

# Persephone's 2025 **METROIDVANIA CORPUS**

(including "Mazes and Labyrinths," 2021)  
(v1.0)



in association with her book series

***Sex Positivity versus Sex Coercion, or Gothic  
Communism: Liberating Sex Work under  
Capitalism through Iconoclastic Art (2023)***

**by Persephone van der Waard**

*Persephone's 2025 Metroidvania Corpus* by Persephone van der Waard (v1.0),  
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I am Persephone van der Waard, a MtF trans woman, anti-fascist, atheist/Satanist, poly/pan kinkster, anarcho-Communist and erotic artist/pornographer [with two partners](#), and the author of the non-profit book series, *Sex*

*Positivity versus Sex Coercion, or Gothic Communism* (2023)—its art director, sole invigilator, illustrator and primary editor (the other co-writer/co-editor being [Bay Ryan](#)). I have my independent PhD in Gothic poetics, meaning I'm a Metroidvania expert who wrote her PhD partially about Metroidvania (regarding the liberation of sex work through Gothic poetics), and whose earlier research about Metroidvania she pushed [into a bigger book series](#), *Sex Positivity*.

This is my 2025 Metroidvania Corpus, whose 76 pages archive all the work on Metroidvania I've ever done. The corpus is its own document ("[From Master's to PhD](#)," 2025); this PDF combines it with the full version of [my "Mazes and Labyrinths" abstract](#) from 2021. Both exist inside my larger sphere of work; re: my ongoing *Sex Positivity* book series, from 2023 onwards. *Unlike* that series, however, these samples have been selected *without* nudity or otherwise overtly sexual material to make them as accessible as possible (the cover art being about as spicy as things get).

As my Metroidvania Corpus is newer, it will be supplied first (or rather, after my note about Jeremy Parish, and my original 2024 critique of the man's work, "[Modularity and Class](#)"). Simply use the PDF bookmark system (and in-document hyperlinks, per table of contents) to jump around in any direction you wish.

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*Note: Apart from "A Note about Jeremy Parish" (which is unique to this document), every other section in [Persephone's 2025 Metroidvania Corpus](#) has been posted elsewhere. If some of the images with writing on them are too small to read, you can always go to the original source link—either on my blog and/or website—and download the full-size image, from there. —Perse*

## Excerpt from "What I Learned Mastering Metroidvania"

The way *I* see it, the world is a *toilet*, and little girls are made to fear the bathroom as a place to hold their urine, lest they get raped. Doing so is *not* protection, as Nex Benedict showed us (re: "[An Ode to Nex Benedict](#)," 2024).

There's two takeaways I'll provide, regarding that: a) view something as a toilet (covered in piss and shit, full of shit, etc) so you *actually clean* it, and b) we're *already* in Hell, so bring the fury to them (our abusers, the elite) with all the piss and vinegar you can muster (we're all monsters under capital; be an Amazon, warrior, mother, detective, Medusa for *workers*)! Take your time and make it memorable, too. Don't "smile more" ("You found me beautiful once!" "Honey, you got real ugly!" Damn straight, you sexist pig!); skull-fuck them (I'm being figurative, of course: the mind fuck)!

Freud might be a bad joke, little more than a trope at this stage; we monstrous-feminine, from cryptonym to *cryptomime*, pull a black rabbit out of a hat, the cat out of the bag—not to *harm* the rabbit or the cat (the poor things historically used as lab rats, now free to proliferate on Bunny Island or some such place), but expose capital's usual illusions relegating *us* to the underworld. *We're*



the final (hidden) boss of Capitalist Realism each and every time. As Gamma Ray once said, "rabbit don't come easy!" Well, we do (we got a wand and a rabbit) and our "hat" is our Pandora's Box, pulling all manner of dark, hellish secrets out of itself.

(artist: [John Keaveney](#))

Under Capitalism, childhood and innocence are lost at birth, replaced with harmful copycats. But fret not! Duality distinguishes "corruption" as defined through context, and a baddie is different than a bad cop; even if both are wearing the same witch *costume*, their *function* is determined by where their rhetoric/antics on and

offstage send power a-flowing: towards workers or the state (which is why iconoclasts can camp Nazis and still be rebels in *disguise*, and why TERFs are still Nazis despite *appearing* as witches).

The same goes for their lairs, their castles as slapped together and used to express largely systemic issues; i.e., on the classic site of queer angst (the stage) given voice among a pedagogy of the oppressed that can be used by all marginalized groups. I call it "Metroidvania," but that is just one name among many for the Gothic castle as something to reclaim with ludo-Gothic BDSM—with revolutionary cryptonymy and castle-narrative (ergodic motion) during the liminal hauntology of war as something to survive. Cops are the enemy in that instance, as are their hungry fortresses; our bodies become ours reclaimed from them within



these prisons' danger discos. Or as Grendel's mother basically said: "I'm not trapped in here with you, you're trapped in here with me!"

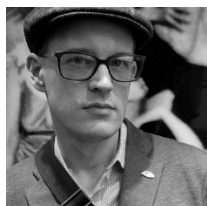
The same goes for me and *anyone* who thinks they know more than me about Metroidvania! I am *peerless* in that respect, both a) the master of the field in a field where no experts exist (as of coining my work, anyways—British academia was allergic to portmanteaus and

cross-media disciplines), and b) a holistic instructor who takes this knowledge and applies it through ludo-Gothic BDSM (my brainchild, my academic concept) to synthesize good Communist praxis outside academia, for the workers of the world to do in kind; i.e., in ergodic motion (my master's thesis) as a pedagogic metaphor that both describes and aids the teaching process: to *all* workers (nature and the environment) sexualized, fetishized and alienated by capital (my PhD argument) and the profit motive's harmful canon, its fatal nostalgia, its pocket experts hired in expert testimony *for* the state/the prosecution.

[...] So forget Luke Skywalker boldly declaring to the Emperor, "I am a Jedi, like my father before me!" Bitch, please—I'm the *Medusa* [...] and I've worked too hard for too long and survived too much to just lay down and take any more of it! The Earth is my home; *Hell* is my home as something *I* design, and I will fight to defend it and my friends from the usual fear and dogma, cops and sell-out academics, *et al.*

—Persephone van der Waard, "[Facing Death: What I Learned Mastering Metroidvania, thus the Abject '90s](#)" (2024).

## A Note about Jeremy Parish



([source](#): *Jeremy Parish | Video Works*)

Derrida and Sir Roger Scruton (re: [Dooley](#)), Benny Morris and Norm Finklestein—any academic needs a rival. Mine is Jeremy Parish. We are not friends; I don't know him and we communicated only once briefly in 2019. But in studying his work since that period. I've grown to resent Jeremy's inserting himself into the larger sphere as some kind of Metroidvania "expert." Well there are experts and there are *experts*; and while he's certainly familiar with the genre from a *consumer/curator* standpoint, I regret to inform everyone that Jeremy will—in *this* Metroidvania authority's not-so-humble opinion—remain an intellectual vacuum until further notice. He's a praxial void.

Frankly, I have my own axe to grind. While not academic in his own work, Jeremy's steady and persistent devaluing of Metroidvania has become something I've chosen to push back against, over time (it's only my life's work, after all). Despite [what he might say about such things being done in bad faith](#), nothing could be further from the truth; I merely wish to probe Metroidvania's critical value, and showcase another point as I do: how gaming terminology (and praxis between games and real life outside of games, such as *that* occurs) isn't determined by gaming companies and Capitalism, but by *players*.

In a time of widespread privatization by those companies taking ownership further and further *away* from players, then, you'd think Jeremy—a self-styled "curator" of the medium—would appreciate that. But he's a white, straight (or ostensibly straight-acting) man; i.e., who merely seems content in picking up the pieces and putting them on a shelf, not using the power of Gothic and games through Metroidvania to do anything immediately useful to workers worldwide. He forgets that knowledge isn't just dead things to catalog once murdered, but alive in how they are organically applied. In this respect, I know considerably more than Jeremy about Metroidvania, because—unlike him—I've actually dedicated my life *to* that particular approach: applied knowledge and theory. I am the *master* of doing so, as far as Metroidvania goes—an authority without equal.

This being said, Jeremy's work *is* still useful, but like anything *isn't* above critique (no matter how much he acts otherwise). "It's both possible, and even necessary, to simultaneously enjoy media while also being critical of its more problematic or pernicious aspects," said Anita Sarkeesian, [during Gamergate](#). I enjoy Jeremy's straightforward documentation of different games, but find his overall treatment of them to be lacking and, at times, problematic. Short of any major developments between us, consider this my last word on the subject.

—Persephone van der Waard

## My Critique of Jeremy Parish (sample from "Modularity and Class")

Originally posted on my website, April 27th, 2024:

<https://vanderwaardart.com/2024/04/book-sample-the-medieval-modularity-and-class>



Media tend to overlap more than stay separate, but we need to intersect and combine them in ways that yield conscious class and cultural characters; i.e., from physical arrangements that help us present them in different exhibits that playfully comment how different texts don't just imbricate inside of themselves, but like a series of different display pieces, hang out side-by-side in ways that *can* be combined, given the chance. That's why the elite want

to reduce physical ownership while maximizing labor and wage theft through *siphons* of these things installed in every American home as prison-like. Once the system is installed, the elite will take as much as possible while giving back as little in return—all while relaying coded instructions that divide workers against each other through the usual us-versus-them fatal nostalgia; i.e., wanting to regress to a place where such a person can be hunted down, then shot with our ragtag band of (mostly white, straight) Radcliffean misfits. It's a "lynch mob" character that applies to consumption and critique as equally melded and dualistic.

Any presence of such harm is the bigotries of a normalized Puritanism whose regular causalities push outwards to the margins; i.e., to harm people with the least rights, while protecting those who are always protected: white predatory men and their token imitators (a criminal hauntology classically assisted by white cis-het *women* as the middle-class gatekeepers *for* these men). Capital *needs* Nazis to save itself—as scapegoats, but also as witch hunters levying violence against the alien surface of the menace being haunted by good old-fashioned Red Scare. If you can scare and manipulate a gang of pesky kids into isolating and attacking someone, it's capital punishment that historically prioritizes the myth of good war *against* labor to *defend* capital. These little shits are defending Hawkins as a replica hauntology of *Pax Americana* seen now relative to a Gothic ancestry that—per Hogle—is false but furthered through the process of abjection. Per *my* arguments, this delivers the usual videogame-style violence against the state's enemies in a half-real sense; i.e., by alienating workers from the Gothic means to set themselves free, and all while letting the actual killers—white predators (with token offshoots)

—free to run about, murdering and raping with impunity (selective punishment during reactive abuse): inside the Imperial Core as a domestic mirror for settler-colonial atrocities overseas. It's what happened in Western Europe, once upon a time, and it's what's happening *right now* all over the world as capital once again decays (more on this in Volume Three).



"Evil," then, is the nature of argument as something to wear like a skin, but also a dwarf in giant's robes, borrowed for fresh purposes (re: *Macbeth*). We must extend this to theory as something to apply to things

like metal, sex and videogames; e.g., from the singular and limited nature of psychoanalysis and what's going on up in our skull-capped grey matter to something more holistic that accounts for/plays with material conditions outside of ourselves that get into our heads, that release again, and so on. Brains are idea factories that respond to bigger factories privatized by the casualties of dogma. The usual suspects tend to make things that are content and entertainment first and second, arguments third; i.e., a grain-of-sand, pearl-like configuration we need to reverse through what we produce as playful, but for which allegory isn't so deeply buried as a matter of Gothic discourse: monsters as things to consume, but also wear and perform in ways that always double state forms—as oppositionally as possible on any register.

This brings us to my critique of Jeremy Parish—as someone who has eclipsed him in terms of me being a queer voice regarding Metroidvania; i.e., as the school of rock such liberators call home as much as the unironic jailors: as something to discuss in academic *and* non-academic terms, during oppositional praxis not just as a dialog but an *argument* relayed through a dialogic imagination. In true Gothic fashion, I am the dark sexy side to someone like Parish—a space alien from beyond the stars that, funnily enough also calls Earth home, and practices a similar magic, but far darker and gayer than Parish could imagine. I am Medusa's best revenge: the past of settler colonialism come back to haunt itself by tormenting its potential champions towards a gayer direction than they might lean without my Aegis' mirrored smile and hug! "Don't fight it, boyo! I'll be gentle!"

We can talk about videogames historically, for instance, but *must* acknowledge them outside of an "impartial" vacuum (re: [Jeremy Parish's many books of "pure history"](#) being fairly indifferent to overt revolutionary politics, but clearly invested in the overall medium as something to house and express with love); i.e., as a living document that is colonized by lookalikes that, like Vecna, look normal on the *outside* but, point-in-fact, have the privilege and power to say and do the most good *or* harm: white America and physical published legitimacy as

being a fatal portrait when pushing unironic fatal nostalgia into the market and crowding out self-published ironies (often non-physical works; e.g., *Sex Positivity* as an entirely digital affair you won't find on Amazon or Goodreads, [just my website](#)). However funny it seems, ignorance should not be a dated point of pride to celebrate in the present space and time if you haven't really changed all that much; i.e., in regards to ongoing societal issues harming people *other* than yourself. It begs the question: "What *is* the use of wizardry if it cannot save a unicorn?" My dude, that is what heroes are for! Are you a hero, or just a weird canonical nerd? Shots fired!



(artist: [Jeremy Parish](#))

Likewise, we want to consider how the inevitable theoretical binary manifests on an actual gradient, meaning any monster has a theoretical fash-to-Commie polarity on which art and porn present; and things that seem separate like art and porn, pleasure and pain are *less* discrete than we care to admit, but ostensibly divide by a variety of factors—colonization, but also one being focused on (versus the other) in a given moment, etc. As such, we must holistically and intersectionally focus on a) producing non-harmful variants that critique harmful variants while b) giving those forced to cruise/exist in the closet a vital means of self-expression regarding their alienation, shame, impostor syndrome, sexual frustration, and desire to wear costumes—masks, suits, clothes—that speak to trauma *and* imitate others ostensibly "more normal"; i.e., as a means of camouflage, co-existence, cryptonymy and so on. No one is normal; normal is a façade where those benefitting from an abusive system use *normality* as a mask to defend themselves with—i.e., by attacking the usual victims during a moral panic, as the state routinely enters in and out of decay—in short, when the chickens come home to roost as a matter of opportunity and exploitation during the liminal hauntology of war usual complicit disguises (e.g., the KKK and their ghost hoods going after fags and [excuse the following expression; I've censored it to avoid using a slur that doesn't apply to my lived reality] "sp\*\*ks").

Sooner or later you have to wake up and take a side... unless the consequences *don't* affect you; e.g., both Jeremy and I work on Metroidvania, but unlike him as a white cis-het man, I embraced the term as a point of praxis while exiting the closet. It became a point of my academic expertise/contributions (re: ergodic castle-narrative and ludo-Gothic BDSM), area of study (speedrunning and Metroidvania) *and* identity as part of the same ongoing equation. In short, I changed—Parish never really did. I can put on a tux and roll with the homies, but



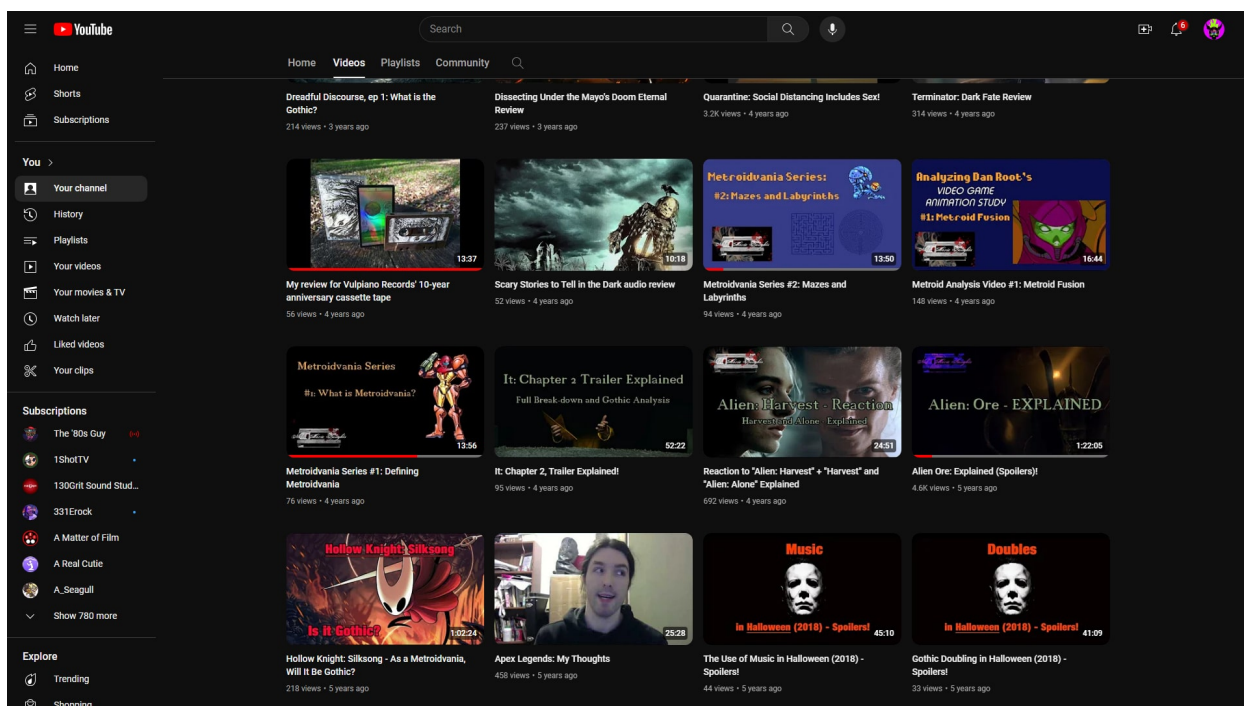


I'll *always* be a trans woman. To be fair, I was in the closet when this photo was taken (summer, 2019); closeted or not, even if you had someone as close to *physically identical* to me as you could get—an identical twin, let's say—I'll always be who I was, am and "was will be" (speaking to the past, present and future as one, like the Gandaharian mutants from *Light Years*): trans, thus prone to say things regarding the world as it affects me!

