MG: The Making of Buried in Time

When Michel Kripalani, Dave Flanagan, and Phil Saunders of Presto Studios Inc. began writing the storyline for Buried in Time in July 1993, they frequently hashed out ideas over dinner at restaurants near their Miramar (San Diego) offices. Evenings were prime time for the creative crew behind Buried in Time. After all, director/producer Kripalani spent all day on the business of the successful The Journeyman Project, predecessor of Buried in Time; writer Flanagan was already raiding UC San Diego's Central Library and every used bookstore in town for background on the "worlds" they'd be recreating in Buried in Time; and creative director Saunders — well, Phil still works full-time during the day designing cars for Nissan.

o evenings would find the trio sharing a meal of rice vermicelli and barbecued pork, the table covered with spring rolls and books, as they discussed the logistics of time travel, the economies of assembling building materials to construct a space station (hint: start by hollowing out a nearby asteroid), how Leonardo da Vinci might have spent his time during a period where nothing of his work is known, or why a Mayan pyramid offers game-playing

opportunities you simply can't get with an Egyptian pyramid.

It All Started With a Concept... "We probably bounced around more than two dozen ideas before we finally found the basic story premise of Buried in Time, which is the idea that you the player, as Temporal Security Agent #5, are on trial for altering history, and that you've been framed," said Flanagan. Agreement on the concept led to five months of writing and "sometimes great, sometimes grueling" story meetings to figure out what time zones Agent 5 would travel to, what the various worlds would look like, what puzzles the character would have to solve, who framed him and why, and how the game play would lead to Buried in Time's dramatic climax.
To choose the time-travel destinations, "They had to look cool and they had to have ample opportunity for game play," said Flanagan. Kripalani elaborated: "We wanted things people hadn't seen before in films or games, especially other CD-ROM games. We were looking for something with a feeling of mystery, and where there was an interesting gap in human history now."

These gaps in history dovetail with the ame's time-travel concept. In Buried in Time, set 10 years after The Journeyman Project ends, Presto hypothesized the creation of the Deep Time Unit, a group whose mission is to check the accuracy of known human history by traveling back in time to events and filling in the blanks. "This approach allowed us to pick points in time with events that are not well documented and that fit into the story," said Kripalani.

Case in point: One of the game's worlds is Leonardo da Vinci's workshop in Renaissance Italy. "We took a point in da Vinci's life — when he was working for the Duke of Milan designing war machines, and no one knows many details about where he lived and his work was very secret — and we elaborated on it," said Kripalani.

In addition to the da Vinci workshop, the time-travel worlds of Buried in Time include a Mayan temple, Richard the Lion-hearted's Chateau Gaillard castle in medieval Normandy, a space station, TSA #5's future home, plus two other futuristic worlds whose identity is best saved for game play. Contenders that didn't make the cut were Egyptian pyramids (overdone concept) and Atlantis, a mythical (i.e., not historical) world that would have meant a fifth time zone.

Part of the writing process included research for the unmatched level of detail built into Buried in Time. "I had my UCSD library card maxed out most of the time during the story development phase. Phil and I also made regular pilgrimages to ALL of the local used bookstores," said Flanagan.

"We pretty much cleared the shelves of every book on castles,

Mayan archaeology

Saunders. “For

castle, Dave

and da Vinci,” added

example, for the medieval

looked for historical things we could build

on while I was trying to get inspired by

neat castle architecture.”

Buried in Time promises more historical detail than any game on the market, and each richly constructed time period is the

result of the team’s research and hard

work.

“Happy Accidents” a “Key” to Interesting Game PLAY

“We wrote the story and designed the environments at the same time, which allowed us to work back and forth between design and game play,” said Kripalani. Saunders designed all the environments except two, which he handed off to Presto intern-turned-supporting-conceptual-designer Victor Navone.

The story/design interplay “left a lot of room for happy accidents,” according to Saunders. For example, the team was having difficulty figuring out where in the medieval world it made sense, technically and logically, to hide a key needed to solve one of the puzzles. In the meantime, design of the world continued. “The solution to the problem spontaneously emerged as we were creating a neat interaction spot in the castle’s blacksmith shop,” Saunders said. “The puzzle solution wasn’t originally scripted, but just sort of fell into place because of what we were trying to do with the environment. It became one of our best puzzles.”

