a makeshift existence, but that they had also made this transient dwelling to some extent their home. There is a letter from a father to his daughter. There is a space that looks like a laboratory, or perhaps an archaeological field station of some kind, with sketches and maps on the wall. By the door, a pattern showing four cryptic symbols can be seen etched into the wall. A nearby device has similar symbols laid in a similar configuration, but in a different order. When you touch the quadrants on the device you notice that the symbols change. If you match the symbols on the device to the symbol pattern by the door, you can start up a holograph of Yeesha, the protagonist of the game. This is the message to which Zandi referred earlier. She speaks, first in a foreign language, then in a kind of poetic way, about water, and journeys, and The Least...she walks to a cloth similar to the one you saw earlier and touches it, telling you there are seven “journeys” in each Age. At this point you can literally walk through her and touch the Journey Cloth.

Figure 6: The Yeesha hologram, activated by the puzzle on the left.

Yeesha is one of only three characters that “appear” physically in the game, and each only once: A living human (Zandi), the holograph of a human whose current condition is unknown (Yeesha), and the skeleton of a dead man (Kadish). Yet of these three, ironically, we know least about the living, human character, Zandi. What we know of the other two, Yeesha and Kadish, we know almost entirely from their environments. Yeesha “speaks” to us via her holograph, yet her “home” in the Cleft also gives us important information about her character. She also speaks to us retroactively throughout the game via the clues and tasks she has left for us.

Yeesha is both literally and figuratively a liminal figure. She occupies an intermediary space between the real world in the present, represented by the Cleft, and the D’ni world of Ages, represented by entering “the cavern” to which it leads. She is half human and half D’ni, with human characteristics, but apparently also possessing the arcane D’ni skill of

“writing” Ages, housed in “linking books.” Even her status as a living person is unclear: while Zandi is clearly alive and Kadish is clearly dead, Yeesha may or may not be alive. As a hologram, she is a translucent ghost that lives in a partially embodied state, frozen in time between the past and the present. She becomes an emissary, an ambassador, a bridge though indirect and mysterious means, from the past to the present, from the “surface” to the cavern, from the magical world of the D’ni to the “real world” of the Cleft and its human explorers, as well as the factions in conflict within the cavern. She leaves you clues, evidence, journeys. Yet, she never tells you anything, never gives you instructions. Yeesha communicates to us through the game space itself. Even the small puddle at the bottom of the Cleft into which we were dumped by the broken bridge means something: it is a foreshadowing of her subsequent comment about “water returning to the Cleft.” Once we enter the cavern, we will find that water plays a crucial role in the D’ni culture and many of the Ages.

As anyone who has played World of Warcraft and others of its ilk know, this approach to storytelling and to game directions is completely anathema to how narrative in MMOGs typically functions. Lead designer Rand Miller was very clear that he wanted to avoid creating a game that was about leveling through a repetitive grind; he wanted people to have meaningful, interconnected experiences that were intellectually challenging and also had a palpable, persistent effect on the world (Pearce, 2010). In WoW, the standard procedure is for nonplayer characters, who are populous, to give you explicit directions as to what to do and where to do it. This prompted me to write a blogpost posing the question “Am I playing the game or is the game playing me?” (Pearce, 2007), in which I pondered the ramifications of doing everything a game tells one to do. In Uru, far from explicit instructions, you receive only oblique, poetic clues that you must navigate to find your way. Once you learn the pattern, the game’s basic elements are quite simple; yet the process of solving its puzzles is highly challenging. By and large, each Age contains the following:

- Seven Journey Cloths, each of which must be touched to complete the journey and pass through the Journey Door into the Bahro Cave.
- One or more Relto Pages, which add features to your Relto (the only visible measure of progression in the game).

- One or more puzzles that transform the space or open up areas of the space in different ways to provide access to the Journey Cloths.

A Journey Door, which will open into a Bahro Cave, once you have found the seven Journey Cloths in the Age. Each Bahro Cave contains artifacts that are added to your home space, called a Relto, to signify that you have completed the Age.

