Present:
Carl Wilhoyte (interviewer, Screen Invasion)
Everett Gunther (no audio)
Matthew Sampson
Max "Zib Redlektab" Batchelder
Philip Peterson

Transcript:
Carl: Hi, I'm Carl Wilhoyte. I'm the video games writer for ScreenInvasion.com and I'll be interviewing the Starry Expanse development team. For those of you that don't know, Starry Expanse is the full 3D remake of the 1997 game "Riven."

Matt: I'll start <indistinct> so, I'm Matt Sampson, and then my role, basically, is what you're looking for?

Carl: Yeah, basically what you do in the context of Starry Expanse.

Matt: I take on a couple of different roles. My main role right now is doing what we call a camera match set-up. It's a real basic overview trying to get the actual scale and dimensions of all the different assets that we are putting into this world at the correct scale, using the screenshots from the game to kind of pull some magic to figure out where they actually were in 3D space, based on 2D images.

Carl: Oh, okay.

Matt: I've been doing a lot of that — it's hard to translate from these 2D images what the scale of these objects actually are... so we're doing all sorts of trickery to get that set, and it's been very challenging, but the results have been pretty satisfying. I also have been doing the character rigging, for the different characters, making them able to be animated, and I'll be taking on some of the animation roles once we've got some of the rigs in a little better shape. So a little animation, a little rigging, and some overall level setup.

Carl: Okay.

Max: [...] I'm Max Batchelder, but I'm more commonly known as Zib. I'm the — I guess I was one of the founding members of the project, and I'm sort of a developer but mostly I do a lot of PR and managerial sort of stuff. I do some amount of coding, but that's mostly Philip's domain. But I'm the guy who gives the talks at Mysterium and does a lot of the posts on our website... and I guess I'm the treasurer of the project as well.

<laughs are had>

Max: So, yep, so that's me. I dunno, heh.

Carl: All right, Philip, want to ahead and go next?

Philip: Okay, so I am Philip, and I'm the other co-founder with Zib, and I do mostly programming — programming gameplay, shaders... yep, that's it.

Carl: Okay, short and sweet. First question, am I supposed to be able to get out of the elevator in the demo? Because I cannot figure out if I'm supposed to <audio cuts out> or not...

Philip: Not upstairs.

Matt: <indistinct> After it goes up?

Carl: Yeah, after it goes up.

Matt: It's blocked off for now.

Carl: 'Cause I spent like 20 minutes clicking on stuff, like am I clicking on the wrong thing? What am I doing wrong?

Carl: No, I'm not supposed to be able to get out of the elevator, excellent.

Max: No, not yet.

Matt: The um— I'm not sure if you were able to get into that point in the game when you played it originally; there's a character interaction that happens in that scene, so you'd be talking with a character on the other side of that gate.

Carl: Yeah, I got through pretty far, but I never played it all the way through. Now I guess I'm obligated to play through...

Matt: Yeah, so that was just a little taste of that.

<Max laughs>

Carl: Yeah, it was definitely really cool to see that part of the game moving in 3D. It was definitely a new, interesting experience, kind of going from the 2D space into 3D space. I was wondering if you could each tell me about your first experiences with Riven? What really made you fall in love with it as a gaming experience?

Matt: Zib, do you want to start, or...?

Max: Sure, why not? My first experience with Myst as a whole was when my parents started playing it when it first came out. And I was like 1 or 2, so... I barely remember my first experience of Riven. Obviously Riven came along a little bit later, but it really began playing with my parents, so it's been part of my life for as long as I can remember. And, I don't know, it seems completely unlike any other game that's come out since then, pretty much, just the depth of the world and the way it's intertwined with the story that's presented — it's just magical. So, that's me, I dunno. <chuckles>

Philip: Well, when I — you can go ahead, Matt.

