

Beautiful Bounty Hunter: The Story of Samus

To legions of fans, the words Metroid brings back fond memories of the early days of the Nintendo Entertainment System. However, Metroid was a groundbreaking game in many ways. It was one of the first games that evoked a tangible world. It also exhibited some very important technological innovations that are an invaluable part of video games today. And then there was the secret of the main character's true identity, one of the most shocking surprises to ever grace an 8-bit cartridge.

The Creation

Gunpei Yokoi is perhaps best known for his development of the Game Boy, the best selling console of all time. Taken from the maintenance department of Nintendo's card factory to the right hand of Hiroshi Yamauchi, president of the company, Yokoi was assigned to create something for the new Games department. He developed a toy called the Ultra Hand, a sort of expandable appendage.¹ He also created the Game and Watch system—tiny little machines with one simple game. These games made millions for Nintendo in the early days of the company's venture into the electronics world. Yokoi was also the leader of Nintendo's R&D 1, one of the legendary groups of employees that are described as the "stars" of the company.²

R&D 1 was the development group behind Metroid, but the technology behind the game came from another group, R&D 3. R&D 3 pushed the limitations of the NES by creating chips to address specific problems. These chips, called memory map controllers, or MMCs, added extra RAM to the cartridges and allowed for more variance in the colors

¹ David Sheff, Game Over: Press Start to Continue (New York: Random House, 1993) 22.

² Sheff, p. 39.

and shapes shown during games. Before, in games like Super Mario Brothers, players were not able to turn around and grab a powerup they missed. Instead of being totally linear, games like Legend of Zelda and Metroid were more exploratory games that fit together like a puzzle.

The Game



Metroid is an exercise in immersion. To the left is the first scene that players see—a transmission from the Galaxy Federal Police. The fact that the game creates a police agency evokes a sense of continuity, as if the world that Samus Aran works and lives in is an existent universe. The manual continues to add to the plot and develop the world of Samus. “In the year 2000 of the history of the cosmos,” the manual adds, “representatives from the many different planets in the galaxy established a congress called the Galactic Federation, and an age of prosperity began.”³ The story continues to explain how a group of scientists exploring the distant planet SR338 discovered the powerful Metroid life form, capable of sucking the energy from any living being. The deadly Space Pirates, known only as a single frightening entity at this point, attack the transport and steal the life form, taking it to their boss in the center of Zebes, Mother Brain.

The game starts with an image of Samus Aran, the main character of Metroid, teleported down to the underground tunnels of Zebes. The triumphant flourish of Samus’ entrance is quickly replaced by atmospheric music that fits the darkness of the

³ TJ Rappel, “Metroid US Instruction Manual,” <http://www.classicgaming.com/mdb/m1/m1manual.txt>.

passageways. Unlike the instantly catchy music of Link or the bouncy beat of Mario, the music that follows Samus does not overpower the action. Rather, the different compositions complement each stage and add to the mood of the game.

Metroid is a challenging game, made more difficult because of the amount of exploration necessary to access all areas and discover the many power-ups available to Samus. The underground world is divided into three areas: Brinstar, Norfair, and Tourain. Each part of Zebes is differentiated by the colors of the stage, as well as different enemies to menace Samus. Brinstar is dark blue and rocky, Norfair is fiery and hot, and Tourain is only a few steps away from the treacherous Mother Brain. But there are also specific details to the graphics that evoke the idea that other creatures once lived here. In the

screenshot on the left, Samus is about to enter an elevator (the vertical shaft in the middle of the floor). Yet the menacing faces add character and a past to the game. The complex system of tunnels and passageways inside the planet suggest an advanced society that Samus is resurrecting, giving new life to the secret powers and mysteries hidden within.



Samus starts out very weak. However, much of Metroid involves the search for power-ups. Instead of wandering the huge maps aimlessly, the weapons and power-ups are essential to guide the player through the game. Exploration is one of the central parts of Metroid, and setting bombs to discover hidden passages or jumping through holes soon becomes second nature.⁴ As presents left from the mysterious Chozo culture that lived on

⁴ Jay Corbett, "Metroid," Gaming Ingredients 6, 30 Nov 2002, <http://www.gamingredients.com/games/nes/metroid/expired.php>.

Zebes, the special tools augment Samus' quest and aid her in defeating the enemies underground.

The enemies of Metroid were very different from the other creatures that were seen in video games around this time, reflecting the darker theme of the game. Unlike most of Nintendo's cartoon-like bad guys, the creatures that Samus faces are alien and dangerous. In order to defeat these monsters, the player must observe the movements and behaviors of the creatures, often dying in the process.

The game is advertised on its box as a "password pak"⁵, a somewhat new feature. Using incredibly complicated passwords, players could save their progress in the game. Most other games at the time had no use for a save feature, but Metroid was deep enough that it took more than one sitting to finish it. However, for the dedicated gamer, there was a reward for finishing Metroid quickly. If the game is beaten in less than five hours, Samus' helmet comes off, and the famous hunter is revealed to be a woman.