Occasionally, a costume element you can collect, such as a hat, shirt, backpack or pair of shoes. These have no instrumental function.

Figure 7: Relto page.

Once you complete the Cleft, including finding all seven Journey Cloths both on the surface and within the cliff dwelling itself, you unlock the tree at the far end of the Cleft. Within the tree is a dark cave-like room where you retrieve a small bound book. This takes you to your personal space, the Relto. All players carry their Relto book on their belt, and can return to their Relto at any time by opening it up and placing their hand on its picture. This introduces the final mechanic of this level: linking books, which provide transport to the Ages and other spaces in the game.

Public and Private Space and Pervasive Gameplay

The Relto is an example of Uru's unusual approach to thinking about private and public spaces. The Relto is the most private space in the game, and players can also belong to a "Bevin" (called a neighborhood or "hood" in earlier versions of the game). The term Bevin refers to both a group, and a shared space for that group. Players in Uru can belong to only one Bevin, for which they have a book on their Relto bookshelf, but they can visit any public Bevin or any private Bevin to which they are invited.

The most public space in the game is the abandoned city of D'ni Ae'gura. This is a very large environment that players can explore, with a wide range of space types, including a museum, a theater and other environments. There are also traffic cones and barriers distributed around the place to block access to areas that are not yet open. During the game's commercial runs, areas were opened periodically as part of the episodic structure.

Although the linking books for the first four Ages of the original game appear in the Relto, in the commercial, episodic version of the game, players could collect new linking books that mysteriously appeared in the city, or in a few cases, within the Bevin. Once you pick up a linking

book, that book appears in your Relto bookshelf, and your personal instance of that Age is generated.

Private Space: The Relto and “Nonlinear Progression”

The Relto serves as the player’s “home base.” It is here that all the players’ current activities are kept, in the form of linking books. It is also the only means in the game, in the absence of points, numerical levels, or gear, of measuring player progress, but it does so in a decidedly different fashion than any other MMOG.

The leveling paradigm is so pervasive in MMOGs that it is almost a foregone conclusion that players will level, in a relatively linear fashion, through some system of points, rewards, and an increase in power and capability. Uru takes a radical departure from this method to measure player progress in the game, one that I term “nonlinear progression.” The idea of nonlinear progression is that players can complete tasks and accrue achievements in any order they like (within the limitations of the game’s framework) and there is no set value with how many of these have been completed. While numerical values are the primary markers of levels (e.g., “level 70 elf mage” or whatnot), linear progression in MMOGs is often also visually represented by increasingly elaborate armor and weapons. More advanced players will sport high-level gear that signals achievement and status to other players.

Rather than using costuming, under the auspices of “gear” (Fron et al, 2007a), Uru uses the Relto as a spatial representation of character progression. Since progression is nonlinear, and there is no point-scoring mechanism, and no particular inventory to speak of, the Relto becomes the means to collect and display player accomplishments. A skilled Uru player can “read” another player’s Relto and quickly determine where the player has been and her level of completion in each Age.

Figure 8: The Relto, showing game progression, with Relto Page landscaping and one tall pillar, meaning one Age has been completed.

At the start of the game, the Relto, a floating island in the clouds, contains a small, adobe hut, and some minor landscaping. Within the hut are a wardrobe, which serves as the avatar customization interface, and two sets of bookshelves. Various elements and features are added to the island through gameplay as follows:

- Short pillars contain linking books to the first set of Ages appear in front of the hut; as the game progresses these become tall pillars based on Ages completed and Bahro Caves entered.

- A stone “donut” shaped floating sculpture to which wedges are added representing Bahro Caves successfully entered, and therefore, Ages completed.
- Linking books are the primary transportation mode of the game, taking players to the “worlds” or Ages created by the D’ni. Players start with a small number of linking books, including one that leads to the “Nexus,” a hub from which they can enter their own and other players’ Ages, and one that leads to the player’s Bevin. As players visit Ages and find books, new linking books are added to the Relto bookshelf.
- Relto Pages, described earlier, are green sketches on cream-colored paper that depict natural elements: birds, trees, flowers, water. When collected, these transform the Relto by adding décor and landscape embellishments.

