

GAME NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Month/Year Submitted: January 2013

Title: *Metroid Prime*

Platform: Nintendo GameCube

Genre: First-Person Adventure

Release Date: November 2002

Developer: Retro Studios

Publisher: Nintendo

Lead Designer: Mark Pacini, **Writer:** Nate Bihldorff

OVERVIEW

The *Metroid* series follows the adventures of interstellar bounty hunter Samus Aran. Taking place an unknown number of years into the future, the franchise follows Samus as she utilizes her highly advanced armored Power Suit to battle forces that threaten the future of the galaxy, most notably among them, the malevolent alien race known as the Space Pirates and the dangerous lifeforms they hope to weaponize, the Metroids.

The focus on Metroids falls away somewhat in *Prime*. Though the fourth game released in the series, *Metroid Prime* takes place second within the series chronology, three years after the events of *Metroid*. The basic plot of *Prime* sees Samus drawn to the planet Tallon IV by a distress signal. Once there, she discovers a Space Pirate frigate in orbit, and following its destruction, she proceeds to the planet's surface in pursuit of an escaping target. There, she soon discovers what brought the Space Pirates to Tallon IV: an asteroid impact some 50 years prior released a highly radioactive mutagenic compound called Phazon onto the planet. The material threatens the ecosystem of Tallon IV, and the Pirates seek to use it to generate powerful new soldiers and weapons. Samus must stop the Space Pirates' plans; in the process, she'll get to the root of the Phazon problem and discover the powerful creature helping to spread the dangerous substance. The course of the adventure takes Samus to

ancient ruins, natural jungles, mountain peaks, and the dark mines where Phazon is being harvested, revealing the planet's troubled past and uncertain future.

CHARACTERS

Historically, the *Metroid* series has not been greatly character-focused (with the major exception being the most recent title, *Metroid: Other M*). However, the series as a whole serves as a continuing exploration of its one chief character, Samus Aran. Incidentally, while not a great deal is revealed about individual characters, the relationship between Samus and some key races plays a major role in the franchise's history. There are four main character considerations in *Metroid Prime*:

- **Samus Aran**, the Protagonist. Orphaned following the destruction of her home colony of K-2L as a child, Samus was found and raised by the Chozo race (below), trained as a warrior, and given a special armored Power Suit to aid her in battling and defeating the Space Pirates (below). Samus is not only an exceptionally talented warrior, but also possesses immense mental discipline and a strong moral sense. She chooses almost exclusively to work alone in her capacity as a bounty hunter, and she uses this solitude to her advantage to remain focused and infiltrate deep into heavily-fortified areas. Due to her upbringing and isolation, she has a poor grasp over human relationships. Though deeply damaged by her childhood trauma, she also possesses a significant interest, as a result, in ensuring such injustices don't befall others.
- **The Space Pirates**, the Foreground Antagonists. Responsible for the attack that claimed the lives of Samus's parents, the Space Pirates seek to gain control over galactic society by either conquering or destroying the current controlling body, the democratic and free Galactic Federation. To accomplish their goals, they seek out powerful new energy sources, bioweapons, and technologies wherever they can find them. The Space Pirates have come to Tallon IV to harness the tremendous power presented by the radioactive element Phazon.
- **The Chozo**, Background Allies. The race who raised and trained Samus, the Chozo are a wise and advanced bird-like species which once explored much of the galaxy. The Chozo are deeply spiritual, possessing a massive interest in science and preserving a state of peace and harmony in the galaxy. A branch of Chozo native to Tallon IV sought to return to a natural state of living

and succeeded in transcending reality, but the impact of the Phazon meteor forced them to return to build a temple capable of temporarily containing the material's spread. Though slowly going mad from Phazon radiation, they do what they can to clandestinely aid Samus on her quest.

- **"Metroid Prime"**, the Background Antagonist. A creature living at the heart of the Phazon meteor's impact crater, Metroid Prime feeds off of Phazon energy and works to promote its spread across the planet. Named by the Space Pirates due to its similarity to the Metroid species, its exact intentions and origins are unclear.

BREAKDOWN

Metroid Prime represents a transitional game in the *Metroid* series – an attempt to translate the critical success that was *Super Metroid* into a new experience for the modern gaming age. The series had evolved in the days when two dimensions were the norm, the term "game writer" was practically unheard of, and when the most notable piece of a game narrative one encountered was the act of a player recounting experiences to friends. By the time of *Metroid Prime*, a rich cinematic presentation was becoming the expectation. Narrative was now presented through cut-scenes, and in many cases, it stood largely independent of the game itself. It was the duty of Retro Studios to bring these two worlds together, and the result was a game which, in its own way, can serve to remind the gaming community that when it comes to game narrative, the player is not just the consumer, but a piece of the medium.

