

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Super Metroid

Platform: Super Nintendo

Genre: Action/Adventure Platformer

Developer: Nintendo/Intelligent Systems

Publisher: Nintendo

Creative Director: Gunpei Yokoi

Overview

Super Metroid is an older game for the Super Nintendo system which told its story mainly through the use of symbolism and cinematic events. When the game first starts, a brief introduction plays, giving a slide-show of events leading up to the beginning of the story. The story recaps the first game, where Samus Aran, the character controlled by the player, battles with space pirates and rescues a baby metroid. This metroid is an immensely powerful creature, whose ability to control energy promises many technological advances when studied. Samus turns the metroid over to scientists on a nearby space station who are show studying the metroid in a glass container. Samus leaves in her spaceship, only to receive a distress signal moments later and have to turn around.

At this point in the story onward, there is no dialogue at all. Everything is displayed by cinematics and symbolism. Samus arrives back on the space station, and everyone is either dead or missing in the same places you just were. The metroid is also missing, and upon a quick search Samus runs across the second in command of the space pirates, Ridley. After a short fight, a siren blares, warning that the station has been set to self destruct, requiring both to break of their fight and escape. Samus then chases Ridley to a nearby planet's surface, which turns out to be the pirate stronghold, where she must fight her way through to recover the lost metroid.

From this point on, there are many common symbols that can be found. Before every main boss fight except the final two, you run into the children of the boss you are going to fight, who give you some idea of what the boss will be, and what its weakness is. Indeed, parent-child relationships are a core part of this game, with nearly every character being depicted with its children and the metroid, at the end of the game, treating Samus as its adopted mother. Besides this, there is a lot of foreshadowing. Many insurmountable obstacles are placed in front of the player as a form of training before leading the player to the tool to pass them. This is done in a variety of forms, leading to a story and world that gradual builds up by breaking down borders.

Characters

Samus Aran - Super Metroid's main character is Samus Aran. She is who the player controls throughout the entire game, and except for the very short cutscenes at the beginning of the game and one short cutscene at the end, the player is always in complete control of her. She is driven by the

motivation to rescue the lost baby metroid she recovered and out of a want for vengeance against the space pirates.

Ridley - The main enemy, and the only one that is fought more than once, is Ridley. He's one of the only enemies that can show change over time because of this, and it's used to show him being collected with on the offensive and enraged and wild on the defensive when things aren't going his way. Importantly, he is also the only major boss character without a family, and it is the escape of the baby metroid that enrages him. This is an interesting choice, part of the family dynamic that continues throughout the entire game.

The Baby Metroid - The metroid itself is supposed to be a fairly unintelligent creature, but it is smart enough to recognize Samus as a mother figure and to escape from Ridley. It's sacrifice for Samus plays a major role, giving it a human and caring element in a game where everything and everyone has normally been alien and hostile.

Mother Brain - The leader of the space pirates is an ugly creature, Mother Brain. Before the final battle, she's shown as a floating brain in a tank, giving her a completely dead and detached feeling. Her physical form is that of a giant drooling grotesque monster with an exposed brain, something that's meant to shock and frighten. Mother Brain is a cold, monstrous killer.

Breakdown

The three main characters of the game are Samus, the baby metroid, and Ridley. The very beginning of

the game is the only part with text and backstory, and so it is no shock that these are the three characters shown. Samus is shown very clearly, with a close up of her face to show her femininity, since for the rest of the game she will be covered in so much armor it will be impossible to tell her gender. From here, her motivation becomes well known, the space pirates slaughtered scientists indiscriminately and stole her metroid, and she must get it back no matter where it goes. The metroid is shown when it first bonds with Samus, and it's potential for scientific research is laid out. Finally, Ridley comes swooping in, killing all the scientists and stealing the metroid from Samus, painting him not-so-subtly as the antagonist.

From there, the game starts on the planet's surface where the space pirates are hiding out, and goes deeper and deeper underground as the story progresses. The vast majority of the game from here on out involves Samus traveling to various parts of the hideout, beating up Space Pirate cronies to gain access to deeper and deeper levels with the purpose of retrieving the metroid from Ridley. This doesn't follow a quite linear path, as you will usually get a glance at where you need to go, but it'll take some item or beating up some boss to get there. A lot of these details can be missed when playing the game, but for every boss, every weapon, and every upgrade there's some sort of foreshadowing element. These range from seeing unique enemies in the form of the coming boss's children to encountering obstacles that block your progress or slow you down greatly right before you find the solution to your problems, and so players are constantly kept on their toes looking at the current level attempting to guess what is coming up next.