Players carry two objects with them at all times: A PDA device called a Ki (primarily to facilitate social interaction, but also for picture taking), and a Relto book. The Relto book is a small journal that players use to return to the Relto whenever they wish. The Relto is also the point of return in the event the player takes a fall of a high place, the closest thing in Uru to death. Uru avatars are immortal.

Ages & Instancing

Many MMOGs use the constructs of shards and instancing. Shards are different servers, each of which has a replica of the game, but whose culture may vary depending on its inhabitants. Instancing is a way to create a quest or scenario for a specific group of players. A group basically launches an instance so they can have a private experience with their own guild or a provisional group. Some games, such as Guild Wars, use this method liberally: most gameplay takes place in instances. This allows individuals or groups to make persistent changes to an instance that will be maintained from one visit to the next. Non-instance based quests will reset to their starting state after players have either completed or failed to complete the quest. They also have the additional problem that only one group can do them at a time, and players often “camp” a quest, depleting monsters and making it impossible for others to complete. The instance method allows an environment to change and a story to progress in a fashion that is unique to each player or group undergoing that quest.

Uru takes a completely different approach to instancing. By and large, each individual player has his or her own instance of each Age. Part of the reason for this is that, since Ages take a very long time and multiple

visits to solve, each player needs to have his or her own game state saved from one session to the next. There are also group-based instances whose linking books are usually found within a Bevin. A player can invite others into her instance of an Age by either sending an invitation through the Nexus (essentially a library of linking books), or by inviting a player to his or her Relto and opening up the Age book for the player to enter. Thus, while the game is multiplayer, each player must solve her own individual Age instance to progress in the game. And while each Age (with a couple of exceptions) can be solved as a single-player experience, because the Ages are so challenging, players generally assist each other in solving them. Helping new players is a big part of the Uru culture and more experienced players relish in guiding newer players in solving Ages. There is a very specific style of assistance that avoids spoilers, but encourages players to solve the puzzles on their own, even with the help of others. Players do not receive any type of tangible reward for helping others, but it is such an ingrained part of the culture that there is an entire Bevin, the Guild of Greeters, devoted to helping newcomers. They also have a web site with expertly crafted walkthroughs to help players through the Ages. The outcome is a highly repeatable game, with most Uru players having completed each Age multiple times, including redoing each personal instance of the Age in each new version of the game, as well as helping others complete their Ages.

Public Space and Group Space: The City and the Bevin

The most public space in the game is the City of D'ni Ae'gura, a neutral place open to all players. The City is where many of the linking books can be found, and while it leads to Ages, it is not, in and of itself, an Age.

Figure 9: Three views of the City of D'ni Ae'gura.

The Bevin, known in earlier instantiations of the game as the Neighborhood, or colloquially, the "hood," is a shared group space. Each player may "belong" to only one Bevin or hood, but hoods can be made public, open to all players, or private, open to hood members only. The hoods have some special features, such as a linking book room, and a lecture hall, as well as a central fountain, emphasizing the water theme. Readers familiar with my other writings on Uru will recognize the fountain as critical to emergent behavior among players, often serving as the first artifact created by Uru refugees in other games.

Figure 10: The Bevin (Hood), showing the central fountain.

Both the City and the Bevin are neutral zones that don't really contain gameplay per se, much as the city areas in traditional MMOGs serve as neutral, "no-combat" zones. However, there is a pervasive game element that exists throughout these areas called a "marker quest." A marker quest is essentially an Easter egg hunt for orbs of that are visible only to players who have the quest activated. When you are near a marker, you click on the flashing marker symbol on your Ki to collect it. Marker quests are extremely popular, and after completing the first series of quests, players can create their own marker quests for other players to complete. In addition to designed elements, players also invented their own emergent pervasive game activities within the public areas of Uru, such as the Saint Patrick's Day Parade, and the D'ni Games, an Olympic style competition with made-up sports such as cone balancing (balancing on an upended traffic cone) or tent rope climbing.