(models: [Henri Albert van der Waard IV](#) and [Persephone \[then Nicholas\] van der Waard](#))

The inverse of the same principle applies to Parish as someone who, while he *is* a published expert in his field and did important work regarding Metroidvania (which I learned from and started with humble origins<sup>1</sup> before I honestly far eclipsed him in the academic and activist senses, if you ask me),

<sup>1</sup> My attempts to branch out originally being through YouTube (my account: [@PersephonevanderWaard](#)) as a place to make videos about Metroidvania—a practice I largely performed out of grad school alongside my old blog ([which I still use](#)), before switching over to erotic art and writing part-time, before devoting myself to [my books and illustrations as one-in-the-same with me the author](#) and largely abandoning YouTube due to repeating censorship issues. Still, the history remains, and I'm proud of that work I did, too; it all went towards my current understanding of things through *Sex Positivity* as a whole:



remains largely untouched by the larger struggles as a member of the oppressor group: white, cis-het men. Allies *need* to be spokespersons in that respect—not just indifferent, dusty old museum curators, but *of* the group(s)-in-question; otherwise, they'll always be on the outside, looking in ("It belongs in a museum!" being a white savior's cry to salvage, collect and study the colonized, postmortem; e.g., the practice of Egyptology after Napoleon largely being one of grave robbery).

In Parish's case, he even says as much [in his Twitter bio](#): "Media Curator (but not spokesperson)." It's all nice and tidy but doesn't really speak to a reality lived in the trenches of conscious, active class and culture war (re: like Tolkien, Cameron, and Lucas, etc). For him, it's cushy and safe—sterile, sanitary. He doesn't get involved—is Switzerland, etc. All involve Metroidvania as something that's largely still a joke to Parish because it combines different things in ways that are historically difficult to *market* and put one's name on (or even invigilate; e.g., queer interpretations/representation in academia; i.e., which is why I wrote my PhD independently—to be able to say what I wanted without exclusion and censorship from the usual accommodated fat cats and their neoliberalized institutions hawking their own books over mine); or as Parish himself argues, "'Metroidvania' is a stupid word for a wonderful thing" ([source](#)). I don't think the word is stupid at all, but freely admit that white straight dudes are generally allergic to such portmanteaus—a fact evidenced not just by Parish, but his peers; e.g., [Scott Sharkey insisting he coined the term](#) (source tweet: evilsharkey, June 1st<sup>[3]</sup> 2023) but being more embarrassed about it than anything else, years later. Such praxial inertia is not growth, my dudes.

In good faith, let me be crystal clear about these arguments (and also to anticipate the usual Gamergate types looking for yet-another-spectre of Anita Sarkeesian to dogpile): I'm not some jilted trans bitch saying "Parish is a Nazi" and nothing else; I'm recognizing how the *image* he puts forth—of the tidy-yet-indifferent scholar indexing games in a growing series of publications to puff up his own image/name (versus socialist archivists focusing on public access and labor value/human rights instead of individual brand recognition and monetary value—of catering to corporate, to investors, to police structures and dogma as a business that starts with archiving all of this through one's practice as a point of praxis that unironically endorses all of these things)—will always be haunted by the potential for such things to denude themselves, overtime, as fash. When push comes to shove, will Parish remove his mask and announce to us fags, "I am one of you/with you, comrades!" Or will he remove it and declare, "You thought it was Jeremy but it was I, DIO!"

That remains to be seen. Trust is earned, in this case ("once-bitten, twice-shy" and all that).

*A note to/about Jeremy Parish: We wizards don't all "know each other." Jeremy and I have spoken to each other, but only briefly and in a purely professional and*

*passing setting. However, we're not friends, and his aims and mine—while in the same broader field of study—I think are somewhat different in terms of research goals (which such Venn Diagrams generally allow for): he compiles and collects for its own sake, and I to liberate my comrades. Go figure. I don't write any of these things about him as a sign of wanton hostility or unchecked revenge, but want to express valid criticism regarding an influential public figure who, like anyone else, is fallible and not above critique; i.e., another darling—one similar to Radcliffe, Tolkien, Cameron and all the rest—that we can figuratively string up, beat with a stick and see what shakes out.*

*"Figurative" is the operative world, here; don't go and harass the guy or anything! Save that spice for actual Nazis and war criminals (e.g., J.K. Rowling or Joe Biden)! But all the same, he is the odd man out, and talk is cheap. If, during discourse you want to test the mettle of such persons to see if they're "one of us," by all means! They'll live. If their sex-positive vocabulary during crisis is simply "no comment," then maybe they've earned a few whacks—not to harm them, but wake them up from their class torpor and de-atomize them as having be pulverized by the myopic nature of classic academic and white nerd culture; i.e., relative to gaming as a medium, but also a way of life, a critical voice. —Perse*

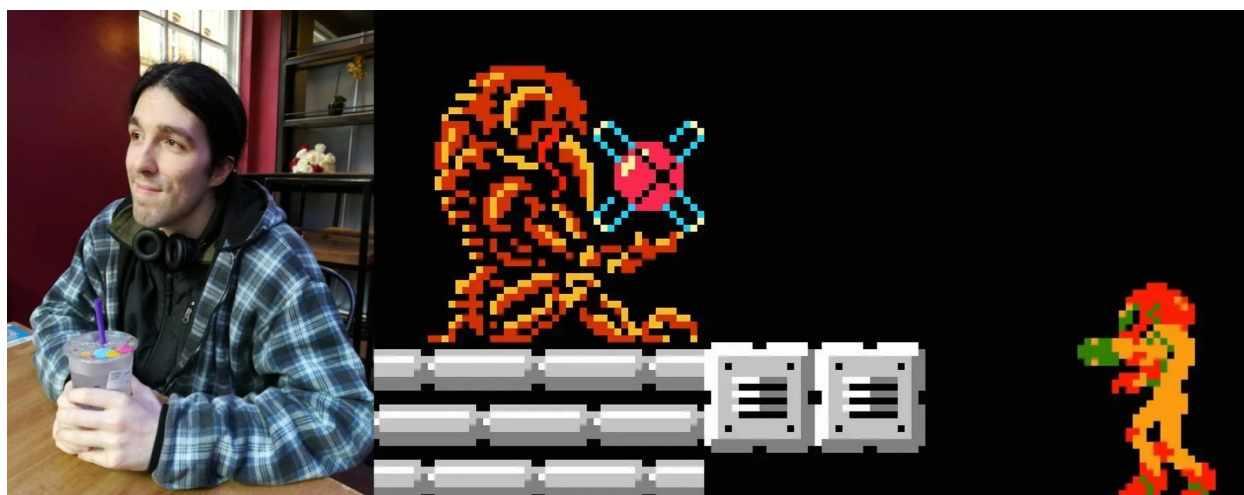


## From Master's to PhD (and Beyond): My Entire Work on Metroidvania

Originally posted on my old blog/website, January 2nd, 2025 (the info is the same):

- blog: <https://www.nicksmovieinsights.com/2025/01/from-masters-to-Phd-and-beyond-my-entire-work-on-Metroidvania.html>
- website: [https://vanderwaardart.com/book\\_gothic\\_communism/about-the-author/metroidvania](https://vanderwaardart.com/book_gothic_communism/about-the-author/metroidvania)

Persephone van der Waard is a leading expert on Metroidvania, having researched the genre aggressively since 2017. From her master's, postgrad and PhD material, this page highlights that work in its entirety:



If you want to ask Persephone a question about any of this material, you can do so [on the r/Metroidvania Reddit page promoting this post](#).

*Update, 1/5/2025: Over the past several days, I've expanded on the contents of this post; i.e., by adding some cool new stuff: a full-fledged table of contents with section summaries, a whole new subsection ("Persephone's History of Formulating Metroidvania"), a corpus for my Tolkien scholarship (which shares the same performative space\*), multiple visual aids, and several new entries to my "Further Reading" subsection on Metroidvania, in particular.*

*\*I.e., the cartographic refrain, my work critiquing capital through its routine, neoliberal (videogame) abuse of police violence inside spaces of play where the player(s) can routinely map out and conquer, ad infinitum: Tolkien's refrain (the High Fantasy treasure map) gentrifying war, and Cameron's refrain (the*

*Metroidvania/shooter) ringing a call-to-arms through neo-conservative revenge fantasy. We won't have time to unpack that here, however. For a good summary of it, refer to "[A Note About Canonical Essentialism](#)" (2024). See, also: "[Goblins, Anti-Semitism and Monster-Fucking](#)" (2024) for a more recent interrogation of the idea, through Tolkien's work.*

*Last but not least, while there's lots of theories and ideas being discussed, here, this survey will gloss over most of them (the ones closer to Metroidvania will get the most focus, of course; refer [to the Paratextual Documents page](#) on my website for a broader theoretical/exhibitory outline). —Perse*

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- **[Persephone's Academic History](#)**: Sums up Persephone's academic history in one paragraph, and gives a small list of vital definitions needed for the rest of the document: "ludo-Gothic BDSM," "ludic Gothic," "Gothic Communism," and "Metroidvania."
- **[Persephone's Work on Metroidvania](#)**
  - **[Persephone's History of Formulating Metroidvania](#)**: Explores Persephone's entire history of formulating Metroidvania as a praxial device; i.e., from her humble beginnings as an undergrad in 2014, to her receiving in 2016 of an academic award that helped her get into grad school, the writing of her master's thesis in 2018 and PhD in 2023, followed by additional scholarship (and books) penned afterwards.
  - **[Summarizing Persephone's Metroidvania Praxis](#)**: This portion articulates Persephone's history of formulating Metroidvania as a theoretical device; i.e., by examining her research in theoretical language, connecting her earlier postgrad work (from 2018-2021) to her PhD (2023) and beyond. Very theory-dense!
  - **[Metroidvania \(definitions\)](#)**: Provides various definitions, all of them coined in the time before, during and after 2006 (the point when Jeremy Parish was writing about Metroidvania for 1UP.com). In short, it curates a broader history of the term prior to Persephone's involvement and after her research began; i.e., as a gradient ranging from roughly 1997 to 2006 to 2014 and beyond.
  - **[Further Reading by Persephone \(on Metroidvania\)](#)**
    - **[Metroidvania as closed space](#)**: Provides my entire Metroidvania corpus; also outlines Metroidvania's function as closed space—i.e., to map out and explore for various reasons.
- **[Tolkien Scholarship \(extra\)](#)**

- **Further Reading by Persephone (on Tolkien):** A list of every essay Persephone has written on Tolkien, ranging from "dragon sickness," to rings/collars and vampire BDSM, to orcs and goblins/monster-fucking—and more!

## Persephone's Academic History



Persephone completed her BA in "English: Language, Literature and Writing" at Eastern Michigan University in 2016. She attended Manchester Metropolitan University from 2017 to 2018, for her master's in "English Studies: the Gothic," then completed her master's thesis on Metroidvania, back in America: "[Lost in](#)

[Necropolis](#)" (2018). She independently researched her PhD (the thesis volume/Volume Zero from *Sex Positivity*) from December 2019 to July 2023, publishing it in October 2023. Apart from [Gothic Communism](#), Persephone's PhD focuses a great deal on Metroidvania; i.e., as a therapeutic healing space *vis-à-vis* ludo-Gothic BDSM, as well as expanding on Barbara Creed's [1993 notion of the monstrous-feminine](#).

### **ludo-Gothic BDSM**

My [2023] combining of an older academic term, "ludic-Gothic" (Gothic videogames), with sex-positive BDSM theatrics as a potent means of camp. The emphasis is less about "how can videogames be Gothic" and more how the playfulness in videogames is commonly used to allow players to camp canon in and out of videogames as a form of negotiated power exchange established in playful, game-like forms (theatre and rules). Commonly gleaned through Metroidvania as I envision it, but frankly performed in any kind of Gothic poetics—i.e., to playfully attain what I call "the

palliative Numinous," or the Gothic quest for self-destructive power as something to camp.

### **Iudic-Gothic**

Gothic videogames. "The Iudic-gothic is created when the Gothic is transformed by the video game medium, and is a kindred genre to survival horror" ([source](#): Laurie Taylor's "Gothic Bloodlines in Survival Horror Gaming," 2009).

### **Gothic (gay-anarcho) Communism**

Coined by me, Gothic Communism is the deliberate, pointed critique of capital/Capitalism using a unique marriage of Gothic/queer/game theory and Marxist ideas synthesized by sex-positive workers during proletarian praxis. Meant to end neoliberal/fascist Capitalism in order to bring about anarcho-Communism, this liberation occurs through sex-positive labor (and monsters) reclaimed by sex workers (which Derrida called "spectres of Marx" in his eponymous book on hauntology as a Communist "ghost" that haunted language after the so-called "end of history").

### **Metroidvania (my definition, short version)**

Metroidvania are a location-based videogame genre that combines 2D, 2.5D, or 3D platforming [e.g., *Dark Souls*, 2009] and ranged/melee combat—usually in the 3rd person—inside a giant, closed space. This space communicates Gothic themes of various kinds; encourages exploration\* depending on how non-linear the space is; includes progressive skill and item collection, mandatory boss keys, backtracking and variable gating mechanics (bosses, items, doors); and requires movement powerups in some shape or form, though these can be supplied through RPG elements as an optional alternative.

*\*Exploration pertains to the deliberate navigation of space beyond that of obvious, linear routes—to search for objects, objectives or secrets off the beaten path ([source](#): "Mazes and Labyrinths," 2021).*

The entire series glossary is available [on this webpage](#).



Lost in Necropolis: The Continuation of  
Castle-Narrative beyond the Novel or Cinema,  
and into Metroidvania

Nicholas van der Waard

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Manchester Metropolitan  
University for the MA Degree - English Studies: The Gothic

Department of English  
Faculty of Arts and Humanities  
September 2018

*Note: Refer to "[Revisiting My Masters' Thesis](#)" (2021) for more information about Persephone's MA (and initial postgrad work). If you want to read the original peer review notes, they're on Google Drive ([source](#): Persephone van der Waard's "Markers' Comments for Persephone's Master's Thesis (10/27/2018))."*

## Persephone's Work on Metroidvania



Persephone is a leading expert in Metroidvania, which has been her center of research since 2017 (for a good summary of her work, refer to her postgrad research in the "[Mazes and Labyrinths](#)" abstract). Unlike "survival horror," which saw regular publication in print by Japanese and American companies since the 1990s, "Metroidvania" wasn't used in mainstream sources until the mid-2010s (after the age of printed media had begun to die out). As such, it was largely ignored by academics when Persephone was at



MMU; i.e., where she had access to the university Gothic and game departments, neither of which knew what "Metroidvania" was:

I noticed these limitations myself when trying to marry the Gothic to videogames in my own graduate work as cutting-edge. It was a tactic my supervisors and academic superiors resisted, simply because videogames were either totally outside of their realm of experience, or "Metroidvania" wasn't something that had been academically connected to games within their own fields. That is, speedrunning as a practice/documentary subject was just taking off online in 2018 (Twitch had only existed since 2011); likewise, "ludic-Gothic" wasn't even a decade-old term at the time, was something that ambitious academics strove to stake new claims within while leaving much to be desired ([source](#): Persephone van der Waard's "The Map Is a Lie," Volume Zero, 2023).