The gameplay through these starting areas slowly introduces the workings of the planet, from it's upper earthy section to its deep underground fiery section. There are four major areas in total, starting with the earth area ruled by the monster Kraid. Kraid is a huge hulking monster, but he isn't too bright and

also not too strong. Effort was taken on his design to show that he is meant to look scary but have not action to back up his look, making him an imposing looking enemy that the player is able to have a laugh at while shooting down. This whole section follows this principle, it looks imposing but it's deceptively simple. Next up is Phantoon, in a section dominated by air. Phantoon is smaller and craftier, constantly disappearing and reappearing. The area takes place on a crashed space ship inhabited with ghost-like creatures, its existence is meant to challenge the player at a deeper level and force them to think and use their skills. Next to last of these four area bosses is Draygon, ruling an underwater area. Draygon is a large monster who has the power that fits his size unlike Kraid, and he will even grab Samus, constantly attacking her. This can be his downfall, however, with some quick thought you can actually electrocute him by pulling him and you to an exposed electrical source with a grappling beam while he is holding you, defeating him instantly. This is similar to the rest of the area, it forces you to really use your head to figure out the best way through things. Finally there's Ridley, where the story takes a turn.

Ridley is the master of the area of fire. The previous sections have all been introductory, giving you new weapons and abilities while easing you into the game. By the time you reach Ridley, however, all of this is done and the game is a constant trial of your abilities. Ridley's hideout is incredibly uninviting, requiring Samus to dive through lava even to reach it. When you finally reach Ridley he has been thrown into a rage. He is noticeably out of place everything else, with his section containing far more technology and no families of enemies, and to top it off the metroid which he brought back has escaped. Ridley lashes out at Samus, and after an intense battle continues to attack Samus even though the attack kills him. This is very different from the collected attacks at the beginning of the game, it clearly shows a collected frustration and rage. Ridley's whole section shows someone who is

broken trying to make himself whole by looking in all the wrong areas.

The game finishes up in a soulless level made of metal. The metroid flies away to the final area in game, the final coordinating area of all of the four main enemies in the game. Initially mistaking Samus for an enemy it attacks her, draining her of all of her power. It recognizes her when the low power alarm on the suit goes off, and runs away, noticeably shaken. Samus runs after it, just to run into Mother Brain, the head of operations behind the Space Pirates. After a climatic but losing battle, the metroid sacrifices itself to protect Samus, giving her a chance to win. As a final act of vengeance Mother Brain self destructs the hideout, forcing Samus to escape back up to the surface as everything falls down around her.

By the end of the game the scene with Mother Brain works as a shock since the player's main motivation for the game, recovering the metroid, dies while attempting to protect Samus. While there are only a few scenes and a few lines of dialogue to flesh everything out, the end of the game still works well to the point where many people say it is one of the most memorable game endings of all time.

Strongest Element

Atmosphere is definitely the game's strongest element. The story and gameplay are both tight, nothing feels added for the sake of extending the story. Everything seems to have a new point relative to gameplay and/or story, making the game very engrossing. Even though the game also gives some clues and foreshadowing, the sheer size of some of the boss enemies can also be frightening. The game constantly keeps you intrigued, wondering what will come next, through its constant use of

foreshadowing and then outdoing itself.

Weakest Element

The game's weakest element is its depth. While the symbolism and design allows for the telling of a story, that story can't be very deep without the proper background information. The boss characters, for example, have barely any background. The only one with a real story and premise is Ridley, and everyone else seems to be set against Samus, but their motivations are never explained fully. The game should have provided a way to find some optional backstory while still leaving the character in control. Metroid Prime attempted to do this by adding a scanning mode, which was a good idea that should have been taken a step further.

Highlight

The game's best moment has to be when the metroid runs in and sacrifices itself for Samus. For the entire rest of the game there had been a Samus against the world mentality, and for the metroid to run in was a somewhat affirming scene. It also gives the players some genuine fear, since they lose control of Samus it feels like they have lost the game for a second before the metroid rushes in. It's a great work of timing, which keeps things flowing perfectly.

Critical Reception

Super Metroid was universally praised, receiving high marks (upper 90%) from all major reviewers.

Super Metroid has fallen within the top 10 of IGN's top 100 games lists every year it was run, evening taking the number 3 spot the first time the list was compiled. Many reviewers still call it one of the best games of all time.

Lessons

- The game is very unconventional in that it displays motherhood and parenting, and has a female protagonist that's not used a simple sex symbol. This has gained Super Metroid some popularity.
- Leaving the player in control of the character as much as possibly and not breaking the game's action makes the game very immersive, but makes storytelling incredibly difficult. Balancing this and providing backstory was Super Metroid's real challenge.

Learning from this, the game's sequel attempted to add in a scanning system that allowed players to break the action and explore the world and characters more thoroughly by reading up on them in a computer. This system unfortunately became too forced, bringing the player too far away from the gameplay.

A compromise would likely be the best solution, with fully optional backstory for the players who want to know more through some sort of scanning system that doesn't stop the game in progress when used, and players who want to simply play the game straight through don't have to break the action and atmosphere. It's also important to have a tightly crafted story, even if that story isn't given textually or verbally, which Super Metroid managed to pull off with interactions of Samus, Ridley, and the metroid.

Summation

Super Metroid is a very unique game that has yet to be truly imitated. It's unconventional style makes it an interesting study case, and its critical reception shows that many games have a lot to learn from it.