Matt: For me, I started by getting hooked by Myst, which a lot of people had, and I had been just totally engrossed in that world. It definitely captured my imagination; I spent many a day just closing the doors in my room, lights off, headphones on, just getting immersed in that universe. I believe, actually, my copy of Myst actually had a demo for Riven. Because it was one of the re-releases of Myst — Riven had already come out, and so, just seeing the graphical overhaul and the added levels of immersion when I was already blown away with Myst, it was something that got me hooked immediately. And just the quality of puzzles, and how they were integrated into the environment was something I had never seen in any kind of puzzle game before, where a lot of puzzles games in the past, they'd have puzzles, but they'd just be like a tic-tac-toe game — I can't get through this door until I do this obtuse puzzle that makes no sense, where these puzzles were integrated in a way that makes sense for that world. That was the game that actually inspired me to pursue an education in 3D animation. That's why it's so exciting for me to be a part of this project, because here's this game that was such an inspiration to me as a kid, and now I'm here recreating it. <laughs> So it's been pretty exciting.

Carl: Excellent, thank you! Philip, how'd you fall in love with Riven?

Philip: Well, mine was kind of weird; my parents had played Myst, but I was too young to really understand what was happening, and by the time I actually found a Myst game to play, they had

traded it in for Riven, so, I just started with Riven, and I had no idea what was going on. But, yeah... that's about it. <laughs are had> I don't know what else to say...

Carl: Riven is a really insanely large game, you know, spread over 5 CDs, as you probably know this better than I do about how big the game is... Why pick such a big game to convert to 3D?

Max: I mean, a lot of that <indistinct> — we're in love with the Myst series of course, and the original Myst was already done (in realtime), and then Riven is my favorite, so a lot of it just came from the fact that I really want to play the game that we're making, and I felt like no one else was going to do it, so, if no one else will, we're going to do it.

Carl: Gotcha.

Philip: And it was a huge demand. Everybody was saying, "Man, when are they going to make a realRiven?"

Max: Yeah.

Philip: So, we just said, "Well, nobody else is going to do it, so we might as well."

Max: Why not us?

<laughs are had>

Matt: Cyan released realMyst, and then that was everyone's — the next logical step, people were asking. And they had made it clear that they didn't have the resources to do it themselves, and that's where we came in.

Carl: Okay, excellent.

Philip: Also, they were saying the technology's not good enough to make it look good, at the moment... but, I mean, that was a while ago, so...

Carl: That's a bit of a strange response. Considering, when were they talking about, "we don't have the resources <indistinct> technology to make this happen"? When did they say that specifically?

Philip: I think that was around when Myst Online was happening? or before that.

Max: It's been their party line for a long time.

Carl: Okay.

Matt: Myst Online, that was about 2003-2004, and let's see, Everett...

Philip: It was probably just whenever people just started asking for realRiven.

<question about Twitter based on misinformation>

Carl: One of the things I was really surprised to hear about was the fact that you actually had been around for five years, in some form or another. Can you guys give our readers a bit of a percentage of completion?

Max: Percentage of completion — we get that question a lot. It's not as much as anybody wants it to be, but it's difficult for us to have a lot of the game done when it's kind of a side project for most of us, so... if you consider that there's five islands, and we've mostly been working on the smallest one, which is Prison Island. Prison Island is probably about... 80% complete? Is that accurate? I know we had bits and pieces of all the other islands... I mean, it's probably less than 50%... but I don't know how to make it more specific than that.

Matt: One of the things is, if you look at the length of the project and the percentage that we've gotten, it hasn't been stretched evenly throughout that entire thing. For a long time — there have been a lot of starts and stops, and re-starting, or working it to a certain point and then realizing we could do something better, and taking over from there. It was really the last year or

so, I'd say, that we really accelerated and started getting some serious work done. And that's pretty much when Cyan started taking notice, really.

Max: Yeah, okay, the first few years were just us (Max and Philip), and as passionate as we are, we're not the best artists <indistinct> and it was really after Mysterium 2010 that we started picking up actual artists who are good at doing things. And since then, we've been working a lot more, so, the project has been around for a long time but we've only been working full-steam for less...

Matt: Everett brings up a good point in the chat, too, where, as crazy fans, we are very big sticklers for the accuracy of what we're doing. So, it does slow down the process a little bit, but for us, it's a labor of love that we're happy to take the extra effort just to make it that much better.

Max: Yeah.

Carl: What would it take to supercharge this development process? What's the thing that you guys are missing?

Max: Free time.

<Laughs>

Max: Most of the team is comprised of college students, and everyone else has a full time job apart from this project. It's difficult for us to find the time to just sit down and crank out game. We've been talking a lot about the possibility of something like a Kickstarter, or something like that, that would allow us to do that sort of thing, but we haven't finalized any plans in that department yet.