Likewise, Bernard Perron mentions "survival horror" tons, but completely ignores Metroidvania in his 2018 book, [The World of Scary Video Games\\*: A Study in Videoludic Horror](#)—not one mention of it, in over 400 pages:

the same year I wrote my thesis on Metroidvania, Bernard Perron would sum up the broader Gothic rush in videogame academia in *The World of Scary Games: A Study in Videoludic Horror* (2018) sans mentioning Metroidvania *once* [...] Not only does Perron make no mention of Metroidvania at all, neither do *any* of the other scholars he cites; nor did my supervisors know what Metroidvania were when I was researching it (nor I, with me finally settling on a concrete definition in 2021; re: the "[Mazes and Labyrinths](#)" abstract). Indeed, Metroidvania—despite being an older genre than survival horror\*\*—remains a thoroughly underrepresented area of Gothic videogame studies, and Gothic videogames remain ripe for continued study within our own lives. Indeed, I had to connect the two myself when recognizing a knowledge gap regarding Metroidvania [within] videogame studies at large; and I have continued to do so as a postgrad writing about mazes and labyrinths in Metroidvania; i.e., as a niche area of study to expand upon within my own daily life beyond academia—by writing about or illustrating Metroidvania outside of conferences, but also interviewing *Metroid* speedrunners for fun in my "Mazes and Labyrinths" compendium ([ibid.](#)).

*\*Also, people who separate "video" and "game," instead of simply saying "videogame," are weird.*

*\*\*Metroid and Castlevania are both older than Sweet Home (1989).*



(artist: [Jeremy Parish](#))

And last (and perhaps least), Jeremy Parish—a bit of an archivist snob and intellectual vacuum—([source](#): Persephone van der Waard's "Modularity and Class," 2024)—largely poo-pooed Metroidvania's value despite flirting with it, in the 2000s. All three cases really stuck in Persephone's craw, so she decided to dedicate her life's work to the genre. Take that, nerds!

Again, Persephone wrote her master's thesis on Metroidvania in 2018, and her independent PhD/thesis volume in 2023 (which dedicates largely to Metroidvania), and she's written about Metroidvania extensively since. Below are her *histories* for formulating the term/writing its parent series, as well as *definitions* for Metroidvania and **further reading** by her about Metroidvania before, during and after writing her PhD (re: quoted from her book series, *Sex Positivity*).

## Persephone's History of Formulating Metroidvania

*Note: Much of this summary lifts directly from "[The Map Is a Lie: the Quest for Power inside Cameron's Closed Space \(and other shooters\)](#)" (2023), which you can read in Persephone's PhD proper.*

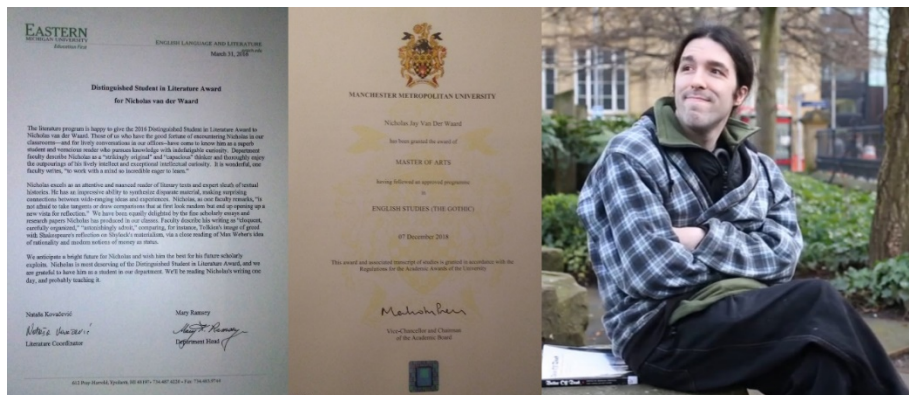
Persephone did not invent Metroidvania; she merely developed it far beyond what others were willing to do; i.e., with an emphasis on critical thinking and applied knowledge through activism, developing Gothic (gay-anarcho) Communism through ludo-Gothic BDSM: as a performative matter of calculated risk—one ever-and-always keeping universal liberation/rape prevention in mind; re: the whore's revenge, thwarting profit as normally compelled against nature by the state (the latter antagonizing the former "as monstrous-feminine" through one-way monomythic police violence [via state monopolies and trifectas, but also capital's heteronormative, settler-colonial and Cartesian qualities] in the neoliberal age). Her researching of/writing about Metroidvania (and reclaiming it from its neoliberal copaganda function) ties directly to her grad school experiences, and *those* all started with her aforementioned undergraduate award. We'll start, there, and explain *its* relevance to Persephone's evolving work, as we go (the rest of this portion will be written in the first person):

*Please note as we proceed: The focus on this corpus will be on Metroidvania's place in my larger body of work, not just my PhD. That being said, my PhD's body—excluding the paratextual documents and extraneous essays on either end—divides*

roughly in two, discussing canon and camp with equal importance (from Volume Zero):

*This book wasn't written/illustrated for Academia, but if it were and I was seriously treating it as my PhD to defend, I would argue that it addresses a knowledge gap regarding the synthesis of Gothic theory with anarcho-Communism, gender studies, ludology and Marxist argumentation: "Capitalism dimorphically sexualizes all work to some degree, including sex work, resulting in sex-coercive media and gender roles via universal alienation through monstrous language; this requires an iconoclasm to combat the systemic bigotries that result—a (as the title reads) 'liberating of sex work under Capitalism through iconoclastic art.' Gothic Communism is our ticket towards that end ([source](#): Sex Positivity, Volume Zero: Thesis Paragraph: "Capitalism Sexualizes Everything," 2023).*

*The basic struggle outlined above can be described simply as canon vs camp, which is what iconoclasm per my arguments essentially is. As I describe it, to camp canon is to recultivate the Superstructure (re: Marx) to foster a more sex-positive and liberatory mindset; i.e., one whose Gothic reinvention turns workers away from Capitalist Realism and towards a post-scarcity world: without genocide, and which uses the language of the imaginary past to achieve development. Metroidvania's role in that is camping canon through ludo-Gothic BDSM, the chapter containing it taking up about half the "camp" portion of my PhD (thus roughly 25% of the entire document). It's not the sole focus of my PhD's arguments, but embodies a pretty big chunk of their application. —Perse*



*[My award letter from EMU, MA from MMU, and me in 2018 sitting on a copy of Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human (2011) borrowed from the school library (the photo was taken by my-partner-at-the-time, Zeuhl, for a school project of theirs).]*

*photo was taken by my-partner-at-the-time, Zeuhl, for a school project of theirs).]*

*There was no money involved, but the letter did help me gain entry to MMU ([which was a whole ordeal, to say the least](#); Persephone van der Waard's Quora answer to "How easy is it to get into Manchester Metropolitan University?" 2019) when I went there for my master's degree in English*

*Persephone's 2025 Metroidvania Corpus by Persephone van der Waard (v1.0), 1/06/2025 — ©2024 [vanderWaardart.com](http://vanderWaardart.com)*

*Studies: the Gothic, in 2017. In short, I had an adventure where the things gained is largely open to interpretation: "This is a story of how a Baggins had an adventure, and found [herself] doing and saying things altogether unexpected. [She] may have lost the neighbors' respect, but [she] gained—well, you will see whether [she] gained anything in the end" [source].*

A transcription of the letter for EMU's 2016 Distinguished Student in Literature Award (above, left):

The literature program is happy to give the 2016 Distinguished Student in Literature Award to [Persephone] van der Waard. Those of us who have the good fortune of encountering [Persephone] in our classrooms—and for lively conversations in our offices—have come to know [her] as a superb student and voracious reader who pursues knowledge with indefatigable curiosity. Department faculty describe [Persephone] as a "strikingly original" and "capacious" thinker and thoroughly enjoy the outpourings of [her] lively intellect and exceptional intellectual curiosity. It is wonderful, one faculty writes, "to work with a mind so incredib[ly] eager to learn."

[Persephone] excels as an attentive and nuanced reader of literary texts and expert sleuth of textual histories. [She] has an impressive ability to synthesize disparate material, making surprising connections between wide-ranging ideas and experiences. [Persephone] as one faculty remarks, "is not afraid to take tangents or draw comparisons that at first look random but end up opening up a new vista for reflection." We have been equally delighted by the fine scholarly essays and research papers [Persephone] has produced in our classes. Faculty describe [her] writings as "eloquent, carefully organized," "astonishingly adroit," comparing, for instance, Tolkien's image of greed with Shakespeare's reflection on Shylock's materialism, via a close reading of Max Weber's idea of rationality and modern notions of money as status.

We anticipate a bright future for [Persephone] and wish [her] the best for [her] future scholarly exploits. [Persephone] is most deserving of the Distinguished Student in Literature Award, and we are grateful to have [her] as a student in our department. We'll be reading [Persephone's] writing one day, and probably teaching it.

As far as I understand it, EMU's Distinguished Student in Literature Award is fairly exclusive; i.e., handed out once per year by the English faculty board to a single student. It is not a cash prize, but recognition of said student's academic talent by the department, and one that doubles additionally as recommendation, beyond letters. I did not apply for it. Indeed, I had no idea I had even *received* it; i.e., my then-girlfriend had just dumped me, so I was thoroughly absorbed in the loss of someone special to me I dubbed "my fairy queen" (from having recently read *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Craig Dionne's Shakespeare course). I set

about mourning as I had been taught: writing bad bereavement poems from having studied British Romantic poetry under Laura George, Shakespeare under Craig, eco poetry under Elizabeth Daumer, and *Paradise Lost* under another professor, among others (I'd recently switched from a linguistics major to an English major, a semester in).



Basically, I had begun delving into my undergrad as intensely as I could; i.e., thoroughly determined to try and numb the pain of heartache, which for me at that point was *kind* of a new thing. I wasn't really a dater—had transferred to Eastern after a seven-year hiatus (originally getting my two-year associates from Washtenaw Community College, in 2007). Upon doing so, I suddenly found myself away from home and back in school; i.e., seemingly marooned at the not-so-tender age of 29, only to suddenly fall for a younger *zaftig* attendee named Constance (not her real name). We'll explore *that* story in Volume Three, but the gist goes something like this: sexually frustrated yet surrounded by fresh-out-of-school 18-to-20-year-olds wearing yoga pants, I met Constance during my commute, fell in love, shaved my Marx-style beard (captain frowny face, above), got used for sex, and did anything I could to recover. In short, I married my work.

Let's just say I spent a lot of time with my professors, afterwards. By making appointments to see them at their offices, I did so to not only better understand the work assigned to me, but do the best work possible for my superiors. I'd also pulled out my brother's copy of *The Hobbit* and was reading *it* again (as I had done to nurse a previous heartache), which gave me the idea to write my essay for Craig

Dionne, "[Dragon Sickness: the Problem of Greed](#)" (which he really liked, telling me so while standing side-by-side at the urinals in Pray-Harrold's upstairs bathroom). Some time passed—with me working on translating someone else's graphic novel<sup>2</sup> for fun—when Sandy Norton stopped me in Pray-Harrold (the building housing Eastern's English department). She did so to tell me in passing that I had been chosen for an award by the English faculty department. "I don't care," I replied, and proceeded to explain how I'd lost my girlfriend and that's all I cared about at the time (love is blind). "Nicholas, you're a terrific intellectual and have a great heart," Sandy replied, holding me by the shoulders. "One step and one day at a time."

Later, I would say something similar to Christine Neufeld, who told me, "This award's a big deal! It's not just something we give out to anyone! With that and your grades, you can go to any school you want! Pick one!" And so I did, planning the rest of 2016 and eventually 2017 (while staying at Sandy's for part of that time) to go to MMU—the Centre for Gothic Studies in Manchester, England—because I really *wanted* to study the Gothic (and no place state-side offered a course). Partly, Sandy had mentioned "Gothic" to me, several times—an idea I continued to nurse until I set my heart upon it; i.e., during an independent study crafted and executed under non-tenured lecturer<sup>3</sup> David Calonne (from Volume Zero):

<sup>2</sup> [Midsummer Love: The Erotic Tales of Madikken the Milkmaid](#) (above, 2016), which the original author tried to screw me out of, and which I fought for the rights of the character in 2019 after he tried to bury the project/leave it half-finished. I won, and currently reserve the rights to pursue the project however I wish; i.e., to rewrite and reillustrate the novel as I see fit.



<sup>3</sup> Because Eastern was constantly milking its tenured professors for time and labor, the latter were more than happy to tell me (in no uncertain terms) to go find someone else. Being non-tenured, David was far less strapped for time; also, his mentioning to me in 2016 of Louis Borges' "Garden of the Forking Paths" (upon seeing my Cthulhu t-shirt, in class) inspired me to accompany him to his car while chatting about Borges and Lovecraft (the former one of my mom's favorite authors and the latter someone my grandfather used to read to me as a child). Eventually I learned that Borges was influenced by Lovecraft's writing—enough, anyways, to write a short story, "There Are More Things" (1975)—whose synchronistic relationship I explored while giving a symposium talk on both men *vis-à-vis* Frederic Jameson: "[EMU 2017 Symposium Script: Frederic Jameson and the Art of Lying](#)" (2017).

Working under David Calonne, I was only just learning about the Numinous *vis-à-vis* Rudolph Otto and H.P. Lovecraft and came across an article by Lilia Melani, "Otto on the Numinous" (2003), citing the Gothic as the quest for the Numinous: "It has been suggested that [Gothic fiction](#) originated primarily as a quest for the *mysterium tremendum*" ([source](#)). Something about it appealed to my then-closeted kinkster as having previously been titillated by Cameron, Lovecraft and Nintendo (there's a sentence I never thought I'd write), but also the videogames I was playing at the time: *Metroidvania* (shortly before I went overseas, my best friend Ginger recommended *Axiom Verge* and *Hollow Knight* to me, which I eventually made the topic of my master's thesis). Eager to go to grad school and learn more about this exciting thing called "the Numinous," I looked for places that taught "the Gothic" and was directed by various educators to MMU ([source](#))



Unbeknownst to me at the time, this entire process comprised a series of then-unfortunate-events-but-eventually-happy accidents. Basically I had attended my graduation ceremony in December 2016, but learned in early 2017 that I *wouldn't* be receiving my diploma that April: I actually needed four more credits to graduate than had previously been told

to me by the English department! Thanks to a miscommunication between said department and the general college (who was trying to milk *me* for money by having me take expensive gym classes, short notice), I had to find the credits needed to graduate after having already planned my trip to Manchester! The ensuing independent study with David saw me writing the paper, "[Method in His Madness: Lovecraft, the Rock-and-Roll Iconoclast and Buoyant Lead Balloon](#)" (2017), which inspired me to pursue the Numinous (as a subject of study) all the way to the faraway, magical city... of Manchester, England (fun fact: I originally went there determined to study under Xavi Reyes and do scholarship for S.T. Joshi's Lovecraft journal, but after dealing with both men, I decided to write about *Metroidvania*, instead)!

Think of the award letter, then, as a statement of merit—one supplied by older wizards giving this gay little hobbit a much-needed kick in the pants (or that awesome twister plucking Dorothy Gale from her Kansas farm before sending *her* magically off to Oz). It inspired me *just enough* to keep going, thus have an adventure (or three) worth writing about. After a fairly long back-and-forth (re: [Quora](#)), I flew out on September 11th, 2017, to start my journey. While there, the fortuitous nature of my delay became clear to me: I met my second ex (re:

Zeuhl, from my book series), dating them the entire stay and afterwards... only to have them leave me for a crush of ten years, who they'd marry spontaneously in 2019 (a month after I returned from a IGA [International Gothic Association] conference in Chicago: "[Always More: A History of Gothic Motion from the Metroidvania Speedrunner](#)")!