Samus Herself

As the Metroid series progressed, the initial character of Samus Aran became fleshed out into one of the most memorable characters from the NES era. According to various sources, Samus was found by a race called the Chozo (the original inhabitants of Zebes) after a Space Pirate raid destroyed her family and her home. The Chozo raised her, recognizing a "fighter spirit" that the peaceful race lacked, and gave her a suit that simulated the tough skin of the Chozo themselves.

Samus is a special character in that she is a woman. While recent characters like Lara Croft of Tomb Raider and Cate Archer of No One Lives Forever are touted as

⁵ "Metroid", box art, 1987, taken by "Servo", <http://www.mobgames.com/game/covers/gameCoverId,16091/gameId,7303/>.

finally answering the call for female characters, Samus was one of the first. However, it is very odd that she is only revealed to be a woman at the end of the game.

There are a lot of factors that might lead to this decision. The hidden secret creates more buzz for the game and spreads interest through word of mouth. This was crucial in the era right after the crash of the video game market in order to draw more players to a game that was not Mario. Also, creating the mystery of Samus' identity gives the game more replay value. Upon hearing the rumor that Samus is a girl, a player might endeavor to defeat the game quicker to see if it is true. Because there are five different endings, the player can keep trying until they see Samus in all her swimsuited glory. The second reward for the player who can beat the game in under an hour is the chance to play Samus without her suit.

Enterprising (and lazy) gamers could play a suitless Samus with a special code: "JUSTIN BAILEY". The password speaks for itself—Justin Bailey is widely considered to be slang for "just in swimsuit", and with this password players got all of Samus' powers with none of the work. This made Zebes a much easier place to explore, especially when looking for the so-called Secret Worlds.

The Secret Worlds are officially a glitch. But there are plenty of websites (and even a ROM editor) dedicated to finding and mapping these hidden areas. One website describes a technique where Samus stands partially in an open door. Once the door closes, the player must press up and down in a rapid succession. If done correctly, without allowing Samus to roll into a ball, she will climb upwards through the solid wall and into a new area.⁶ There are about twenty of these new areas to explore, outside the

⁶ Elken Osher, "The Secret Worlds of Metroid," 1990, <http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/Maze/9372/metroid/metroid.txt>.

normal zones of Metroid, and detailed maps have been created to chart progress.

However, after a programmer named Kent Hansen created a map editor for the emulated version of Metroid, everyone was able to figure out how the maps were put together.⁷

The new glitchy areas were somewhat explained, but exploration of the “secret worlds” is a hallmark of any Metroid master.

The Future

Metroid was followed up in 1991 by Metroid II: Return of Samus, made for Gunpei Yokoi’s Game Boy. In this game, Samus is sent to destroy all the Metroids on their home planet. Metroid II is more linear, given that the plot is driven by the destruction of Metroids and not exploration. Yet it is still important to find all powerups. Metroid II, continuing a tradition, also has a surprise ending. As Samus destroys the final boss, a baby Metroid appears and latches on to her, treating her like a mother. Unable to kill the deadly creature, she flies off into space with the hatchling.

Metroid II was another technological marvel for Nintendo. The graphics are impressive for the Game Boy, showing large sprites and great subtlety in areas, even though the game only features four colors. Metroid II marks the first time that Samus is able to jump and shoot downward. There is rarely music in the game, melody giving way to the beeping of Samus’ life meter and the dripping of acid. “When you’re lost in the caves with low health and all you hear are the strange sounds and the warning siren, you certainly tense up a bit.”⁸ This game also includes “secret worlds” that are similar to those of Metroid, almost as a nod to the original game.

⁷ TJ Rappel, “Secret Worlds,” 16 Mar 2003, <http://www.classicgaming.com/mdb/m1/secretworlds.htm>.

⁸Jay Corbett, “Metroid II,” 17 Mar 2003, <http://www.gamingredients.com/games/other/metroid2/expired.php>

Super Metroid contained no such glitches. Instead, it was a polished game full of the same powerful action that Metroid fans came to expect. Widely considered to be one of the best games made for the Super Nintendo, Super Metroid came out in 1994, taking players and Samus back to the shattered hull of Zebes. The Space Pirates again try to use the power of the Metroid to rule the universe, forcing Samus to follow. Many of the areas are similar to the underground caverns of the first game, giving Super Metroid a familiar feeling to many of the gamers familiar to Metroid.

There was no Metroid game for the Nintendo 64, despite many misleading comments by Nintendo. Instead, Samus appeared in the popular Super Smash Brothers games as a selectable character. The final two Metroid games have recently come out for the Gamecube and the Game Boy Advance. Metroid Prime, for the Gamecube, is a slight deviation in the Metroid formula—a first person shooter instead of a side-scroller. But the game still has the same mix of atmospheric action that Metroid fans know and love. Metroid Fusion, the Game Boy Advance game, is similar to Samus' first adventure, involving the fight against a Samus doppelganger created by a dangerous parasite.

The Metroid series is unusual in that many games have the same types of conventions. For example, Samus is able to roll herself into a ball in every one of her games. There is generally a timed escape from a planet or space station. And the different ending of each game encourage replay in order to see the different incarnations of Samus. This gives the series a strong sense of continuity, creating a universe that is full of colorful characters and the fight against evil. With a sequel to Metroid Prime already in the works, it is inevitable that Samus will fight the Space Pirates for years to come. To legions of fans, that news can only be considered a good thing.