Carl: Okay. What's been overall the biggest technical challenge you guys have faced?

Matt: Hmm... <laughs>

Carl: I understand that the whole process —

Philip: I can tell you the one that *will* be the worst.

Carl: — will be like a Don Quixote-esque <laughs> struggle, but I mean, what's been the one thing that's been surprisingly tough?

Matt: Everett says scale, and I may agree with that. It is really hard to get a 3D representation of a 2D element to be accurate. For my area, that's definitely been the big challenge. Anyone else?

Philip: Well, I can't tell you, necessarily, what the biggest challenge we've had so far is, but I can definitely say that the biggest challenge will be Jungle Island. Because that island is just the hugest thing ever, and in a couple of shots you can see the whole thing at once, so... we're going to need to work some magic to get it all to work.

Max: A lot of it was, like Matt said, just getting things to look right, given that we only have the original screenshots from the game to work from... and other reference materials outside of that, but mostly it's been working from those original screenshots so the development of our camera matching technique, which we mentioned earlier, has been invaluable. But that process takes time.

Carl: When I first heard about the project, it immediately reminded me of *Black Mesa*, which was the Source Engine remake of *Half Life 1*. Are you directly translating the game, or are you adapting it for full 3D? For example, the *Black Mesa* team actually edited parts of the on-a-rail segment to make it less annoying.

Matt: And we appreciated that.

Max: There's a lot of discussion of that sort of thing... for the most part, we are rabid fans, and are just trying to make as close a representation of the original game as we can. There are some areas that we've discussed adding things like a day and night cycle, or the possibility of adding weather elements, and there's some of that present in our demo already. At the same time, we're worried about things like puzzles not being as solvable if it's night-time, so maybe possibly having to tweak things for that. But, at our core, our first priority is, "remake the game exactly as it was originally." I don't personally know from *Black Mesa* what the annoyances that were fixed were, but I don't feel like there's that much in *Riven* that needs fixing, so... I don't know, that might not be true for everybody, but... <laughs>

Carl: Well, I'm just happy to hear that you guys aren't going to dumb the really tough puzzles down, in order to like...

Matt: No, definitely not.

Max: We like 'em hard.

Carl: That's really good to hear.

Philip: One thing we might is when you push the button to rotate the Gate Room... make that a little bit shorter.

Max: <indistinct>

Carl: Just make it faster, that's all I care about.

Max: Make it faster <laughs>

Carl: Make it, like, instantaneous.

<laughs>

Carl: But, I really like the idea of the day and night cycle, and the weather cycle, and making it more immersive by having change as you progress through it.

Max: Exactly. The ultimate goal of the project is to have *Riven*, but more immersive, and so then the question of, "What was the original intent of the original game?" Like, if they could have done night time, would they have done night time? And that sort of thing.

Carl: I guess as a fellow fan of *Riven,* is keep the original music.

Max: Oh yeah.

Carl: That stuff's amazing, I love the music for *Riven*.

<laughs>

Carl: So that's my one fan <indistinct> music. One of the things I've personally been following and really excited about is the Oculus Rift, and you said that Oculus support is not going to happen right now. What's the main impediment you face with integrating a development kit?

Philip: I think the big thing that makes us not want to immediately commit to the Oculus Rift is the fact that so many of these ideas that have come up for improving *Riven* have already made the overall project much larger than it maybe could be. So, we've got a bunch of extra goals, and adding Oculus Rift right now would probably be just a distraction, so, maybe once it's done, we'll have the ability to decide, "Let's do Oculus Rift now."

Carl: Yeah. 'Cause you guys are doing The Starry Expanse in Unity, aren't you?

Max: Yeah.

Carl: Yeah, because Unity's going to have Oculus Rift native support for it. They've already

signed on to it as a developer.

Matt: Yeah, there's a developer kit, I believe, apparently.

Carl: Yeah. Well, I'm saying that it is possible that you guys should seriously think about it.

Max: Yeah, I mean, it's clear that there is a huge fanbase for that thing, and it seems very interesting — at least to me personally. I would love to play this game with Oculus Rift. It really boils down to, we already feel like we don't have that much time to work on this project, and putting more on our plates, even something that seems as straightforward as Oculus Rift... you know, there's going to be complications from that, and we just don't want to commit to anything yet.