([source](#): "Welcome to IGA 2019: Gothic Terror, Gothic Horror")

It wasn't *all* bad. Yes, Zeuhl abandoned me *and* expected my loyalty afterwards. All the same, they still taught me loads about non-binarism, trans people and queer culture; introduced me to Foucault, Dennis Cooper and Derrick Jarman, and set up this website for me; and—for better or worse—also showed me some dating tips and tricks (about fucking online) that led me to meeting my third and fourth exes (Jadis and Cuwu, for those of you keeping track). While *that* sounds understandably terrible, it proved essential towards my development as a postgrad; i.e., I continued my research on Metroidvania while on lockdown during Covid, and began networking for what ultimately became my *Sex Positivity* book project. Reeling from trauma and hard-fought knowledge, I set about pursuing the project in earnest, July 2022 (after Cuwu left me for a dog trainer also named Nicholas<sup>4</sup> with a similar sized penis); writing initially about TERFs in media, I quickly expanded *Sex Positivity* to a concept I dubbed "Gothic Communism" ([source](#): "My Logo for Gothic (gay-anarcho) Communism!" 2023), and to Metroidvania as I researched it.

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<sup>4</sup> I tentatively came out as trans [on June 1st, 2022](#), but made it official on August 7th ([source](#): "Coming out as Trans!"). *Sex Positivity* began in earnest, July 22nd, 2022 ([source](#): "Sex Positivity versus Sex Coercion, or Gothic Communism: Manifesto"). I chose "Persephone" as my new name—not after the Greek goddess of death (though that is cool), but [from the kung fu maids in Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow](#) (2003). The idea was to camp Communism with Metroidvania, but also queer studies at large (re: "[Making Marx Gay](#)," 2024). "We camp canon because we must!"



## Summarizing Persephone's Metroidvania Praxis



Despite playing Metroidvania my whole life (e.g., "[Super Metroid and Why It Matters \(to Me\)](#)," 2020), and having met David Calonne in 2016, my work on the genre technically started on January 2018; i.e., when I chose the topic (and supervisors) for my master's thesis (and landed on Metroidvania instead of Lovecraft). By October 2023, I had written my PhD, which discussed the evolution of the term as I understood it, and how I wanted to apply it to my ongoing work, *post-postgrad* (from Volume Zero):

Before the thesis proper, my essay "Notes on Power" discussed the paradox as being the performative nature of power doubled, including monsters but also their decaying lairs as monumental sites of immense, god-like power dressed up through the Gothic language of the imaginary past; the Metroidvania is a Gothic castle full of Gothic monsters, but also Gothic *ghosts* (echoes) of older and older castles reaching out from novels and cinema into videogames. Regardless of the medium, though, Clint Hockings' adage, "Seek power and you will progress" ([source](#): "Ludonarrative Dissonance," 2007) means something altogether different depending how you define power as something to seek, including unequal arrangements thereof. As a child, teenager and woman, I sought it through the palliative Numinous in Gothic castles of the Neo-Gothic tradition carried over into videogames (which I learned about in reverse: videogames, followed by the Numinous/*mysterium tremendum* as introduced to me by Dr. David Calonne). Of these, I explored their Numinous territories in response to my own lived trauma and subsequent hypersexuality—i.e., as things I both related to the counterfeit with and sought to reclaim the counterfeit from as a tool to understand, thus improve myself and the world by reclaiming the castle as a site of interpretative Gothic play (of kinks, fetishes, and BDSM); i.e., this book that you're reading right now is a "castle" to wander around inside: a safe space of exquisite "torture" to ask questions about your own latent desires and guilty thoughts regarding the "barbaric" exhibits within as putting the ghosts out from my past on display (the Gothic castle and its intense, "heavy weather" theatrics generally being a medieval metaphor for the mind, body and soul, but also its extreme, buried and/or conflicting

emotions and desires: a figurative or sometimes literal plurality depending on the person exploring the castle) [[source](#)].

In short, Metroidvania are yet-another place to camp canon with in the Neo-Gothic style (to put "Gothic" [the historical late medieval period, aka the Renaissance] in quotes, faking and camping it); i.e., by fabricating giant imaginary worlds to explore a variety of things during ludo-Gothic BDSM, but especially imperiled emotions and Numinous sensations, monomythic intimations of tyrannical regression, concentric environments and illusions (*mise-en-abyme*, or castles-in-castles/"the belly of the beast"), and various anachronistic, psychosexual devices conducive to liberation through calculated risk: as a complicated, warring matter of performative imprisonment and escape *without* exit, told playfully *in* "Gothic" space-and-time. It's what Bakhtin and I call "castle narrative,"

Toward the end of the seventeenth century in England, a new territory for novelistic events is constituted and reinforced in the so-called "Gothic" or "black" novel—the castle (first used in this meaning by Horace Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto*, and later in Radcliffe, Monk Lewis and others). The castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past [...] the traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible form as various parts of its architecture [...] and in particular human relationships involving dynastic primacy and the transfer of hereditary rights. [...] legends and traditions animate every corner of the castle and its environs through their constant reminders of past events. It is this quality that gives rise to the specific kind of narrative inherent in castles and that is then worked out in Gothic novels (source: *The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981).

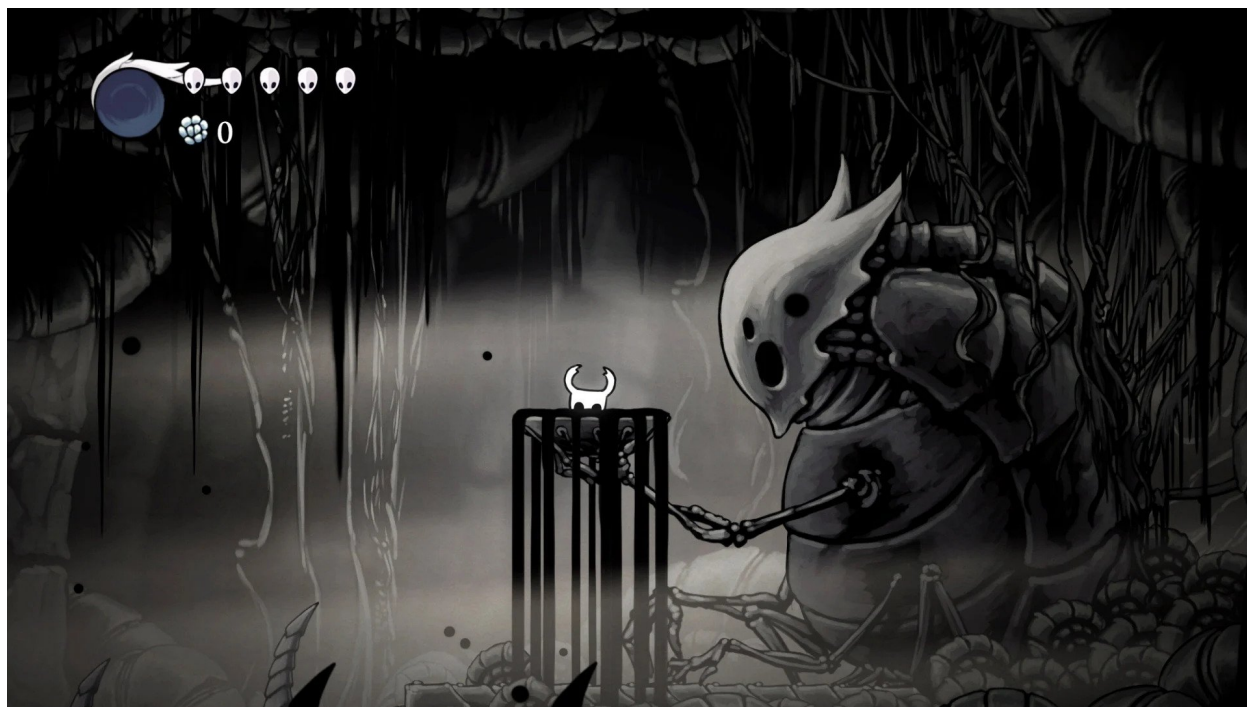
but which I—since my master's thesis—have tried to take *beyond* novels or cinema and into Metroidvania as, itself, *not* restricted to the computer screen (re: Zimmerman's magic circle); i.e., as what Jasper Juul would call "half-real," but with a twist—not between fiction and the rules, as he argues, but as *I* argue: between fiction and non-fiction, onstage and off, during ludo-Gothic BDSM while negotiating power for ourselves versus the bourgeoisie. Capital abuses Gothic media to foster illusions that reinforce and perpetuate Capitalist Realism during the neoliberal era (the time of videogames); we learn from these refrains (re: Tolkien and Cameron's High Fantasy and Metroidvania/shooter) to camp canon, thus *break* Capitalist Realism with: to imagine a better world beyond capital while inside it; i.e., while using neo-medieval language often concerned with our world's end as suggested by previous imperial collapse (and encroaching barbarism) "faked with intent."

The *Otranto* manuscript, for instance, was originally presented as a historical artifact that Walpole "discovered" and passed off as "genuine" (admitting it was

fake, a year later). So often, the ancient castle shows up like an alien vessel (the liminal hauntology of war), becoming something to face and understand our smaller place inside a larger cannibalizing structure: capital's boom-or-bust, dressed up as "Gothic." It's a found document, intimating destruction as something to avoid by fucking with it "in small."

Through the state, things never change; through us, Gothic reinvention changes the historical-material future tied to the past as, to some degree, imaginary and playful, thus potent through its connection to our labor having infinite value the state will try to exploit through fantasy. All *Metroidvania* work like this; i.e., they summon what resists discovery yet can never fully disguise itself, then gives us the awesome, torture-dungeon means to articulate *that* however we like, and in ways that are easy enough to understand (through thresholds and tolerances we can change, generally through exposure to "pain" and "fear" in campy forms).

Furthermore, **abjection**, **chronotopes**, **hauntology** and **cryptonymy** are all major Gothic theories, and whose praxial usage (among others) I summarize for someone on r/Metroidvania regarding *Metroidvania* as "Gothic" (and which I've proofread slightly here):



As for "Gothic," it means many different things, and concerns just as much a mode of expression as an aesthetic or specific thesis argument (the two were not separate, in the Neo-Gothic period). It boils down to the excitement from interrogating a lineage of "Gothic" things; i.e., a palimpsestuous voice of fakery and the neo-medieval taboos associated most famously with Horace

Walpole and *The Castle of Otranto* (1764): the first Gothic novel, whose effect survives in Metroidvania doing something similar through a different media type (videogames versus novels of the Ancient Romance-meets-quotidian). I'll give you a taste of things in relation to my own work.

My master's thesis, for example, essentially argued that, despite being "speed games" that can be played a variety of ways, *Metroid*-style Metroidvania are built for that due to their maze-like space; i.e., their metaplay upholds a Gothic effect; e.g., Radcliffe's distinctions of terror and horror<sup>5</sup>, Bakhtin's chronotope and the saturation of a "black castle" with through-and-through reminders of the historical past (dynastic primacy and hereditary rites), and Chris Baldrick's own notion of Gothic effect from his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (2009): "For the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration" ([source](#)).

A good rule of thumb is, the Gothic rules its narratives through proximity with power, obscurity and decay as something to "quest for" in a variety of stories; i.e., Rudolph Otto's the Numinous, aka the *mysterium tremendum*. Jerrold Hogle takes this further, arguing how "Gothic," since the Neo-Gothic period of the 1700s, furthers Kristeva's abjection process through a middle-class fear-fascination relationship with the imaginary past (re: "The Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit and the Process of Abjection," 2012; referenced through Dave West's "[Implementation of Gothic Themes in The Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit](#)," 2023); i.e., the ghost of the counterfeit (from my book series glossary): "this abject reality or hidden barbarity is a hauntological process of abjection that, according to David Punter in *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (1980), 'displaces the hidden violence of present social structures, conjures them up again as past, and falls promptly under their spell' ([source](#)). I would add that it is a privileged, liminal position that endears a sheltered consumer to the barbaric past as reinvented as consumable."

For Hogle and me, then, the Gothic is rooted in fakery as a poetic, theatrical means to interrogate the present *arrangements* of power and illusion (the status quo and Capitalist Realism); i.e., through *hauntological* (retro-future) poetics, *cryptonymy* as a matter of

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<sup>5</sup> From "On The Supernatural In Poetry" (1826, published posthumously):

Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them [...] and where lies the great difference between terror and horror but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil? ([source](#)).

concealment pointing to oppressed materials (darkness visible), *abject* (us-versus-them) content, and the *chronotope*<sup>6</sup> speaking to ancient revenge (Gothicists fear a return of the imaginary past tied to present structures). Metroidvania have all these devices, though each arrangement *is* different: "This castle is a creature of chaos; it may take many different incarnations." Even so, the palimpsest is there, haunting each variation with older has-beens and new possibilities alike.

In a nutshell, the Gothic is a place to *regress*, in neo-medieval language we can play with; i.e., doing so with ludo-Gothic BDSM and Metroidvania helping workers interrogate the decay of the present space and time (and presence of trauma): *vis-à-vis* ongoing but repressed socio-material issues in and out of themselves; e.g., Ellen Ripley and settler colonialism in the *Alien* franchise (the language of Amazons and Grendel's mother, from *Beowulf* onwards). There's also the idea of mappable (cartographic) space in Metroidvania as "terrifying"; i.e., per Manuel Aguirre's *infernal concentric pattern* upending Campbell's monomyth: "[...the infernal concentric pattern has] in Gothic one and the same function: to destabilize assumptions as to the physical, ontological or moral order of the cosmos [... It is like a Mandelbrot set:] finite, and yet from within we cannot reach its end; it is a labyrinth that delves 'down' instead of pushing outwards" ([source](#): "Geometries of Terror, 2008).

[...] To conclude, Metroidvania—regarding *Metroid* and *Castlevania*, onwards—is inherently Gothic because all of these devices are in effect, be that spatially, thematically and/or textually per the ludo-aesthetic arguments taking place (through play, appearance and expression; e.g., fighting or surviving monsters not just as literal things, but a staged theatre evoking mood—Walpole's gloomth or [Creed's] monstrous-feminine, for instance). They breathe power and decay to interrogate both the end of nuclear ("Roman") mastery (the fall of the king and patrilineal descent tied hauntologically to Capitalism), and the expected, subsequent rise of anxiety through doomed inheritance. Inside the Imperial Core—among a displaced, projected tomb thereof—the latter's unearthing or otherwise sudden appearance, like Dracula's castle, speaks to apocalypse (revelation), survival and taboos in the presence of fearsome power abjected onto state enemies or doubles; i.e., the "exquisite torture" of what cannot *immediately* kill us, mid-fantasy, yet speaks paradoxically to things caused by capital (and its inherent inequities, division and alienation) that most certainly *can*; e.g., rape fears, cannibalism, live burial, and so on ([source](#)).

---

<sup>6</sup> I refer to these constantly throughout my book series (often *vis-à-vis* Castricano's *cryptomimesis* and Hogle's "narrative of the crypt"; re: from Castricano's 2001 book of the same name, and Hogle's "The Restless Labyrinth: Cryptonomy in the Gothic Novel," 1980). Refer to Sex Positivity's [Paratextual Documents page](#) to see them outlined in full.

Capital alienates and sexualizes everything. The whole point of my PhD, then, is to combine a polity of Gothic theories and poetics that—once reunited with, during the dialectic of shelter and the alien learning through reinvention and play—challenge capital, including Metroidvania; i.e., in a holistic manner conducive to universal liberation; re: through Gothic theatre and play using Metroidvania during ludo-Gothic BDSM to achieve praxial catharsis for workers by dismantling the state with *Promethean* spaces of play (reversing the monomyth [thus profit] during the infernal concentric pattern, chasing the fire of the gods). All these theories are at work, but I often stress or focus on them differently throughout my book series.

That's essentially "the gist" of it, here, and all we have time to outline refer to my essays from "Further Reading" for a more detailed exploration of these topics *vis-à-vis* Metroidvania).



And *that's* a quick crash course on Metroidvania and how I conceived it, from 2017 to 2023 (and beyond)! It's as much a story about my life, "there and back again," as it is my academic ideas in isolation; i.e., my work is *holistic* and doesn't try to separate academic concepts from everyday life. Instead, it tries to *synthesize* the two, combining them and cultivating good daily social-sexual habits to best achieve

praxial catharsis: to engender rebellion and break Capitalist Realism with ludo-Gothic BDSM (re: Volume One).