The influences of an earlier era of gaming are evident through the fact that *Metroid Prime's* primary means of narrative presentation is the layout and styling of the game world. The story is told through the relationship between areas of the world, the sequence of their discovery carefully regulated by a variation of the lock-and-key progression mechanic. Each section of the world bears a specific significance to the overall story, and most rooms are designed to fulfill a specific purpose for either of the races in the game. The world is set up as a mystery to be uncovered, and the details of each room provide clues as to what this place is and what it means for the future. The game doesn't tend to tell

players directly what's happening, instead leaving it up to them to figure it out. This process of discovery encompasses the heart of the narrative.

In keeping with the world-based focus, what explicit narrative exists in *Metroid Prime* is presented almost entirely from outside the perspective of the main character or, for that matter, the player. Some short animated cut-scenes do follow the events of the plot, but the real narrative focus of the game is the product of a relatively simple interface tool, the "Scan Visor" – a device which allows the player to gather information on the world.

The Scan Visor's practical functionality is found through its ability to grant the player information on enemy morphology and anatomy, as well as identifying special locations in the environment that hide holes, passageways, or means of progression. It can be argued, however, that its more significant contribution to the game is through its ability to give the player information about the world's past. Pieces of Chozo "Lore" located throughout the world detail the history of the planet and the events that led up to the game's beginning. Bits of data from Space Pirate logs reveal their reasoning and intentions. Lore and data entries also follow player actions throughout the game, providing an outside perspective on what's been happening throughout the course of the game. Depending on the writing style used, these entries reveal information on the sort of emotions other characters feel towards each other. Rather than dealing with complex verbal interactions or elaborate cinematic action sequences, character relationships are made quite clear through entries which may be hateful and panicked, simply informative, or enigmatic and hopeful. In essence, the entire story is told as a collection of fables and legends.

Aside from explicit story elements, the general amount of information provided through the Scan mechanic makes for a highly active and living world. Small scans in room after room provide information with practically no relevance to the progression of the plot. Regardless, they provide a valuable sense of genuineness to the game and make the world just a little bit easier to accept as an alternate reality. As a narrative tool, the Scan Visor allows the story to stay out of the player's way. At the same time, by serving as a useful gameplay device, the Scan function encourages players to gather information, thus facilitating the deepening of the game world and expanding the breadth of the game's story.

STRONGEST ELEMENT

Metroid Prime's greatest strength, at least in the narrative sense, is its ability to convey a textured and multi-layered story through the design of the game world and without the use of any spoken dialogue. Every section of the world tells a story. Some areas reveal bits of the world's distant past, some of its near past, and some of its impending dark future. In the midst of it all, we find the player, filling the role of player character Samus Aran, a lone figure in a tumultuous world. It's the task of the player to fill in the gaps between the elements of story told by the game world – to solve the mystery, so to speak. This is something that *Prime* does a brilliant job of conveying. Between elements of level design and world structuring, elements of visual art and audio, and elements of written descriptions and Lore entries, the game slowly but surely reveals more and more about Samus's place in this world, and subsequently, involves the player more and more deeply in the role. Significantly, *Metroid Prime* also accomplishes this without one line of spoken dialogue. There's nothing wrong with spoken dialogue (and it's for the best that Nintendo has since broken Samus's silence), but *Prime* illustrates that there are more important aspects to narrative design – a tribute to the days when cinematic presentation wasn't viable and, quite simply, wasn't needed.

UNSUCCESSFUL ELEMENT

As a result of making the player a key part of the narrative process, the player becomes yet another unstable variable in presentation. The story of *Metroid Prime* only delves as deeply as the player allows. A player who finds no interest in the game world, who doesn't desire context or backstory, and who only witnesses the game's events as they occur witnesses a rather simplistic and typical video game plot. There's some evil involved. Our hero arrives on the scene, battles evil aliens who are evidently up to no good, grows more powerful, and encounters the final boss, a creature more evil and powerful than the rest, defeating it with a ridiculously powerful weapon, thus saving the day and preventing a horrible evil from being unleashed on others. And there's evil involved. We've all seen/heard/read it before, and with no explicit details to lay down a new context, it can all seem, to put it kindly, formulaic. It's entirely possible to hear one person argue that *Metroid Prime* has a complex

and deep narrative while someone else can argue that it has practically no story at all. As a narrative designer, you risk your hard work going unnoticed and underappreciated with such an approach.