“Cheese Girl” Inspires Puzzle

Many of the gags thrown into the game purely for levity ended up becoming important story elements. Back when Presto was creating The Journeyman Project, a 5-year-old girl who lived across the street frequently arrived to ask if Greg Uhler, Presto’s lead Mac programmer, could “come out to play.”

One day, when given the usual answer that Greg was too busy, the little girl pulled out a chunk of cheddar from her purse and said, “Well, would you like some cheese?”
“We were in such a twisted, demented mood from having worked all these hours, that this became a funny story that we told all the time. We never knew her name, so she just became the Cheese Girl,” said Kripalani. The Cheese Girl inspired one of the commercials on the Interactive News Network (a futuristic interactive CNN) that runs in Agent 5’s future home in Buried in Time. The ad, in turn, becomes important for solving one of the game’s puzzles.

Sly References to The Journeyman Project

“Because events of your future self in Buried in Time take place 10 years in your character’s future, we set it up so that the events of The Journeyman Project made you a hero, complete with made-for-TV movies based on your life,” said Saunders.
In at least one instance, Presto used a gag tying its first and second products into a puzzle clue. TSA #5’s future apartment includes a series of The Journeyman Project action figures: your character and the three robots you encounter in the first game. These action figures become integral to one clue. An added twist pays homage to Presto’s actual Japanese distributor: “One of the action figures on the coffee table is still in its package, with the company’s logo on the package,” said Saunders.

he Biosuit Time Machine

The vacuform plastic Biosuit worn by live-action actors in Buried in Time as they portray time-traveling Temporal Security Agents is an integral part of the story. In the story, technology embedded in the Biosuit lets the agents travel at will among all the game's past and future worlds. Saunders, drawing on his industrial design and special effects experience, designed the Biosuit to "look technological enough" to credibly act as a time machine; compensate for limited available window size in the game's interface (which he surmounted with a completely opaque "protective" faceplate with a video camera feeding the agents a screen window-sized view of the world); and be flexible and able to be worn by actors of various sizes.

As a side note to indicate the diversity of the Presto team's background, Farshid Almassizadeh, the project manager for Buried in Time, also acted as a "stunt double" for all the actors any time the Biosuit faceplate was closed. Turns out "Farsh" is also a gymnast "with the right height and a great sense of balance," said Saunders.

enaissance Fair Extras and Michel's Cousin in Live-Action Scenes

Saunders' and Navone's conceptual designs went to Jose Albanil and Leif Einarsson, Presto's lead 3D screen modeler, who translated the drawings into 3D wireframes on the computer.

From Albanil, the images went to either E.J. Dixon III, the game's art director, or Frank Vitale, a texture designer, who applied textures to each 3D object. Researching appropriate textures for objects — accounting for historical accuracy and futuristic realism — was a huge undertaking in itself.

The images then went to the 3D department (Eric Hook, Shadi Almassizadeh [Farshid's brother], and Eric Fernandes), who were responsible for animating the images and choosing the right lighting and camera moves. "The 3D department had to take all the different pieces, assemble them, make sure they all lined up precisely, then render out all the camera cues as they relate to game play," said Kripalani.

Video scenes of live-action actors all had o be worked out far in advance but actual filming took place during just three days in April 1994. Filming went smoothly in large part due to Saunders' preparation. "I designed some environments around the video shoot, to set up the angles and distances the video would have to be shot from, and to establish the actors' range of motion so they didn't walk through walls and tables," Saunders said.

At a family Christmas dinner a couple of years ago, Kripalani was able to persuade his cousin, professional actress Michelle Scarabelli, to lend her talents to Buried in Time. Scarabelli's credits include playing the mother in Alien Nation and Data's girlfriend on Star Trek: The Next Generation. Presto found the other actors for the Biosuit scenes through a local talent agency. To fill the cast for medieval scenes, Presto used professional actors they found at a Renaissance Fair.

"I have a vivid recollection of standing in the parking lot of the studio with three guys dressed in full medieval armor, coaching them on Middle English pronunciation. I have a little experience with it from school and, believe me, it's not easy. It combines aspects of German, Scottish, and modern English. In the end, those bits of dialogue ended up being dubbed by a voice actor who didn't even attempt the Middle-English pronunciations," said Flanagan.

Like Scoring a Movie

Sound, so often poor cousin in interactive CD-ROM games, was a full member of the family in Buried in Time. Presto hired professional musician/composer/arranger/sound effects expert Bob Stewart, persuading him to abandon a job in the video industry to work full-time on all the sound and music for Buried in Time.