Rebellion is a question of effort over time, for which my work on/with Metroidvania certainly qualifies; i.e., it didn't spring into existence, *ex nihilo*, but took considerable effort, information and energy exerted on/coming from me over an extended time period. Furthermore, I don't expect my thoughts *on* Metroidvania as a vector for this process to magically "convince" people, overnight—education doesn't work like that, and those in Plato's cave will eagerly attack those coming in "from outside" (re: *The Matrix*' blue pill/red pill analogy, which sadly has been co-opted by fascist groups, like all punk culture has). Instead, if my mistakes and breakthroughs (such as they are) help people think more critically about media—i.e., to raise emotional/Gothic intelligence and class, culture and racial awareness about the world through said media (re: Volume One)—then frankly it was time well

spent! It's *my* contribution to the Cause, one I don't have to convince *everyone* about; I just have to put *something* out there that makes *some* kind of difference. Even if it "doesn't work" and only directs people's interest and money towards the other workers I collaborate with (see: "[Acknowledgments](#)"), that is *still* a good thing. Burning Rome is a *group effort* and stripping is *not* consent; tip your sex workers (re: "[Book Sample, Volume One: 'Paid Labor,'](#)" 2024)!



(artist: [Fired Up Stilettos](#))

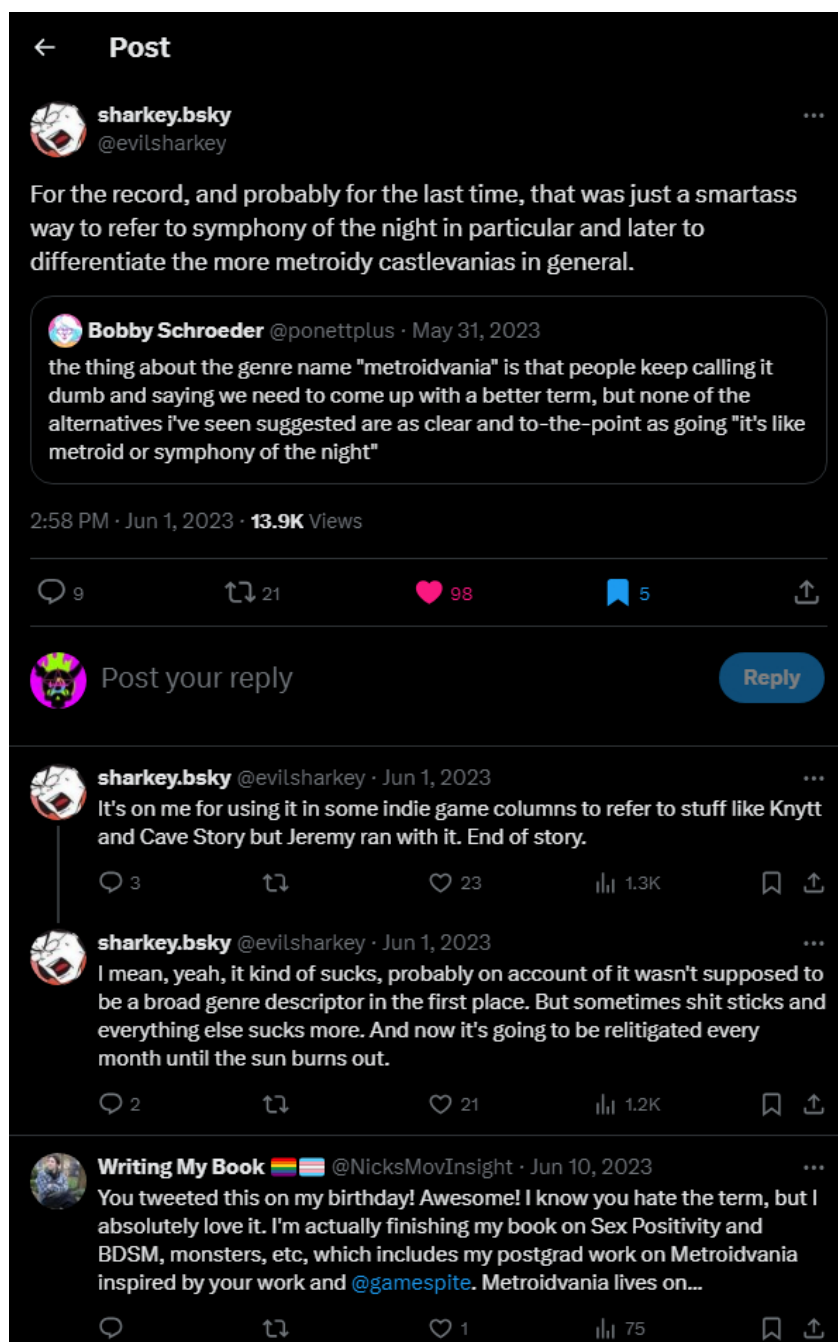
## Metroidvania (definitions)

Metroidvania has multiple definitions. Here, Persephone supplies the most important (chief among them being her own, of course); re (from Sex Positivity's glossary):

### Metroidvania

A type of Gothic videogame, one involving the exploration of castles and other closed spaces in an ergodic framework; i.e., the struggle of investigating past trauma as expressed through the Gothic castle and its monstrous caverns (which is the author poetically hinting at systemic abuses in real life). [Scott Sharkey insists he coined the term](#) (source tweet:





evilsharkey, 2023)—ostensibly in the early 2000s while working with Jeremy Parish for 1-UP.com:



However, the term was probably being used before that in the late '90s to casually describe the 1997 PSOne game, *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*; records of it being used can be found [as early as 2001](#) (this [Aria of Sorrow Amazon review](#) is from 2003, next page).



Metrodvania is great... Thumbs up for Castlevania: Circle of the Moon. 1,099 views

-  **Richard Hutnik**  
For me, the Metroid formula for the GBA version of Castlevania is real good, well, once I give the Jun 14, 2001, 10:02:55 PM
- 
-  **Todd Jones**  
>For me, the Metroid formula for the GBA version of Castlevania is real >good, well, once I Jun 15, 2001, 12:12:19 PM
- 
-  **hhh**  
to Jun 15, 2001, 12:21:51 PM ☆  
guess the N64 fanboys don't know that they first used the Metroid formula  
in SOTN  
...
- 
-  **Richard Hutnik**  
to Jun 15, 2001, 4:02:33 PM ☆  
"Todd Jones" <todd...@nethere.net> wrote in message news:<tlfk9l...@corp.supernews.com>...  
...  
I have SOTN, but I hadn't been the one who had been comparing COTM to  
Metroid, until this post.  
- Richard Hutnik

## Customer Review

 Ed Oscuro

★★★★★ **A fitting end (perhaps) to the Castlevania timeline.**

Reviewed in the United States on May 11, 2003

There's a Belmont in there somewhere.

First there was Circle of the Moon. Then there was Harmony of Dissonance. For those of you hoping that Aria would get away from the "Castleroid" (or Metrodvania) style of gameplay, you'll undoubtedly be annoyed that Aria once again uses a map system and items that must be picked up.

Unlike the other two games, though, Aria has a focus more in keeping with the CD-ROM based game Symphony of the Night. It's huge! We're not talking about simple length from A to B, or cheap inverted maps, though: instead of the simple Vampire Killer whip/morning star, you start out with a pocketknife and best mink stole, as the style of 2035 dictates one should go into battle equipped. Along with the usual upgradeable armor and profusion of healing items, you have the choice of equipping any of literally dozens of types of insane weaponry. You will eventually meet up with the Vampire Killer...but suffice to say that a number of things must happen first.

The Soul Powers should be mentioned as well. This is a fitting replacement for item capsules, with a somewhat plausible explanation: You have the power to absorb the souls of different monsters, gaining a unique power in the process. Not much more can be said about it, but the variety puts CotM's DSS tarot card combination system to shame.

The graphics are certainly a high point. Unlike CotM's stock graphics, drawn by a company outside of Konami, everything in AoS really belongs in a CV game. Some characters will be familiar, some are brand new...but they're all interesting. What about graphics effects? We've got awesome waterfalls, mirrored corridors, lots of good sprite rotation, and even different angle shots (chariots, horses and similar things run in a virtual circle, with unique sprites for viewing them at different angles). What's more, it all fits. Out of all the 2D Castlevania games, this is without a doubt the most competitive.

The music is very excellently composed, enough to make you forget it's all mono this time around. Forgiving that, the tunes are more nicely executed than the previous two games. Listen for the remix of "Don't Wait Until Night" and "Hearts of Fire."

Finally, AoS has intense replay value. Don't be swayed by people saying "And once you beat the ugly last boss, it's over!" That last 10% of the map played your first time through is where the game actually starts. With a few extra modes of game play, the ability to trade souls between different GBAs, and a profusion of weaponry (some archaic, some futuristic) this game will continue to present you with surprises for a long time to come. Along the way, you'll discover why I call this the end to the Castlevania timeline...and much more.

7 people found this helpful

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So whereas "survival horror" was often used in official published material (and as early as 1999)

"Capcom made up the survival horror genre because the company didn't feel that the *Resident Evil* games really fit in any existing category" ([PSM 58](#)).

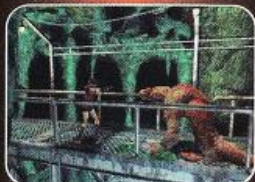


## WHAT IS SURVIVAL HORROR?

Capcom made up the Survival Horror genre because the company didn't feel that the *Resident Evil* games really fit into any existing category. Okay, so we thought the whole idea was a little goofy. But now that we've got a non-*Resident Evil* series Survival Horror game, it kind of legitimizes the new category.



▲ The original *Resident Evil* started the Survival Horror category. The goal of the game wasn't necessarily to blow everything up, but to simply survive, even if it meant running away.



▲ *Resident Evil 2* improved on the idea, with refined techniques on setting a creepy ambience to keep the tension level high. The game rarely let you feel safe and secure.



▲ *Dino Crisis* should hopefully continue in the tradition and provide faster, smarter monsters, along with many more horrendous moments that will make you jump.



▲ Those raptors are some of the smartest dinosaurs in this game. They have no problem running away if the odds are not in their favor.

# DINO CRISIS

Capcom trades in zombies for dinosaurs

For months Capcom has hinted at the next game in its "Survival Horror" genre, a category made famous by the company's top franchise, *Resident Evil*. But after months of speculation, it turns out that this new game doesn't have anything to do with *Resident Evil* at all—no zombies, mutated monsters, none of that stuff. Instead, Capcom is shocking the world with perhaps the most unexpected "Survival Horror" villains of all—dinosaurs!

The game is called *Dino Crisis*, and is the creation of Shengji Mukami, the genius who originally gave us *Resident Evil*. The game will be unveiled on videotape at the Tokyo Game Show (look for our report next issue), and the first playable version will appear at the big E3 show in May. While the action/adventure gameplay is very reminiscent of the *Resident Evil* series, the story appears to come directly from *Jurassic Park*.

The trouble starts when a character named Professor Kirk goes to Idis Island to conduct experiments, in an attempt to create a source of limitless energy. Unfortunately, Kirk's activities catch the attention of the wrong people, who want to use the technology to make a devastating new weapon. An intense struggle follows, and the equipment is damaged. To everyone's amazement, this opens a rift in time, bringing dinosaurs through. As you can guess, much carnage ensues.

Unlike the *RE* series, you only play as one main character, a woman named Regina. She's part of a special team sent in to find Professor Kirk and get him off the island alive. You'll have to survive all kinds of dinosaurs, including massive T-Rexs and the lightning-quick Raptors, who we hear are the most vicious beasts in the game. The dinos will sometimes toy with their human prey. They can pick you up in their jaws and swing you around like a rag doll, which has the effect of knocking your weapon out of your hand. When this happens, you have to go to the inventory screen and select a new one until you can retrieve your old one.

While thinking of *Jurassic Park* doesn't exactly conjure up the moody atmospheres and creepy scenery that we're all familiar with from *Resident Evil*, Capcom assures us that this game will scare the crap out of you. There are even more "jumpy" scenes than in *RE2*, with dinos suddenly leaping out from nowhere to chomp down on you. In one scene, you're walking along when, all of a sudden, you switch to a first-person view, looking through the eyes of a raptor as it hops from



▲ If this screenshot doesn't take your breath away, then we don't know what will. We just can't wait to see this T-Rex in action.

rooftop to rooftop. When it finally hits the ground, you notice that it's come up right behind you! There's even a scene straight out of *Resident Evil*, where dinos come smashing through a glass window to ambush you. You can even hear the dinosaurs' movements as they stalk you, which makes the game even more intense. Capcom is also putting a lot of effort into lighting and atmosphere effects, to create just the right mood to spook you out.

As for other new features, Capcom is keeping them hush-hush for now. However, we have heard there's a weapons-combination system in the game that builds on what you could do with items in the *RE* titles. Also, Capcom is saying that this game is definitely not for the squeamish. For example, when you take a lot of damage, you limp along leaving a trail of blood behind you, and there's even a scene where someone gets bit by a dino, and a stream of blood jets out the back of their head! Hence the "horror" in "Survival Horror".

Make no mistake, this is one of the very top titles headed our way this year. Even though we've only seen these few screen shots, you just know there's no way Capcom's A-team is going to disappoint. So keep your eyes on these pages, because Capcom has assured us we'll have new material to show you almost every month from now until the game's release this Fall. *Dino Crisis* is definitely going to be a lot of fun to look forward to!

## TRUE 3-D GAMEPLAY

Unlike the *Resident Evil* games which had still, pre-rendered backgrounds, *Dino Crisis* is completely 3-D, with fully-polygonal graphics. The developers are taking advantage of this by creating lots of sweeping, creeping camera movements like you'd see in a horror movie (for an example of this, check out Konami's recent *Silent Hill*). Overall, the graphics in *Dino Crisis* are said to be a step above *RE2*.

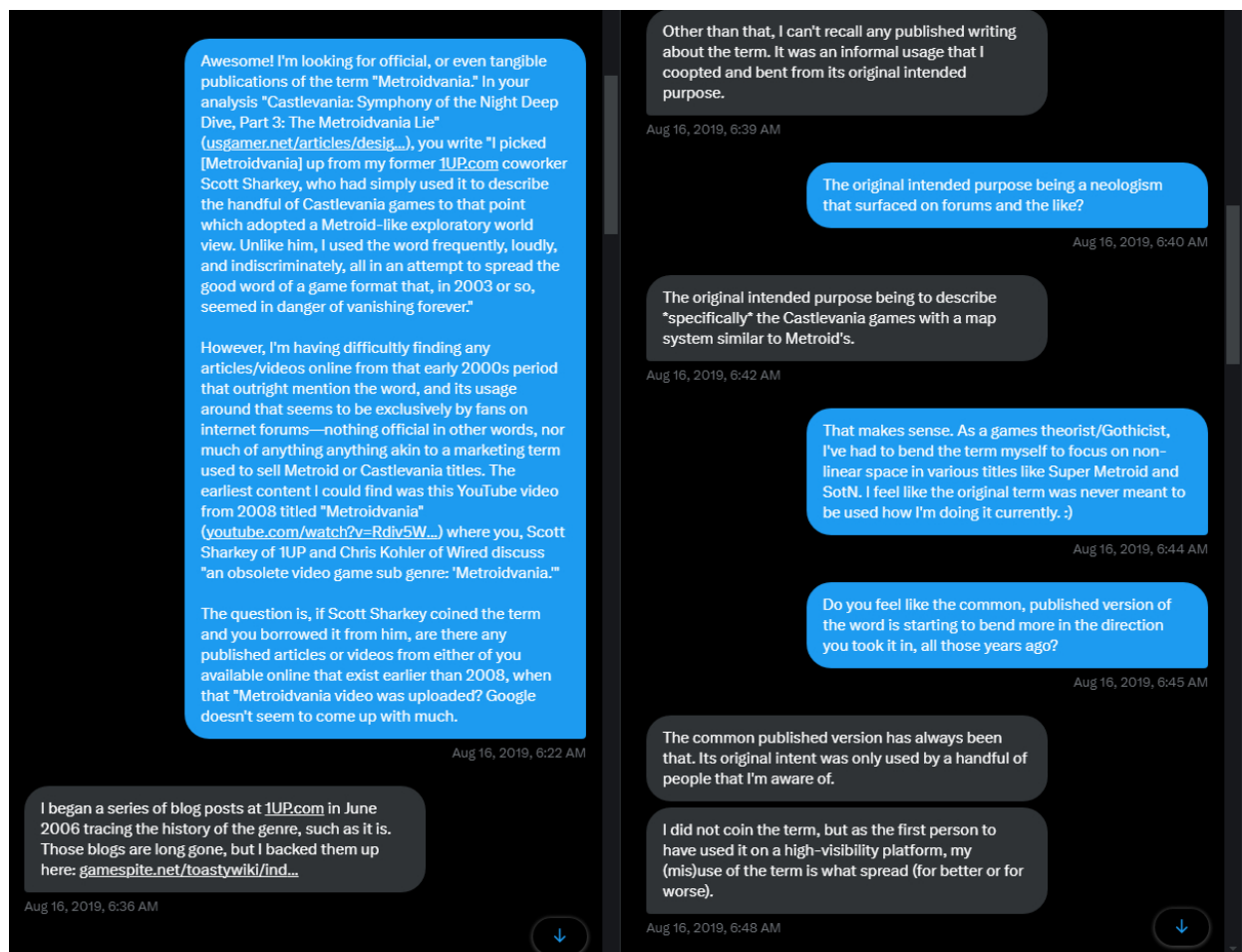


▲ Considering the fact that *Dino Crisis* takes place in a true 3-D environment, it is impressive that Capcom was able to keep the detail level so high. We guess that is a testament to the quality of their texture artists.