Matt: We need a few islands under our belt first.

Philip: We would like to commit to it, but we can't do it.

Max: We would love to commit to it. But...

Philip: Not yet, at least.

Max: It's just, we don't want to risk putting anything down yet that will inhibit us later on.

Carl: Gotcha. I remember you said previously — in your 2011 Mysterium presentation — you stated that you had access to the original *Riven* source files. Has Cyan Worlds commented on the project or talked to you guys recently about it, like since then?

Max: We are in pretty constant contact with Cyan. They're busy with their own stuff, so we don't get, necessarily, as much communication as we would like, but they do definitely approve of the project. They've told us before that they would like to be doing it, but they don't feel like they are capable of doing it at the moment, so they've been very supportive.

Carl: Yeah, 'cause Cyan Worlds themselves are only like a 40-person team.

Max: Yeah, they're pretty small. We've heard that they're doing something — I mean, they're definitely still working on something, but we don't know what, so...

Carl: They've recently been porting a lot of their stuff to iPad.

Max: Yeah, *Riven* for the iPad just came out, it's a pretty good port. (But, it's not gonna be as good as ours...)

Carl: Kind of going off of that, you say you don't have plans for Oculus Rift, have you thought about maybe making a mobile version out of it?

Max: I think that also falls under the heading of, "We would absolutely love to do it, but it's a very low priority." Obviously Unity and most modern engines support at least the iPhone, if not Android as well, but I think that just having the engine work on that platform doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be easy to do. So, it's the sort of thing that once the game itself comes out for Mac and PC, then we can think about maybe porting it to other ~~engines~~ platforms, but it's definitely not something we're considering right now.

Carl: Okay.

Philip: There's usually a lot of extra programming, like to support touch, since you don't have a keyboard, and things like that.

Max: Of course. And then issues with shaders — the mobile hardware is great, but it just doesn't have the same features as the computer hardware, so a lot of, like, transition stuff is necessary.

Philip: And phones don't have GPUs really, so...

Max: It's just not as simple, unfortunately.

Carl: Yeah... and from what I understand, the iPad has a really low memory ceiling too.
Max: Yeah.
Matt: Even for the *realMyst* version, which is *Myst* in real time, they had to get rid of the day/night cycles, I believe, and wasn't the sky static?
Max: Did they?
Philip: Yeah.
Matt: I think so.
Philip: For the new realMyst.
Matt: What's that?
Philip: For the new realMyst, it's a static sky.
Matt: Yes, they had to scale back some of the features of *realMyst* to get it to work on those mobile platforms, and likely we'd have to do the same thing, so the optimization that would have to take place to get it onto a mobile device would be pretty extensive, so we're focusing our core devices — PC and Mac, at this time, definitely.
Carl: Gotcha. Have you guys ever made a formal pitch to Cyan about them bringing you on, similar to how the guys from Counter-Strike and [Portal brought?] into Valve as the <indistinct> for a product?
Max: We have... we never even considered that, really. We were pretty happy when they told us that they were happy with the project just existing, so... we had never really considered anything like that, but it's an interesting idea.
Carl: 'Cause, seems like they would only have to drop a little bit of money to you guys, and then you would just work on it.
Max: Yeah, I mean

Max: So our main point of showing off what we've done is Mysteruim, the Myst convention that happens in the first week of August every year, and we will be showing off things that are not Prison Island, because we're sick of showing that off, and we have other things to show off. As for the next demo release, playable thing, we're not entirely sure if that'll be out at Mysterium,

but we'll see. If we have something that's really playable enough to send out, like Prison Island is.

Carl: Do you guys think I could get like a sneak peek screenshot or something like that?

<small silence>

Max: Uh. <laughs> Possibly. Maybe, I don't know.

Carl: I'm asking real nice. <salesman smile>

<laughs>

Matt: We might be able to come up with something.

Max: We'll see what we can do

Carl: Okay

Matt: We'll have to search through our stuff and...

Max: Yeah, we'll see if there is anything we can send you without giving too much away

Nick: I wasn't even there, clearly something has gone wrong during the transcribing process.

Carl: Okay, right 'cause obviously I don't want no spoilers or anything about - because you'd want to save that for Mysterium - but a little taste would be nice.