HIGHLIGHT

Identifying the absolute best moment in a game's narrative will always be entirely subjective, but it's particularly troublesome in a game like *Metroid Prime*. There are a few cut-scenes people may identify as key plot points, but *Prime* is, above all else, about the past – what *has* happened – rather than about what *is* happening. As its primary method of narrative delivery is the design of the game world, it could be said that the best moment in the narrative is not so much an *event* as it is a *place*.

Which location in the game, therefore, provides the most significant narrative impact? That is, what location most makes you understand the world? Again, it's a very personal call; each area has a different impact on different people. For me, however, that location is the northern region of the Chozo Ruins area. Every time I pass through it, I can feel history; it's an area that somehow feels purposeful and important. Shafts of light filter through cracks in the stone walls, mystical technologies blend with a bit of steampunk, and everything seems to feel natural and smooth. Coupled with these artistic elements are some important pieces of Lore for the Scan Visor to pick up. These entries begin to map out connections between the Chozo in the past, Samus Aran and the player in the present, and the forthcoming final battle in the future. It's like crossroads in the different layers of *Prime's* narrative, providing glimpses in all directions. Perhaps it's more than coincidence that one of the rooms in this region is called the "Crossway". Then again, that probably is just a coincidence.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

In general, critical reception for the game has been very good. It maintains an overall Metacritic score of 97, indicating immense general audience satisfaction. Reviews from professional sources have proven equally impressive. However, the narrative is often not a subject given much attention in such

reviews, likely for reasons which the rest of this critique has discussed – much of the narrative is embedded in the structure of the game.

Greg Kasavin's review on Gamepot.com, however, discusses *Prime's* narrative at considerable length. To summarize:

"This game draws you in not with storytelling but with a vast, seamless 3D world that sprawls out in front of you in all directions, just waiting for you to discover all its many secrets. ... All this is suggestive of one of the most impressive accomplishments of *Metroid Prime*: It never breaks you out of the experience of the game. The far-flung futuristic technology and the imaginative alien world come across as surprisingly believable. ... While *Metroid Prime* isn't plot-driven, it provides you with lots and lots of context."

Kasavin rates *Metroid Prime* a 9.7 out of 10.

Fran Mirabella III, in IGN's 9.8/10 review of *Prime*, reiterates this last point. While narrative is scarcely mentioned, the review sheds a little light on the significance the environmental element plays in the feel of the game:

"The attention to detail continues to a more microscopic level, as you can cast your gaze in almost any direction and see something you may not have noticed before; ... If Retro Studios has proven one thing, it is how extremely valuable artistry is for establishing the mood of a game and immersing the player."

LESSONS

- The "world-driven" narrative model, when properly executed, is a great tool for generating immersion. Through discovery of the game world, players become active members of the world and gain a vested interest in what becomes of that world. This interest can help drive the player forward.
- Much of a game's plot is told through the actions of the player. The game world provides the player with a frame of reference for the type of actions that fit within the narrative. By accepting the world, the player inhabits the main character and acts out an appropriate plot.

- A successful world-based narrative is the responsibility of the entire development team – the artwork, world layout, progression, sound, written elements, and mechanics must all combine in a fluid and functional package to form a world with a believable past, present, and future.
- The game world is a narrative unto itself. Therefore, make sure the story your world tells is a good one.
- In many cases, cut-scenes and scripted events are only necessary to depict the literal detail of actions occurring in the present. Backstory and context can be incorporated into the structure of the game.
- **Gameplay and narrative are not mutually exclusive.**

SUMMATION

It's been over ten years since *Metroid Prime* was released. At the time, video games were trending more and more towards elaborate cinematic presentations, complex exposition, and photorealism. A decade later, not only is this trend continuing, but such titles have become the industry standard. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. In the process, however, many of the prized narrative design practices of the 2D era have fallen by the wayside. We've seen a decreased emphasis on subtlety and hinting in favor of direct access to full information. In the process, the player has lost a bit of the need for imagination while the development community has seen a divergence in the concepts of "game" and "narrative".

In 2002, *Metroid Prime* served as a game seeking to preserve the flavor of a series' beloved 2D titles presented in a new 3D shell. What it brought to the table is a reminder that the player is a key part of delivering game narrative. The job of the narrative designer, in such a case, is to help establish a game world that provides the player with the means to become a living plot device. The genius of *Metroid Prime's* narrative design has nothing to do with its content; the game presents a world and encourages the player to accept it. Players who accept that world can, generally speaking, act out the plot accordingly while still retaining a sensation of freedom and control. This process of suggestion and subtlety, once a common exercise in the industry, is one missing from many elaborate cinematic games. Just as *Prime* was meant to serve as a bridge to connect classic games to more modern times, it can serve the opposite purpose today.