▲ Since both the monsters and the backgrounds are composed of polygons, everything seems to have a more cohesive feel. There won't be any moments where the characters look like they are posted on a pre-rendered background.

this worked because it all belonged to Capcom. Conversely "Metroidvania" was effectively the combination of two IPs owned by different Japanese companies, Nintendo and Konami. For that reason, Jeremy Parish explained to me (many years later—in 2019, below), the term was almost<sup>7</sup> never printed in any official capacity during the 1990s and early 2000s:



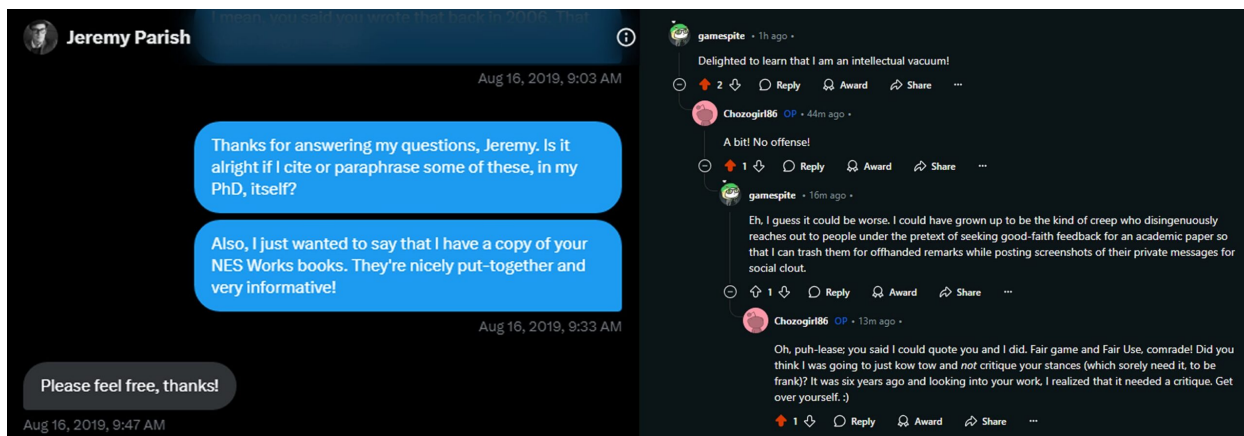
By 2006, though, Parish explains how he'd written a personalized definition; i.e., for a series of blog posts at 1-UP.com, which he archived for years afterwards on his now-defunct website, GameSpite:

<sup>7</sup> "Almost" being the key word, here. Discussions of it were being printed in some capacity—just never to sell games. Instead, they were done to turn one's noses up at grassroots language; e.g., Game Informer Magazine: "For Video Game Enthusiasts," Volume 16, Issues 9-12 (2006): "Though some jaded [emphasis, me] gamers dub *Symphony's* gameplay formula 'Metroidvania' due to its resemblance to Nintendo's beloved franchise..." ([source](#)). Published sources then and now (or those nursing a print-only nostalgia; e.g., Parish) have always treated the term with weird disdain, and describe anyone who used it as "jaded" (except Parish and company, of course—classic double standard, there).

"Metroidvania" is a stupid word for a wonderful thing. It's basically a really terrible neologism that describes a videogame genre which combines 2D side-scrolling action with free-roaming exploration and progressive skill and item collection to enable further, uh, progress. As in *Metroid* and Koji Igarashi-developed *Castlevania* games. Thus the name ([source](#): "GameSpite | Compendium of Old and Useless Information," 2012).

Jeremy has since removed the archive (and it's not on the Wayback Machine). However, during our conversation, his baffling disdain for the word was in full force (no doubt inspired by its vague, umbrella, grassroots qualities). He seemed annoyingly blasé about it, too—acting as Metroidvania's *de facto* minter/singular representative while, at the same time, completely disowning it; i.e., seemingly embarrassed by it while pushing towards physical publication (of his admittedly fine book series, *Works*<sup>8</sup>): utterly convinced that Metroidvania was worthless, disinterested in its theoretical aspects—and ever-the-archivist in love with

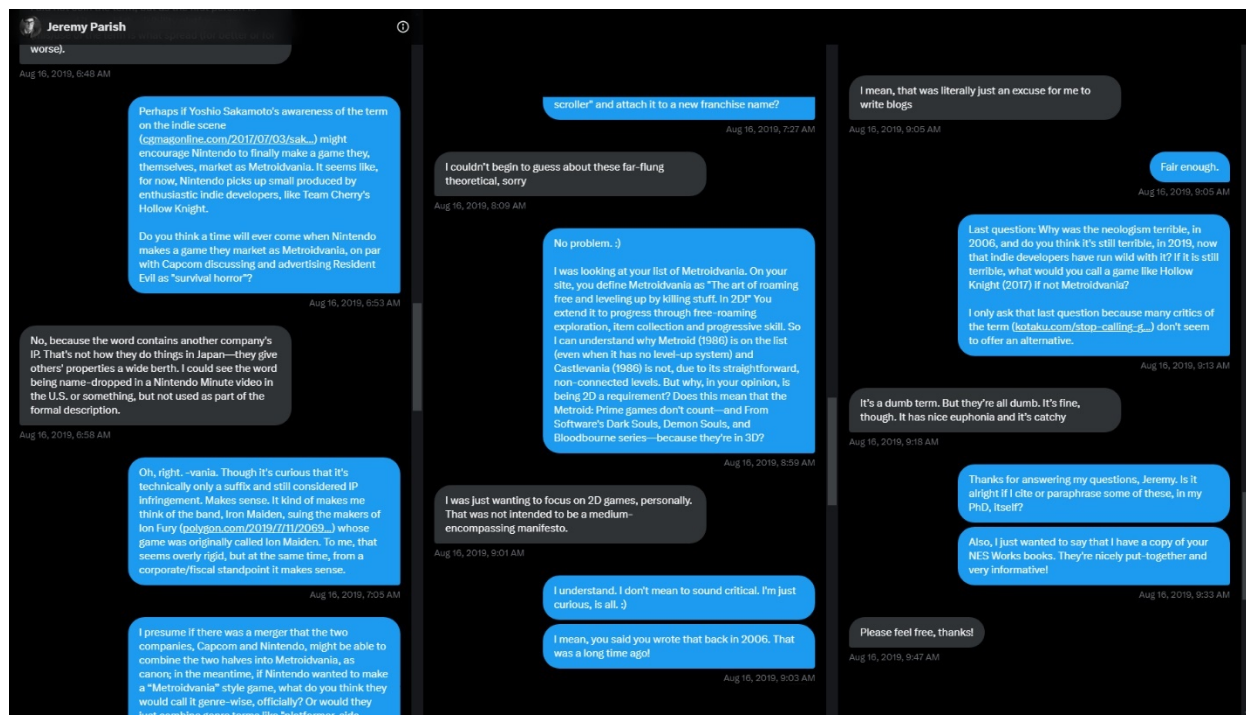
<sup>8</sup> The physical copies are spiffy enough, but you can see the entirety of it—narrated by Parish, himself—on his YouTube channel. [The "Jeremy Parish Fan Club" webpage](#) even organizes the long-running series not just by book, but by episode per game per book. It's pretty comprehensive and consistent, if meat-and-potatoes.



([source](#): Reddit, "From Master's to PhD (and Beyond): My Entire Work on Metroidvania," 2025)

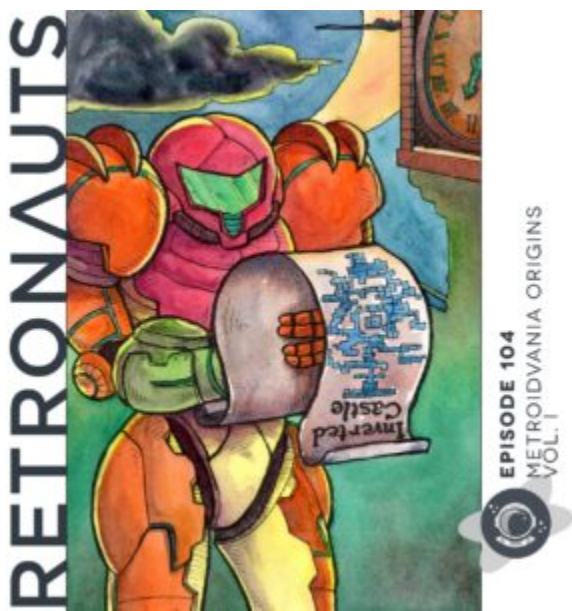
*Jeremy did not appreciate what I wrote about him and his work as an archivist, or his lack of anything intellectual to add through his work. He seemed convinced that I'd approached him in bad faith, only to drag him six years later while plotting about it, ahead of time! How dastardly. The truth is, I was fairly indifferent towards him at the time, and didn't get around to even delving into my research concerning him until about eight months ago (re: "[Modularity and Class](#)," 2024). But the more I looked into his work and opinions, the more I found them to be lacking on multiple fronts. I think it says something to his character/thin skin that, upon receiving valid criticism (positive and negative), he insinuates I "planned it all from the start" and merely "wanted clout" (despite waiting six years to publish my findings and not tagging him at all, on social media; i.e., he wandered into the subreddit merely to whine that I didn't aggrandize him). My dude, if I suddenly realize I don't like the work you do over half a decade after speaking with you, you can't really begin to argue what my intentions were at the time (white straight male fragility, amirite?). Go soak your head! —Perse*

the printed word and the profit motive—largely preferred the value of anything canonized by the two parent companies. In other words, he couldn't care less, yet seemed determined to bury the concept and have me print *that*, for all he cared:



Ignoring my personal feelings about Jeremy (and his weird, hipster/weeb's vendetta against Metroidvania [and allergy for portmanteaus] by trying to eliminate and discredit a phrase he didn't even invent), he was absolutely right about one thing: that "Metroidvania" was never used in any official capacity through the '90s or early '00s; it was purely a grassroots term. In fact, it wasn't until the mid-2010s that "Metroidvania" saw wider use in the Internet's indie market: [PC Gamer](#) (Tom Senior's "The Best Metroidvania Games on PC, 2022"), [Engadget](#) (Richard Mitchell's "'Metroidvania' Should Actually Be 'Zeldavania,'" 2014), [Game Developer](#) (Christian Nutt's "The Undying Allure of the Metroidvania," 2015), [Giant Bomb](#) ("Search Action<sup>9</sup>," 2024) and [Wired](#) (Bo Moore's "An Anime-Inspired Platformer..." 2015).

<sup>9</sup> The Japanese term for "Metroidvania," demonstrating how—even in 2024 (the last time Giant Bomb updated their post)—Japanese audiences and authors avoid using the term.



([source](#): "Retronauts episode 104: Chronicling metroidvania [lower-case, them]" (2018))

Since then, Parish and Sharkey have continued discussing the term throughout the years, always taking credit for "Metroidvania" while oddly disparaging it in the same breath; e.g., The Retronauts Jeremy Parish, Scott Sharkey of 1UP and Chris Kohler "discussing an obsolete video game sub genre: 'Metroidvania'" ([source](#), reupload: Rumbfish, 2008), or "Retronauts episode 104" (above) insisting Metroidvania is "a genre near and dear to the hearts of the Retronauts East crew" while, again, knocking and outlawing<sup>10</sup> it every chance they could before, during and after this point. It's like watching a bunch of abusive husbands battering their

<sup>10</sup> \*A petulant, entitled and prescriptive trend shared by others—e.g., Joshua Rivera ("Let's talk about one of my least favorite words in the video game lexicon: metroidvania"; [source](#): "Stop Calling Games 'Metroidvania,'" 2019)—but actually valued by Koji Igarashi:

When Igarashi took the reins of the *Castlevania* series, one of the team's primary goals was to increase the amount of time that players would spend with the game. Several options were considered, including adjusting the difficulty or changing the ending of the game to promote multiple plays. In the end, the team decided to increase the amount of exploration.

"We really wanted to extend the life of the game," said Igarashi, "and the one game that popped up in our heads was *Legend of Zelda*, an exploration-filled action game. Pretty much our entire team, including myself, were huge fans of the game, and we wanted to make something very similar. So now you know the origin of inspiration actually wasn't *Metroid*."

Even so, Igarashi is happy that his *Castlevania* games are associated with *Metroid*, although he didn't actually learn of the term "Metroidvania" until around two years ago, when he noticed fans posting about it on Facebook. "I like the name and I respect it," said Igarashi, "and I like the meaning behind it. It fits very well, so I'm actually kind of honored that *Metroid*, the name, is attached to *Castlevania*, and that it morphed into this one word, so I like it very much."

Of course, back in the late 1990s when Igarashi and his team were creating [Castlevania: Symphony of the Night](#) – the game that established today's familiar formula – the term Metroidvania didn't exist. So, what did they call it? As Igarashi told us during the Q&A session, it wasn't very flashy. "We didn't really have a code name for it. It was very basic and plain and we just called it '2D exploration action game.' There was really nothing special about it, so there you go" ([source](#): Mitchell's "'Metroidvania' Should Actually Be 'Zeldavania,'" 2014).

Yeah, and according to Larry the Architect ([from Will Farrell's spoof of \*The Matrix: Revolutions\*](#), 2003), *Frogger* (1981) was originally supposed to be called "Highway Crossing Frog." Doesn't mean it was a good idea ("[Search Action](#)" isn't any better)!

housewife, then love bombing her to death. It's very weird behavior (what we fags call "the Straights," and which I describe further as "white straight guy disease"; i.e., the kind of mean-spirited and cold, calculating invigilation behaviors exhibited by smug Egyptologists: calmly dissecting Cairo and putting its corpse parts in jars after Napoleon came and raped the city to hell and back).

My own postgrad research (re: "Mazes and Labyrinths," 2021) has expanded/narrowed the definition quite a bit:

Metroidvania are a location-based videogame genre that combines 2D, 2.5D, or 3D platforming [e.g., *Dark Souls*, 2009] and ranged/melee combat—usually in the 3rd person—inside a giant, closed space. This space communicates Gothic themes of various kinds; encourages exploration\* depending on how non-linear the space is; includes progressive skill and item collection, mandatory boss keys, backtracking and variable gating mechanics (bosses, items, doors); and requires movement powerups in some shape or form, though these can be supplied through RPG elements as an optional alternative.

*\*Exploration pertains to the deliberate navigation of space beyond that of obvious, linear routes—to search for objects, objectives or secrets off the beaten path ([source](#)).*

Also from "Mazes and Labyrinths":

**Mazes and Labyrinths:** I treat space as essential when defining Metroidvania. Mazes and labyrinths are closed space; their contents exist within a closed structure, either a maze or a labyrinth. A classical labyrinth is a linear system with one set, unicursal path towards an end point; a maze is a non-linear system with multiple paths to an end point [classical texts often treated the words as interchangeable].

**Metroidvania, etymology:** As its most basic interpretation, Metroidvania is a portmanteau of *Metroid* and *Castlevania*, specifically "Metroid" + "-vania." However, the term has no singular, universally-agreed-upon definition. Because I focus on space, my definitions—of the individual portmanteau components—are as follows: "Metroid" =/= the franchise, *Metroid*; "Metroid" = that franchise's unique treatment of closed space—the maze.

"-vania"  $\neq$  the franchise, *Castlevania*; "castlevania" equals that franchise's unique treatment of closed space—the labyrinth. At the same time, "Metroid," or "metro" + "-oid" means "android city." "Castlevania" or "castle" + "-vania" means "other castle," "demon castle," or "castle Dracula." The portmanteau, "Metroidvania"  $\approx$  "android city" + "demon castle" + "maze" + "labyrinth."

**Further Distinctions:** There are further ways to identify if a Metroidvania space is a maze or not. As I explain in my 2019 YouTube video, "[Metroidvania Series #2: Mazes and Labyrinths](#)":

What ultimately determines a Metroidvania's maze-ness are three sequences: the start, the middle, and the end. The start is what I consider to be the collection of essential items—power-ups you'll need to use for the entire game. Mid-game is the meat of the experience. The end sequence makes the win condition available to the player.