Figure 11: A marker quest in the City of D'ni Ae'gura. Upper left is interface to Ki.

Nonlinear Storytelling

Rather than the typical MMOG storyline of a series of isolated quest or quest chains, the Uru story is told through non-linear exploration of spaces and solving of puzzles, each of which reveals some information about the world, its inhabitants and its history. In addition, the episodic version of the game included live actors (known by players as Cyanists) who took the role of contemporary human characters, the "D'ni Restoration Council (DRC)" who also served the narrative role of "opening up" new Ages and areas in the City for the players to explore.

The Uru narrative foregoes classic tales of military grandeur, simple construct of good vs. evil, and aspirations of heroism that are prevalent in combat-based MMOGs. Instead, it favors nuanced moral conflicts. The *Myst* series has allegorical biblical references, and perhaps the strongest of these is Pride, the first of the Seven Deadly Sins, and the most egregious and destructive among the denizens of the D'ni world.

The core storyline and conflict of Uru, revealed over time as the puzzles and Ages are solved, revolves around the moral conundrum at which Yeesha is the center. The D'ni, whose own world was destroyed, occupied—colonized, as it turns out—this cavern in the New Mexico desert. They built a vast and complex underground City, now deserted, with linking books to their complex puzzle-worlds, called Ages. The D'ni have the ability to "write" these Ages, or worlds, into being with their magical linking books, but possession of this godlike craft has made

them prideful and greedy. The implication is that it is this pride and greed which led to their downfall.

The implicit goal of the game is for players to help the DRC restore the city, and potentially bring back the D'ni. However, as the plot unfurls, mostly through obtuse clues left by Yeesha, we come to realize that the D'ni had enslaved the prior occupants of this cave, the Bahro, or "Best People," the people to whom Yeesha refers as "The Least." Players in the live, episodic version of the game were eventually incited to take sides: one group are followers of Yeesha whose goal becomes the freeing of the Bahro, the other are followers of the DRC, who want to restore the city and hopefully, bring back the D'ni. A third group emergently opted out of this artificial conflict, preferring to steer clear of what it perceived as "drama" between players. These were generally referred to as OOC, or "out of character" players.

As originally envisioned, Uru was meant to be an episodic game, with new Ages released and new events occurring on a regular basis. This vision was realized in part, only to be aborted, in the Gametap instantiation of the game. Here the "Cyanists" brought the fictional DRC characters back into the game, and a number of new Ages planned for the original game were released. Interestingly, this episodic method was not so much about playing out a plot, but rather was used to maintain the Myst storytelling convention of revealing events that had happened in the past. These events were not always revealed in their proper sequence. The episodic technique also allowed for the development of a complex level of subterfuge. Strange events were occurring in the present-day D'ni Ae'gura and the DRC were an integral part of this aspect of the game.

Example Ages

The following are some examples of gameplay within Ages. I have picked three Ages which are indicative of the game's overall approach, and only specific aspects of each. The third Age I've described, Kadish Tolesa, is the most complex Age in Uru; here I touch on a few aspects of this Age because it provides some particular insights into Uru's game mechanics as well as its storytelling method.

Eder Gira/Eder Kemo: The Garden Ages

Eder Kemo and Eder Gira are two interconnected "Garden Ages" (Eder means Garden in D'ni) that together constitute a single puzzle. While all Ages in Uru include natural and manmade elements, these two do so in a very specific way. Eder Gira is a natural environment with human intervention, and Eder Kemo is a manmade natural environment, a

garden. Machines Ages, in contrast, are primarily manmade, sometimes with natural elements integrated into them. In most Uru Ages, many of the manmade elements are broken, need to be powered up, or need to be set into a particular sequence to function properly. The Gira/Kemo Age is unique in that it is two Ages in one, and requires the completion of both to complete the Age.