Seventy percent of the game is accompanied by music, all of it composed, arranged, and performed by Stewart, who loaded his complete MIDI recording and music studio in his van and rolled it off into Presto's studios in September 1994.
"Doing the sound for this game was like scoring a movie," said Stewart, and in fact Presto decreed from the outset that the game's theme song evoke movie themes rather than

“corny game theme songs,” said Stewart. The rest of the music consisted of variations on this dramatic, melodic theme.

n addition to music, the game has extensive sound effects — an effect for every movement during game play. Not simply footsteps, for instance, but footsteps with various echoes depending on the room (i.e., cavern vs. futuristic apartment) or the terrain (concrete, dirt, mud).

Prerecorded effects from a 40-CD library are combined with real-life sounds. In one scene, a character gets hit with an arrow. The player hears the arrow flying through air, followed by a thud (actually a refrigerator door being closed), a squish, and crushing bones (courtesy of the special effects library). For futuristic sounds, Stewart purchased “the most advanced synthesizer on the market, which makes brand new sounds people haven’t heard before.”

The Wild, Wild Worlds of Buried in Time

From a story standpoint, da Vinci’s workshop was the game’s most challenging world to create. “It was the most full of potential, with the idea of interacting with a place full of da Vinci devices. But we had to figure out, what do we invent that da Vinci

adn’t? How do we put together a game play puzzle built out of da Vinci devices? We were constrained by historical facts, and it was very difficult to fit fantasy into reality. But in the end, the environment was one of our best,” said Saunders.

The player ends up exploring da Vinci’s workshop alone at midnight, solving logistical puzzles aimed at getting to the top of one of the workshop’s towers. The environment exemplifies Presto’s combination of rich fantasy anchored in meticulously researched detail. “Half of the stuff in the workshop is really stuff that da Vinci designed during those years, and the rest Victor created with the same format, feel, and materials,” said Kripalani.

After rejecting Egyptian pyramids in favor of Mayan ones, Flanagan chose Chichén Itzá on Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula because it had “lots of interesting things to work with.” They thought they’d use El Castillo, the site’s main central pyramid, until discovering that most Mayan pyramids are solid except for the upper roof comb. Uh, oh. “Then we found one pyramid at Chichén Itzá, the high priest’s grave, where an entrance through the grave leads to an underground catacomb system whose purpose no one knows. Bingo!” said Kripalani.

“I discovered that the Maya believed that the souls of the dead had to travel through the nine levels of the Underworld on their way to the land of the dead. The myth also explained that the soul had to pass a trial on each level before making it to the next. Boom. Instant game play,” said Flanagan.

The historical research led to a game scenario where acolytes who want to become high

priests go to the high priest's grave, find an entrance into the catacombs, and are faced with several puzzles.

The third historical environment recreates Chateau Gaillard, built in 1197 and destroyed in 1204. "We stumbled on Chateau Gaillard among our research books because it was the coolest looking castle we saw," said Saunders.

"Many of the walls are toppled and all of the rooms are destroyed, and the only evidence of what the castle looked like are writings and hand-drawn images," said Kripalani. "Everything that's known about it, we have in there. Everything that's not known, we were able to extrapolate and adapt it for game play."

Hidden Touches

Presto put a great deal of time and effort into aspects of the game that some players may never even discover or care about. For example, they introduce a surprise character inhabiting one of the worlds, which the player can pick up as a companion to travel to the rest of the worlds.

"This character is a knowledge source who can help you get through puzzles," Kripalani said. "But even more importantly, the character can also add comments as you go through the game that lets the player learn all this background history. It adds a whole new dimension and makes the game very enjoyable."

"Buried in Time is really about having fun playing games, which is why we threw in as much humor as possible. But we're trying to tell a story, too. It turns out that the motivations

behind the character who framed Temporal Agent #5 are not cut and dried. You can find yourself sympathizing with the motivations in the end, and I wonder myself if they are all that far off," said Saunders.

The sophisticated ambiguity of the story line is just another indication of the level of passion, commitment, and dedication to detail and quality behind every aspect of this game. In an insightful summation of the complexities of creating Buried in Time, Kripalani remarked that, after all the time and effort they spent trying to produce a satisfying yet consistent adventure, "We are now convinced that time travel is impossible — except, of course, in our world."