I mention item collection relative to these sequences because they are a core element of Metroidvania play, hence determine what kind of space the player is dealing with. In *Metroid*, for example, the Morph Ball, Bomb and Missiles are essential, and the player can acquire all of them rather quickly. Apart from those, however, there are few items you actually need to complete the game. One of them is Ice Beam, which is required to kill metroids, thus gain access to Mother Brain (the game's end condition). Large portions of the game can be played without it, though. Like many Metroid power-ups, it is a mid-game collectible.

Item collection allows the player to leave the start and enter the middle. This section, I argue, determines whether or not a Metroidvania is a maze. If the majority of the game allows for sequence breaks, RBO (reverse boss order) and low-percent, then it is a maze; if not, it is a labyrinth. A Metroidvania can be either ([source](#): the original script on Google Docs).

In terms of appearance, a Metroidvania's audiovisual presentation can range from retro-future sci-fi to Neo-Gothic fantasy. Nevertheless, their spaces typically function as Gothic castles; replete with hauntological monsters, demons, and ghosts, they guide whatever action the hero must perform when navigating the world and dealing with its threats.





### [...] **The Metroidvania Spectrum**

Apart from newer games, my definition also highlights the spectrum actualized and inhabited by older titles over the past thirty-odd years: *Castlevania* - *Castlevania*-style - cross-franchise hybrids - *Metroid*-style - *Metroid*

The extreme poles are represented by either parent franchise. These franchises appeared in 1986, and introduced a signature space to videogames:

- *Metroid* space = nonlinear, multi-directional mazes, with chimeric boss keys
- *Castlevania* space = linear, single-direction labyrinths, with singular end-stage boss gates

More towards the middle, you have franchise sequels or spiritual successors whose space behaves similarly to either parent franchise:

- *Castlevania*-style Metroidvania, which borrow spatially from *Castlevania*
- *Metroid*-style Metroidvania, which borrow spatially from *Metroid*
- Cross-franchise hybrids, which borrow spatially from both parents

Since 1986, videogame mazes and labyrinths have generally become associated with monsters and locational phobias (re: live burial, isolation, exposure). Mazes and labyrinths are structurally fundamental; Metroidvania developers can draw upon them (and their supernatural inhabitants) without pointedly

referencing *Metroid* or *Castlevania*. You'll know it when you see it; you might even call it something else (*ibid.*).

## Further Reading by Persephone (on Metroidvania)

Persephone's research into Metroidvania includes interviewing speedrunners, game designers, film directors; it extends and applies to her casual writing about sex, heavy metal, videogames and horror media; and it includes her personal artwork and sex work, as well as collaborations with other models and activists. Here is some further reading about Metroidvania taken from Persephone's body of work that you might find fun (re: quoted from the *Sex Positivity* glossary—hence the switch to first person):

### Metroidvania as closed space

In the past, my academic/postgraduate work has thoroughly examined the Metroidvania ludonarrative (including speedruns) as a closed/parallel *ergodic* space; while my critical voice has changed considerably since 2018, I want to show the evolution of my work/gender identity leading into *Sex Positivity*'s genesis by listing my entire Metroidvania corpus (not including my *entire* book volumes, but citing some salient essays from those books):

*[Anything from 2023 onwards, I'm perfectly proud of, but everything before 2023 is still important.] Though imperfect, these older pieces try to show how the poststructuralist method—when taken beyond its somewhat limited 1960s/70s praxial scope (the '70s being the emergence of academic Gothic thought)—can be critically empowered in dialectical-material ways; i.e., to actually critique capital through iconoclastic monsters, BDSM/power exchange and spaces in Metroidvania, but also immensely creative interpretations/responses to those variables as already existing for me to rediscover in my own work: speedrunning as a communal effect for solving complex puzzles and telling Gothic ludonarratives in highly inventive ways. As we'll see moving forward, this strategy isn't just limited to videogames, but applies to any poetic endeavor during oppositional praxis. —Perse*

- my master's thesis, which studies the ways in which speedrunners create castle-narrative through recursive motion inside the Metroidvania as a Gothic chronotope: "[Lost in Necropolis: The Continuation of Castle-Narrative beyond the Novel or Cinema, and into Metroidvania](#)" (2018)

- a YouTube video summarizing Metroidvania and its spatial qualities (sort of a precursor to the 2021 "Mazes and Labyrinths" abstract): "[Metroidvania Series #2: Mazes and Labyrinths](#)" (accompanied by its original script, [on Google Docs](#); both 2019)
- An IGA lecture I gave, which "explores speedruns in relation to Metroidvania, a videogame subgenre": "[Always More: A History of Gothic Motion from the Metroidvania Speedrunner](#)" (2019).
- A video lecture I gave for Sheffield Gothic's [Reimagining the Gothic with a Vengeance, Vol 5: Returns, Revenge, Reckonings](#) (2019), one that explores "videogames, and the speed at which one confronts the monstrous in a ludic framework. Terror hides the monstrous; one is lost in the castle, waiting to bump into the beast. Horror shows the monstrous, out in the open; the gore and the grotesque are on full display. In media, one can see the discrepancy not just in what is shown, but the speed in which it arrives at, and is viewed after, in monstrous form. [...] This paper considers variation on speed, as it occurs from palimpsest to sequel—across media, but from text to text. In other words, *Alien* is the cinematic palimpsest for *Metroid* (1986), a videogame. However, *Metroid 2* (1991) is the videogame sequel to *Metroid*. How does speed of monstrous presentation—of terror and horror—vary upon entering a ludic framework, and how does it continue to vary once inside?": "[More My Speed': The Tempo of Gothic Affect in a Ludic Framework](#)" (2019).
- a BDSM reflection on ludo-Gothic themes in *Metroid*: "[Revisiting My Masters' Thesis on Metroidvania—Our Ludic Masters: The Dominating Game Space](#)" (2021)
- a deeper follow-up to "Our Ludic Masters": "[Why I Submit: A Subby Gothicism's Attitudes on Metroidvania, Mommy Doms, and Sexual Persecution](#)" (2021)
- a study of abjection and traditional gender theory *vis-à-vis* Barbara Creed in Metroidvania: "[War Vaginas: Phallic Women, Vaginal Spaces and Archaic Mothers in Metroid](#)" (2021)
- a Q&A interview series that interviews *Metroid* speedrunners about Metroidvania for my postgrad work: [the abstract for "Mazes and Labyrinths: Disempowerment in Metroidvania and Survival Horror"](#) (2021)
- a chapter I wrote about *Metroid* for an unfinished book: "[The Promethean Quest and James Cameron's Military Optimism in Metroid](#)" (2021)
- a chapter on Metroidvania from my PhD, aka Volume Zero of *Sex Positivity* (2023), which details extensively my history with Metroidvania from childhood to my graduate and postgraduate work: "[Make it gay,' part two: Camping Tolkien's Refrain Using Metroidvania, or the Map Is a Lie: the Quest for Power inside Cameron's Closed Space \(and other shooters\)](#)" (2023)
- an essay from Volume Two, part one, which conceptualizes the middle class' constant inheritance and exploring of the imaginary past through a privileged "savior" position, but one that can develop ludo-Gothic BDSM as a sex positive

force; features Samus Aran as a "white Indian": "["In Search of the Secret Spell': Digging Our Own Graves; or, Playing with Dead Things \(the Imaginary Past\) as Verboten and Carte-Blanche \(feat. Samus Aran\)"](#) (2024)

- an essay from Volume Two, part one, which critiques Jeremy Parish as a Metroidvania research inspiration of mine: "["Monsters, Magic and Myth": Modularity and Class \(feat. Jeremy Parish and Sorcha Ní Fhlainn\)"](#) (2024)
- an essay from Volume Two, part one, which reflects on how the Gothic is queer as realized through my Metroidvania work and beyond: "["Facing Death: What I Learned Mastering Metroidvania, thus the Abject '90s"](#) (2024)
- a three-part book chapter\* on Metroidvania from Volume Two, part two, which covers *Frankenstein* (aka *The Modern Prometheus*) and talks extensively about the Promethean Quest as it appears in popular media after Shelley's novel—Metroidvania, of course (with close-reads of *Hollow Knight* and *Axiom Verge*), but also movies like *Forbidden Planet* and *Alien*: "["She Fucks Back'; or, Revisiting The Modern Prometheus through Astronoetics: the Man of Reason and Cartesian Hubris versus the Womb of Nature in Metroidvania"](#) (2024).

*\*Said chapter combines my PhD research after writing my PhD, making "She Fucks Back" a culmination of my life's work on the subject; I'm very proud of it!*

Last but not least, I wanted to share my favorite essay about Metroidvania. Already the culmination of my life's work, I wanted to cap off my magnum opus [re: "She Fucks Back"] with a fun little announcement, letting you all know the last part of that chapter is now on my website:



["Sleeping Beauties: Policing the Whore; or, Topping from Below to Rise from the Ashes"](#) (2024)!

([source](#): *Materia Collective*)

Normally it'd just be another post in my book sample series for Volume Two, part two, "["Searching for Secrets"](#) (2024). However, "Sleeping Beauties" is extra special because it's the capstone to my Metroidvania work after my PhD and what I esteem to be my crowning achievement; i.e., I write about rape play a great deal, talking about it outside of Metroidvania all the time (e.g., "["Into the Toy Chest, part](#)

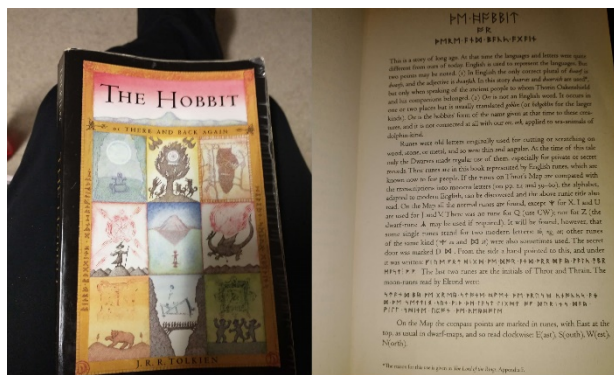
[zero: A Note about Rape/Rape Play; or, Facing the Great Destroyer,"](#) 2024),

but "Beauties" complements that work by marrying it to one of my favorite games, *Hollow Knight*, and its secret final boss, the Radiance! There's just so much fun academic stuff to unpack (e.g., Manuel Aguirre, Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin, to name a few)—with me doing so in a way that's hopefully more accessible, sexy and fun than those authors to read!

To summarize the piece, itself, my website describes it as, "Articulates Aguirre and Bakhtin's ideas per my evolution of ludo-Gothic BDSM after my master's thesis and into my graduate work, then considers the Promethean Quest as something that presents the whore as normally hunted by police forces, only to escape their subjugation and imprisonment by acting out her own rape; i.e., as *Hollow Knight's* final boss, the Radiance, does" ([source](#)). In short, girl's a freak, but camps her abuse at the hero's hands to say something not just about the Pale King, but Capitalism, too, and why *it* sucks. Maybe in reading "Beauties," you'll change how you view not just the game and its approach to sexual violence in Gothic forms, but also the world at large...

In any event, it's a huge relief to have "Beauties" out there, and I'm very proud of it. Give it a look and let me know what you think!

### Tolkien Scholarship



Apart from *Metroidvania*, Persephone is also an avid Tolkien nerd/critic (from Volume Zero):

[Top-right: My brother's 2001 copy of *The Hobbit*, which I've had for years and used to cite all of my work on Tolkien, including one of my better\* undergraduate essays, "[Dragon Sickness: the Problem of Greed](#)" (2015).

It was also a book that I read to nurse my broken heart, in college; but segued into my planning to go to college to find love (to have lots of nerd sex)—which eventually happened when I met Constance (my first) at EMU and Zeuhl, at MMU, and promptly had an adventure



that did not start or end with them, but introduced me to someone whose ghost, for or worse, would stay with me for the rest of my life. I don't think you can have an adventure without a bit of sex and/or ghosts, by the end of it!]

## Further Reading by Persephone (on Tolkien)

Tolkien appears all throughout my book series, but here are some key essays I've written about him in the past (the ones from Volume Zero and Volume One are *only* available on my website; i.e., by downloading the PDFs that contain them):

- Re, "[Dragon Sickness: the Problem of Greed](#)" (2015): This paper compares and contrasts notions of rarefied greed in Tolkien's novel, *The Hobbit*, compared alongside Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, when taking into consideration the idea of wealth as defined by Max Weber in his own work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.
- "[On Twin Trees; or, 'Taking the Trees Back during Oppositional Praxis': the Superstructure and Base; Tolkien vs Milton; and Our Manifesto Tree](#)" (from Volume Zero, 2023): This piece gives the manifesto tree, which lists our series' praxial equations and coordinates relative to the holistic study and camping of canon's singular interpretations (and subsequent policing) under Capitalism. Supplies several equations, followed by two exhibits on the Base/Superstructure and Tolkien vs Milton insofar as "trees" are concerned. Then, it considers the twin "trees" of Capitalism—the Base and the Structure (re: Marx)—as things to "corrupt" and reclaim away from Capitalism; i.e., when developing towards Gothic (gay-anarcho) Communism: our manifesto tree of oppositional praxis.
- "['Make it gay,' part two: Camping Tolkien's Refrain using Metroidvania, or the Map is a Lie: the Quest for Power inside Cameron's Closed Space \(and other shooters\)](#)" (from Volume Zero): This section of my PhD (about a quarter of its overall length) explores the interrogation of power in relation to Gothic space (castles) but especially in videogames (shooters, High Fantasy and Metroidvania). It also interrogates Tolkien's [cartographic] refrain [the treasure map] through the conceptualization of *Cameron's* refrain (the shooter); i.e., not through the FPS, but the *Metroidvania*—a particular kind of third-person shooter (TPS)/castle space that (along with the monsters inside) can be camped, but also achieves immense catharsis through honest and profound theatrical evocations of psychosexual trauma: a palliative Numinous and fairly negotiated (thus sex-positive) ludo-Gothic BDSM achieved by *remaking* Gothic castles, thus negotiating the unequal power lurking inside an iconoclastic castle or castle-like space.
- "[An Uphill Battle, part two: Concerning Rings, BDSM and Vampires; or the State's False Gifts, Power Exchange, and Crumbling Homesteads Told through Tolkien's Nature-Themed Stories](#)" (from Volume One, 2024): This essay examines rings within the Gothic mode as famous symbols of power and power exchange; i.e., through the vampire legend as used by Tolkien.

We'll examine power as Tolkien expressed it in relation to nature as something to conquer by proxy—an invented other. In short, Tolkien relied on the vampire legend—but also Gothic castles, BDSM language and harmful arrangements of unequal power (rings and collars)—to dominate nature and those within it.

- "[Goblins, Anti-Semitism and Monster-Fucking \(feat. Tolkien's orcs and goblins, acid Communism, and SpongeBob SquarePants\)](#)" (from the Demon Module, 2024): My final essay on Tolkien examines the vengeful, monstrous-feminine qualities of blood libel per *goblins*; i.e., their being "of nature" in ways that can be policed or avenged by theatrical agents waxing demonic poetic while playing with darkness visible. Explores these dualities first in Tolkien canonizing evil labor policed by good (orcs and goblins [vengeful-Jewish-coded slaves and whores] vs humans), followed by our own work and others camping him: through such "monster-fucking" play as highly chaotic/acid-Communist (e.g., Ween and SpongeBob).



- "['A Lesson in Humility'; or, Gay Zombie Caesar \(and His Token Servants\) When the Boomerang Comes Back Around \(feat. Myth: the Fallen Lords\)](#)" (from the Undead Module, 2024): Explores queer aspects to the undead warlord/Zombie Caesar in *Myth: the Fallen Lords* (and his token, anti-Semitic servant, in *Myth II: Soulblighter*); i.e., by diving into the game's DARVO-style, empire apologia, effectively describing how empires-in-decay endlessly recolonize themselves in between monomyth fiction and non-fiction—not just with the raw mechanics of colonialism (chiefly armed conflict) stuck in a self-destructive loop, but spearheaded by past historical figures who, as current genocides committed by the good guys are abjected, return as fascist bogeymen to colonize empire from the outside in. Includes examinations of Tolkien as the palimpsest for Bungie's landmark title.