The first area of Gira is a somewhat treacherous desert with twisting paths between tall mountains and high falls. Below its cliffs and narrow paths are rivers of lava. Throughout the Age are steam vents coming through the rock, some of which can be opened or closed using a foot pedal, which places a large, hexagonal board over the vent. Eder Gira blends fire and water, which is a pervasive theme throughout this Age. The implication is that the lava is related to the steam, and also creates a sense of danger, as there are a couple of high and treacherous places you need to get to in order to close vents and find Journey Cloths.

Figure 12: A view from above showing a journey cloth (left) and a steam vent on an island surrounded by lava, both of which require jumping to access.

In addition to collecting Journey Cloths, the primary puzzle in the first part of Gira involves closing a particular number of vents. Once this is done, players may ride a puff of steam coming out of an open vent over a rock and into the second area. While still in the desert, this second area is more benign, surrounded by rocks and cliffs, and including a waterfall and a small pool. When you explore this area you will eventually find that there are caves behind the waterfall, but they are dark. In some cases, you can turn a light on, but at some point you will need to find a light source to explore the caves.

Also in this area is a small gazebo with a linking book on it. This book leads to Eder Kemo, a lush garden surrounded by rock and cliffs, and including benches, paths and fountains, a manmade natural environment. It is here you will find the cave to the Bahro door whose entry will signal the completion of the Age. There are several Journey Cloths in this Age, and an experienced player will know to look thoroughly behind things, and to jump into high places to find them.

Figure 13: Journey Cloth hidden on the back of a rock formation in Eder Kemo.

This environment has several other interesting features. One is a swarm of fireflies that you can get to follow you by getting into their

midst and walking down the path. If you run they will disperse, and they will also disperse if it starts raining, which it does intermittently and unpredictably. If you experiment enough, you will discover that the fireflies can serve as a mobile light source when you walk through some of the tunnels in the garden. You can also use those tunnels to protect them from the rain. If you are an astute Myst player you will eventually realize that you might be able to actually use the Eder Kemo fireflies to help light your way through the caves in Eder Gira. The fireflies will actually follow you through a linking book at the far end of the garden.

Figure 14: Transporting fireflies from Eder Kemo to Eder Gira via linking book.

This sequence in the puzzle is extremely arduous, time-consuming and requires a process of repeated trial-and-error to complete. It is nothing if not a lesson in patience and tenacity. Since we know fireflies don't like water, we have to do a number of things in the Gira waterfall area to get them across the pool to the caves. If we walk into water, we will lose them; if we run, we will lose them. Eventually, with repeated failures, we will discover that we can jump exactly one time but a second jump will cause them to disperse. Thus we have to find some lobster traps that we use to form bridges to cross the pool once we bring the fireflies back into Gira. We will also have to cross under the waterfall in one place, and jump over it in another, all while trying to avoid dispersing our fireflies. Once we get to the uppermost cave, we will find a Journey Cloth, and are rewarded for our efforts with a pith helmet that we can wear.

Perhaps in part due to the beauty of their environments, in addition to their gameplay function, Gira and Kemo are popular hangout areas for Uru players. One of my earliest experiences in the player-run server instantiation of Uru involved playing a game of hide-and-seek in Kemo, with players coming up with ingenious hiding places, some of which exploited glitches in the geometry of the environment. In Gira, players like to sit on a high stone arch in the waterfall area, from which they can see distant landscapes that I have heard players lament that they will never get to explore.

Figure 15: Using fireflies from Eder Kemo to illuminate the caves in Eder Gira.

Figure 16: Entering the Journey Door.

Part of what is so fascinating about the Gira/Kemo Age is that it involves transporting something between Ages via linking book. I have never done this Age without assistance of some kind, from either of seasoned Uru player or from the Guild of Greeters' online guide. I am still baffled as to how a player would be able to make the leap on their own that they could bring the fireflies from Kemo into Gira to light up the caves. The process of learning the fireflies' behavior is extremely complex and takes multiple failures to master. Yet dozens of players completed this Age and loved it. Part of the appeal of this Age for me is how poetic it is: fire and water, lava and steam, deserts and gardens, and fireflies which are not just an environmental effect but also a functional element of gameplay. I think we see this kind of poetic use of gameplay on occasion (*Portal* comes to mind), but to experience it in such a beautiful and sublime environment is rare.

