

Inventor's drowning real or a trick, some wonder

By Daniel Golden
GLOBE STAFF

Thirty years after it was submerged under a lake, the Egyptian fortress of Buhen rose again last April at a Boston Computer Society trade show: Thanks to Boston inventor William Riseman, hundreds of tekkies took a virtual-reality sail down the Nile to visit the ancient fortress.

Six months later, Riseman mysteriously vanished off the coast of Brazil after seeking investors at a conference there. Although Riseman, a strong swimmer, was presumed drowned Oct. 31, an intensive search did not turn up his body, and his disappearance was not reported to local police. The only eyewitness

says that he believes Riseman may still be alive.

In a paradox that the "virtual reality" pioneer might have appreciated, Riseman's friends and relatives are debating whether reports of his death were true or illusory. While most accept that he drowned, others suggest that he may have staged his disappearance, or been abducted because his research had military applications. They cling to hope that, like the fortress of Buhen, Riseman will reappear.

"It certainly is a possibility that he's still alive," said Charles Ostman, a California specialist in virtual reality and the only witness when a wave washed the 48-year-old Riseman from a rocky promontory into the Atlantic Ocean. "The last time I saw Bill, he

was floating on his back, quite conscious. I was completely flabbergasted when he was never found."

"It's like something out of 'I Spy,'" said Riseman's stepson, Sean McKinney. "There's quite a feasible chance he's still living - whether he's being held somewhere against his will, or whether he said, 'To hell with it, I'm going to disappear.'"

Without an official verdict on Riseman's fate, the computers that store his innovative re-creations of ancient Egypt sit in limbo in Rio, stalling efforts by collaborators at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and J. Paul Getty Trust to continue his work.

His brother, Walter Riseman, said it will take at least another two months before Ri-

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WILLIAM RISEMAN
Specialist in virtual reality

Hub inventor leaves questions behind

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seman is legally pronounced missing. Such a ruling is needed before Riseman's \$200,000 worth of borrowed computers and other equipment, now in storage at the US consulate, can be returned to Boston.

"He disappeared just as he was beginning to achieve a certain fame," said Timothy Kendall, an associate curator at the fine arts museum. "I don't know anybody else who did this work. It's one thing to see a reconstructive drawing of an ancient building. It's another to be there."

Added Alice D'Entremont, a friend who was helping Riseman seek government research grants, "Sometimes technologists don't have the artist's eye. He had both."

Donald Sanders, an archaeologist for the J. Paul Getty Trust in Williamstown, said that Riseman's models preserve archaeological artifacts and material that otherwise would fade over time. Sanders hopes to improve virtual-reality techniques by reassembling Riseman's research team and seeking government funding, but said that such efforts will be in vain as long as the database is marooned in Brazil.

"That hinders our goal of pushing the limits of technology," Sanders said. "We basically have to start all over again."

Virtual reality was just one of several technologies that the self-taught Riseman mastered. The son of a Boston architect who specialized in designing movie theaters, Riseman never graduated from college. In the 1970s, he built and owned state-of-the-art recording studios, where groups such as Aerosmith and The Cars cut albums.

After his father's death in 1982, Riseman took over the family architectural firm. By applying principles of computer-aided design, he helped popularize multiplex theaters. Because he did not have an architectural license, his success drew criticism from some other Boston architects.

In 1990, Riseman met Kendall, the Egyptologist from the Museum of Fine Arts, who had recently returned from an archaeological excavation in Sudan. Combining Kendall's field data with Riseman's computer expertise, they built a three-dimensional computer model of Jebel Barkal, a famous Egyptian ruin. Then, at Kendall's suggestion, Riseman decided to recreate the Nile valley area that had been flooded after the building of the Aswan Dam in the 1960's, including the Fortress of Buhen. His reconstructions not only were structurally correct, but also

had accurate texture and colors.

"He prepared the presentation so you could fly over the fort, walk through it, or sail by in a ship," Kendall said. "It was unbelievable."

Although his experiments could benefit military training methods such as flight simulation, Riseman wanted to apply his wizardry to education. Friends say that he hoped to link virtual reality models to telecommunications systems, so a worldwide classroom of students could experience the glories of ancient Egypt.

Riseman, who was divorced, lived in a South End condominium with his cat, Bonkers. According to Kendall, he worked 16 hours a day on the Fortress of Buhen without any income, spending his personal savings. In the past year, he exhibited the project everywhere from Florida to South Africa, hoping to increase visibility and attract investors.

On Monday morning, Oct. 24, he displayed the fortress of Buhen at Bolt Beranek And Newman Inc., a computer consulting firm. Then he packed his computers and flew to the conference in Rio, which was sponsored by a leading Brazilian businessman and philanthropist, Candido Jose Mendes.

According to Ostman, Riseman's presentation was "very well received."

When the session ended Oct. 30, they accepted Mendes' invitation to stay for a few days on his coastal estate in Buzios, Brazil, before going to another conference in Porto Alegre, a city in southern Brazil.

On Oct. 31, a pleasant day with a light wind, Riseman and Ostman took their cameras and went hiking. When they reached a breathtaking vista of cliffs and islands, Riseman climbed down for a closer look.

"Just as I turned around, a wall of water came up and swept him off a rock," Ostman says. "I didn't know what to do. Then he pops up 50 feet away, waving and floating on his back. I was yelling at him, he was yelling back."

Ostman, a poor swimmer, ran half an hour back to Mendes' house to call for help. Their host immediately dispatched a boat, and helicopters soon joined the search, to no avail.

Claudio Castilho, a correspondent for *Jornal do Brasil*, a daily newspaper based in Rio, said that Riseman's disappearance was not reported to police in Buzios. "My newspaper is investigating down there," said Castilho, who is based in California but has a home in Buzios. "It is a very weird story."