Eder Delin

Eder Delin is a newer Garden Age that was introduced with the Gametap version of Uru. When the Age was released, a copy of the linking book for Delin appeared in each Bevin. It is one of the few puzzles in Uru that is a distinctly multiplayer Age that cannot be completed by a single person. It is also one of the few Uru puzzles that is timed. And it also has a slightly different mechanic than other Ages: rather than collecting the seven Journey Cloths one at a time, you have to activate them more or less all at once in a sequence.

Delin is a beautiful lush, colorful environment with trees, flowers, benches and fountains. The Journey Door is opened by a combination that is solved as follows: There are seven Journey Cloths hidden in various locations throughout the Age. These are different from other Journey Cloths in that rather than the traditional hand symbol, they show a spiral. When touched, a different section of the spiral will illuminate on each.

The Bahro Cave has a combination lock which, when activated, reveals a sequence that shows different parts of the same spiral symbol on the Journey Cloths being illuminated. In order to solve the puzzle, players must press each of the corresponding Journey Cloths when the matching piece of the spiral appears on the lock. Because the Journey Cloths are spread out throughout the Age, and are not even visible from the door, this Age typically requires multiple players to solve, ideally a total of eight, one to monitor the door, and seven others to touch the Journey Cloths in the right order.

Figure 17: Decoding the door in Eder Delin.

The multiplayer nature of this puzzle makes it particularly popular with Uru players, and because of the individual instancing scheme described above, every player has to get eight of their friends to come and help them solve their personal instance of the Age. Even if all players have solved the Age, players will frequently go to Delin again to repeat the procedure. It's actually one of the simplest puzzles in Uru, but its co-op nature makes it one of the most fun. It also takes a relatively short period of time to complete relative to other Ages.

Kadish Tolesa

I'm only going to speak briefly about this Age because it is one of the most complex to describe, and is notoriously the most difficult to complete.²⁴ However, Kadish is an important Age in terms of story and theme, so I wanted touch on some of its characteristics. Kadish Tolesa provides perhaps the best example in Uru of the use of both space and gameplay as characterization.

The key to solving its puzzles is understanding the personality of its creator, the brilliant, yet prideful and greedy, Guildmaster Kadish. Kadish is a fallen sage who was expelled from his Guild. One of his notable characteristics is his "careful omission of information in order to seem more powerful to others" (Guild of Greeters). Because of this, all the puzzles in this Age are solved by looking for what is missing or absent.

The Kadish Age also has an associated space in the city of D'ni Ae'gura, the Kadish Gallery, which you can access via a linking book within the Age, as well as through the City itself. The Kadish Gallery contains clues to the solutions of all the puzzles in the Age. While spaces that are shared between Ages and the city are not unusual, a space that contains clues for all puzzles in an Age is a rare feature. The clues are of course, complex and oblique. It is common for players to have a pen and paper on-hand in order to draw or write down visual content they encounter along the way.

Figure 18: The Kadish Gallery contains clues to all the puzzles in Kadish Tolesa.

Kadish puzzles often involve transforming the space. In one example, known as the Moon Room, players must follow a path on the floor that is obscured in shadow. If correctly followed to a center spot in the room, areas of the floor drop away to form a staircase to a secret doorway. In the Pillar Room, pillars are lowered and raised by the correct

combination of lever pulls. Once you configure the pillars correctly, you can climb up a series of ladders embedded in their sides to get to an inaccessible door high on a back wall.

The final puzzle in Kadish is the combination lock to Kadish's vault, a chamber suspended by cables in a large cavern. Although clues to this lock are found in the gallery, as it is based on the Kadish principle of finding what is missing, it is a fairly complex combination to solve. Once you have entered the vault, you discover the skeleton of Kadish himself, alongside a note in D'ni and annotated in English. In spite of his brilliance, Kadish, it seems, was done in by his own pride and greed.

Kadish also has a twist that occurs in a number of other ages, and that is a time travel mechanism. A linking book within the vault will take you to a different version of the vault at a different time. This alternate vault is virtually empty, with the exception of a few artifacts (one of which you can collect) and a Relto Page which adds a feature to your Relto.

Returning to the original vault, once you exit, you will see the Journey Door entrance to the Bahro Cave; however, you will have to traverse one of the narrow beams that holds up the vault suspended in the cave to get there. If you've picked up all the Journey Cloths, then you will be able to open the door and collect the pillar and the wedge for your Relto.

Kadish is, as mentioned earlier, only one of three characters that appear, physically, in the game, in this case, as a skeleton. He represents one of the Myst themes of the destructive force of pride and grandiosity. That he meets his end locked in a vault with his own riches is a fitting end, as well as a stark statement about the futility of hubris and greed. In spite of Kadish's godlike attributes as one of the great Age-writers of his culture, his own mortality is further punctuated by his petty materialism in this very stark scene in which the greatest symbol of his wealth becomes his tomb.

"The Ending Is Not Yet Written"

In spite of its nonlinearity, Uru does have an ending, and a rather dramatic one at that. It is an ending that is both unexpected and inevitable, but as promised, I will not conclude this article with a spoiler. The quote referenced above, "The ending is not yet written," refers to an oft-invoked quote of Yeesha's that Uru players return to in an ironic reference to their own fate. With each subsequent closure, devoted Uru fans have brought forth this quote, and low and beyond, Uru has risen again from the ashes. Uru players are nothing if not persistent.

Hard Fun and the Sublime Pleasures of Impossible Gameplay

As mentioned earlier, central to Uru's gameplay is the pleasure of discovery, the Eureka moment when a difficult puzzle has been conquered and the solution found. It also epitomizes Alan Kay's concept of "hard fun." Kay coined this term to describe activities, such as playing the violin, that are at once challenging and enjoyable. I would also argue that the best examples of hard fun are, like playing the violin, sublime. While most games can be characterized as "hard fun," I would argue that Uru is an example of what might be characterized as "sublime fun."

The concept of "fun" is itself increasingly contested, with the game industry and its press tending to use a fairly generic, male-centric perception of the term (Fron et al, 2007b). This results in novel games such as Uru, and even popular but unconventional games such as The Sims, getting panned in the mainstream game press. But there are many types of fun tied to the play preferences of each individual player, and even a variety of preferences and moods within that player. The stereotypical marketing construct of the "hardcore player" overlooks the fact that players who enjoy Halo, or Grand Theft Auto, can also enjoy Farmville and Diner Dash. This question calls for a deeper analysis of the varieties of fun. For as many varieties of fun as exist, there may also be a variety of methods for going about such an analysis, from a "player-centric approach" that focuses on individual players, to more of a literary theory or film studies style textual analysis. Any of these methods is valid, but they are long overdue.

Whatever type of fun is characterized by Uru, it must be classified among the hardest of hard funs. The so-called "Mensa-level" puzzles of the Myst games, and especially those featured in Uru, are notorious for being diabolically challenging, as well as imaginative and creative. Yet it is this very difficulty, combined with the social dimension of the game, that has long held Uru fans in its rapture. The sublime challenge, combined with the opportunity for collaboration, create fertile ground for the formation of what Bernie DeKoven calls a "play community" (DeKoven 1978). The play community is a group of people whose decision to play together transcends the game they are playing, and whose mutual respect allows each to perform at his or her optimal level and maintain the optimal experience, regardless of skill or experience. Building on DeKoven's concept of "co-liberation," which in turn builds on Csikszentmihályi's notion of "flow" (1990), I define this as "intersubjective flow." This is characterized by a form of flow that is enhanced and maintained through group interaction, whether competitive or cooperative, and can be seen in a range of practices, from sports to music, to video games.

Uru achieves the sublime pleasures of impossible gameplay by merging this transcendent experience of intersubjective flow, hard fun of the “violin” variety, and a compelling and beautiful story world with a rich mythos. The result is a sublime experience comparable to any great work of art, yet totally unique to the video game medium.

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