## Series Abstract: "Mazes and Labyrinths: Disempowerment in Metroidvania and Survival Horror"

Originally posted on my old blog, April 14th, 2021:

<https://www.nicksmovieinsights.com/2021/04/series-abstract-mazes-and-labyrinths.html>

This post is the abstract for my upcoming interview series "Mazes and Labyrinths," which interviews speedrunners and Twitch streamers about disempowerment inside Metroidvania and survival horror games. Specifically it examines how mazes and labyrinths, along with their historically "heavy" contents, are used to disempower players.

*Note: The compendium—containing the interviews themselves, and any relevant links—is available in [this post](#).*

*Update, 4/16/2021: This piece was modified in response to conversations within [the abstract's reddit post](#). The feedback was instrumental in helping me hone my goals, so thank you!*

The abstract is divided into five main sections and thirteen subsections:

- [1. Overview](#)
  - [At First Glance](#)
  - [Metroidvania](#)
- [2. Space](#)
  - [Terms](#)
  - [The Metroidvania Spectrum](#)
- [3. Cross-Franchise Hybrids](#)
  - [Soulsbourne](#)
  - [Label Trouble](#)
  - ["Zeldavania": Open-space and RPG Components](#)
- [4. Action and Power](#)
  - [FPS](#)
  - [Castlevania-style Metroidvania](#)
  - [Metroid-style Metroidvania](#)
  - [Survival Horror](#)
- [5. Research Goals](#)
  - [Why Speedrunners?](#)
  - [Thoughts on Power](#)



To discuss how Metroidvania disempower players, we'll first have to define what they are. My definition for Metroidvania (which I'll go over more in the Space section) is as follows:

*Metroidvania are a location-based videogame genre that combines 2D, 2.5D, or 3D platforming and ranged/melee combat—usually in the 3rd person—inside a giant, closed space. This space communicates Gothic themes of various kinds; encourages exploration\* depending on how non-linear the space is; includes progressive skill and item collection, mandatory boss keys, backtracking and variable gating mechanics (bosses, items, doors); and requires movement powerups in some shape or form, though these can be supplied through RPG elements as an optional alternative.*

*\*Exploration pertains to the deliberate navigation of space beyond that of obvious, linear routes—to search for objects, objectives or secrets off the beaten path.*

The **Overview** section generalizes each genre—FPS, Metroidvania and survival horror—whereas **Space** and **Cross-Franchise Hybrids** focus on Metroidvania specifically. **Action and Power** ties Metroidvania to FPS and survival horror, and **Research Goals** explains what the series hopes to achieve.



## 1. Overview

"Mazes and Labyrinths" is corollary to my past research on how FPS empower players; it explores how Metroidvania and survival horror disempower players trapped inside their respective gameworlds. They offset the player's strength,

generally to tell a perilous story. This peril stems from varying lapses of power due to a hero's position—who they are and where they exist within a space. Female heroes in FPS are exceptionally rare; we'll explore how *Metroidvania* and survival horror heroes are often female, or have traditional feminine qualities or predicaments. The stories of such heroines are less about proving how strong they are, like their male FPS counterparts, and more about surviving a larger menace. Some non-FPS heroines, like Samus, are fairly weak from the offset but progressively grow stronger. Some, like Jill Valentine, remain slow and vulnerable throughout the entire game.

## At First Glance

Videogame genres are usually categorized as gerunds. FPS are self-evident: First-Person Shooter. Survival horror is also a gerund, one crystallized by the *Resident Evil* franchise: "Enter the survival horror" or (depending on the game and translation) enter "the world of survival horror."



All genres are marketing terms; with videogames, genres are used to explicitly advertise action. "Survival horror" are a bit different; they tie the action to a place, thus making the label a gerund and a location. But the so-called "resident evil" doesn't account for its exact ludic function in spatial

terms (re: a maze or a labyrinth). Neither do *Metroidvania*, except they aren't a gerund at all; they're a combination of franchise labels, generally acting as vague location descriptors that fail to specify space type or action type.

Nevertheless, *Metroidvania* and survival horror are both famous for their idiosyncratic gameworlds, which combine highly specific space types with trademark forms of action against perennial threats and scenery. Each reliably contains zombies, ruins, and mad science, but calling either by the other's label would suggest more about them than what's accurate. Likewise:

- qualifying either genre "horror," or "horror *Metroidvania*" in *Metroidvania*'s case, would sound vague or redundant
- calling *Metroidvania* "action/platformers" and survival horror "action/adventure" would leave out the worlds that made them famous, but also the names of those places that people associate with their iconic action

- calling either genre FPS or TPS (third-person shooter) would technically be correct, but would also incorrectly lump them in with other videogames that stress those elements more

These are some of the reasons why I think the labels "Metroidvania" and "survival horror" stuck, despite being unconventional marking terms.



To be fair, "survival horror" was often used in official published material (and as early as 1999)

"Capcom made up the survival horror genre because the company didn't feel that the *Resident Evil* games really fit in any existing category" ([PSM 58](#)).

this worked because it all belonged to Capcom. Conversely "Metroidvania" was effectively the combination of two IPs owned by different Japanese companies, Nintendo and Konami. For that reason, the term was almost never printed in any official capacity during the 1990s and early 2000s; it was purely a grassroots term. In fact, it wasn't until the mid-2010s that "Metroidvania" saw wider use in the Internet's indie market: [PC Gamer](#) (Tom Senior's "The Best Metroidvania Games on PC, 2022), [Engadget](#) (Richard Mitchell's "'Metroidvania' Should Actually Be 'Zeldvania,'"

2014), [Game Developer](#) (Christian Nutt's "The Undying Allure of the Metroidvania," 2015), [Giant Bomb](#) ("Search Action," 2024) and [Wired](#) (Bo Moore's "An Anime-Inspired Platformer..." 2015).

*Note: The above summary heavily abbreviates the Metroidvania label's early history. To read a longer description of Metroidvania's evolution and eventual acceptance as an advertising term (from ~1997-2014), refer to "[From Master's to](#)*

[PhD \(and Beyond\): My Entire Work on Metroidvania](#), " which goes much more in-depth on the topic (and drags Jeremy Parish, a bit).

## Metroidvania

Compared to FPS and survival horror, Metroidvania are the vaguest label when it comes to advertising action, while also having the most variable action inside their gameworlds historically. Out of the three, it remains the most misunderstood; some even vilify its use:

"Let's talk about one of my least favorite words in the video game lexicon: *metroidvania*. A portmanteau combining the video game titles *Metroid* and *Castlevania*, it takes two made-up video game titles that are pretty cool and evocative on their own and inelegantly mashes them into something worse [citation needed]. And now, that word is one we use to talk about a whole genre of incredible video games" ([source](#): Joshua Rivera's "Stop Calling Games 'Metroidvania,'" 2019).



In 1986, *Metroid* was advertised as adventure. The term, like the game, is somewhat dated, with "action/adventure" referring to games whose individual components could not be summed up by a single verb—either because said action was too complex and eclectic (re: *System Shock*), or because a gaming precedent hadn't yet been established. To this, *Metroid* is technically a TPS, but the label "shooter"

didn't exist when the game was published; instead, its other forms of action were eventually married to its primary mode of movement, platforming.

Alas, "action-platformer" doesn't do much to separate *Metroid* from *Super Mario Bros.*, even though both games are incredibly different. If you wanted to be more thorough, you could call *Metroid* a "horror-themed, exploration-based action-platformer" (this isn't too far from how Twitch categorizes *Super Metroid*, labeling it as "Action," "Adventure Game," "Shooter" and "Platformer"). But this approach not only fails to account for *Metroid's* claim to fame, the maze; it also ignores the game's location within an umbrella genre whose considerable hybridity also borrows

from *Castlevania*, as well as other genres: FPS, RPG, action-adventure and survival horror.

Let's start with a basic, comprehensive definition—Jeremy Parish's:

*"Metroidvania" is a stupid word for a wonderful thing. It's basically a really terrible neologism that describes a videogame genre which combines 2D side-scrolling action with free-roaming exploration and progressive skill and item collection to enable further, uh, progress. As in Metroid and Koji Igarashi-developed Castlevania games. Thus the name ([source](#): "GameSpite | Compendium of Old and Useless Information\*", 2012).*

\*Now-defunct; refer to ["From Master's to PhD"](#) for more info.

While I don't feel that I stray too far from Jeremy's ideas, my definitions are more numerous and specific. Moving forward, we'll explore these definitions, and apply them to other genres.

*The next two sections, Space and Cross-Franchise Hybrids, catalogue the impressive spatial variety seen in Metroidvania gameworlds. Whilst those are important, an even quicker distinction is power. Metroidvania, FPS and survival horror all afford the player varying degrees of power through action—i.e., the player responding to the gameworld and its inhabitants. We'll explore that relationship more thoroughly in the Action and Power section.*



## 2. Space

This section is a glossary of terms concerning space in Metroidvania. Inside are my specific definitions for "maze," "labyrinth," and "Metroidvania," as well as the spectrum on which they all exist. To hear my extended thoughts on Metroidvania space, please refer to [my video](#)

[on Metroidvania Mazes and Labyrinths](#), and [this reddit post](#).

## Terms

**Mazes and Labyrinths:** I treat space as essential when defining Metroidvania. Mazes and labyrinths are *closed space*; their contents exist within a closed structure, either a maze or a labyrinth. A classical labyrinth is a linear system with one set, unicursal path towards an end point; a maze is a non-linear system with multiple paths to an end point.

**Metroidvania, etymology:** As its most basic interpretation, Metroidvania is a portmanteau of *Metroid* and *Castlevania*, specifically "Metroid" + "-vania." However, the term has no singular, universally-agreed-upon definition. Because I focus on space, my definitions—of the individual portmanteau components—are as follows: "Metroid"  $\neq$  the franchise, *Metroid*; "metroid" = that franchise's unique treatment of closed space—the maze

"-vania"  $\neq$  the franchise, *Castlevania*; "castlevania" equals that franchise's unique treatment of closed space—the labyrinth

At the same time, "Metroid," or "metro" + "-oid" means "android city." "Castlevania" or "castle" + "-vania" means "other castle," "demon castle," or "castle Dracula." The portmanteau, "Metroidvania"  $\approx$  "android city" + "demon castle" + "maze" + "labyrinth."

**Further Distinctions:** There are further ways to identify if a Metroidvania space is a maze or not. As I explain in my 2019 YouTube video, "[Metroidvania Series #2: Mazes and Labyrinths](#)":

"What ultimately determines a Metroidvania's maze-ness are three sequences: the start, the middle, and the end. The start is what I consider to be the collection of essential items—power-ups you'll need to use for the entire game. Mid-game is the meat of the experience. The end sequence makes the win condition available to the player.

I mention item collection relative to these sequences because they are a core element of Metroidvania play, hence determine what kind of space the player is dealing with. In *Metroid*, for example, the Morph Ball, Bomb and Missiles are essential, and the player can acquire all of them rather quickly. Apart from those, however, there are few items you actually need to complete the game. One of them is Ice Beam, which is required to kill metroids, thus gain access to Mother Brain (the game's end condition). Large portions of the game can be played without it, though. Like many Metroid power-ups, it is a mid-game collectible.

Item collection allows the player to leave the start and enter the middle. This section, I argue, determines whether or not a Metroidvania is a maze. If the majority of the game allows for sequence breaks, RBO (reverse boss order) and low-percent, then it is a maze; if not, it is a labyrinth. A Metroidvania can be either" ([source](#): the original script on Google Docs).

In terms of appearance, a Metroidvania's audiovisual presentation can range from retro-future sci-fi to Neo-Gothic fantasy. Nevertheless, their spaces typically function as Gothic castles; replete with hauntological monsters, demons, and ghosts, they guide whatever action the hero must perform when navigating the world and dealing with its threats.



**Metroidvania, terminology:** Being inclusive, "Metroidvania" has several broader definitions I did not create:

- The narrow definition, briefly used by American consumers in the late 1990s/early 2000s [to inaccurately describe SotN](#) (re: a Castlevania game + *Super Metroid's* map system).
- Jeremy Parish's nuts-and-bolts definition from 2006: "a videogame genre which combines 2D side-scrolling action with free-roaming exploration and progressive skill and item collection to enable [further] progress."

There's also the commodified umbrella term from the mid 2010s, which includes a wide variety of "indie" titles related to either *Metroid* or *Castlevania*, or various spiritual successors. To compensate, I've created a definition for Metroidvania as a present, broader commodity in the gaming market; re:

*Metroidvania are a location-based videogame genre that combines 2D, 2.5D, or 3D platforming and ranged/melee combat—usually in the 3rd person—inside a giant, closed space. This space communicates Gothic themes of various kinds; encourages exploration\* depending on how non-linear the space is; includes progressive skill and item collection, mandatory boss keys, backtracking and variable gating mechanics (re: bosses, item, doors); and requires movement powerups in some shape or form, though these can be supplied through RPG elements as an optional alternative.*

*\*Exploration pertains to the deliberate navigation of space beyond that of obvious, linear routes—to search for objects, objectives or secrets off the beaten path.*



### The Metroidvania Spectrum

Apart from newer games, my definition also highlights the spectrum actualized and

inhabited by older titles over the past thirty-odd years:

CV ---- CV-style ---- cross-franchise hybrids ---- *Metroid*-style ---- *Metroid*



The extreme poles are represented by either parent franchise. These franchises appeared in 1986, and introduced a signature space to videogames:

- *Metroid* space = nonlinear, multi-directional mazes, with chimeric boss keys
- *Castlevania* space = linear, single-direction labyrinths, with singular end-stage boss gates

More towards the middle, you have franchise sequels or spiritual successors whose space behaves similarly to either parent franchise:

- *Castlevania*-style *Metroidvania*, which borrow spatially from *Castlevania*
- *Metroid*-style *Metroidvania*, which borrow spatially from *Metroid*
- Cross-franchise hybrids, which borrow spatially from both parents

Since 1986, videogame mazes and labyrinths have generally become associated with monsters and locational phobias (re: live burial, isolation, exposure). Mazes and labyrinths are structurally fundamental; *Metroidvania* developers can draw upon them (and their supernatural inhabitants) without pointedly referencing *Metroid* or *Castlevania*. You'll know it when you see it; you might even call it something else.



## Soulsbourne

Before we continue onto Metroidvania hybrids in earnest, I wanted to quickly address the "Soulsbourne" games (re: *King's Field*, *Dark Souls*, *Bloodborne*) and why I consider them to be Metroidvania.

The fact is, I hesitate to call latter-day Metroidvania "Soulsbourne" just because *Dark Souls* are currently more popular than *Metroid* or *Castlevania*. The notion of Gothic space in videogames has to start somewhere, and it did—in 1986. Since then, mazes and labyrinths never really changed at a fundamental level. That's why *Darks Souls* feels like a Metroidvania to me; the function of its maze-space is virtually identical to Zebes—non-linear and multi-directional, with boss keys.

Meanwhile the game's limited, brutal platforming and precise monster battles feels like *Castlevania* in 3D with RPG components thrown in. Sound familiar? It should; *SotN* introduced RPG elements into a *Metroid*-style maze and they called it Metroidvania. In short, Soulsbourne are nowhere close to being different enough to merit their own genre; they simply have too much in common with their forebears. I'll happily consider them a subgenre, but that's still a Metroidvania: Like Zebes, Lodran is a single, giant level, one whose closed space the player must explore, conquer and escape.



elements: open space and RPG action.

### 3. Cross-Franchise Hybrids

Metroidvania are hybrids by design. This section explores the cross-franchise hybrids that complicate the framework provided above. This can be through contrasting elements from either parent franchise (re: label trouble), or by adding "outsider"

## Label Trouble

I've been using the terms "*Metroid*-style" or "*Castlevania*-style" for the sake of simplicity and people's familiarity with the games themselves. The problem is, this can suggest connections to a past franchise that:

- people have essential, pre-conceived notions of
- contains many parts, not just space
- has continued to evolve over time

In other words a franchise is iconic, but also plastic. To say "*Metroid*-style" suggests its original, "essential" cosmetics, but also whatever space people tend to associate with the franchise at any given moment, even if this association is by no means historically constant. Think of it as a recycled blueprint with pathos, except blueprints can be modified over time.

For example, classic *Castlevania* are linear and classic *Metroid* are not. Nevertheless, certain *Metroidvania* set in the *Castlevania* franchise—especially *SotN*—rely more on the *Metroid* treatment of space. Post-*SotN*, some *Castlevania* (or comparable games) only appear maze-like; their closed, network-like worlds actually are quite linear (re: *Portrait of Ruin*, *Blasphemous*).



I've developed a rule of thumb when classifying *Metroidvania* from either franchise, or spiritual successors with no obvious parent:

*A non-linear or maze-like mid-game (the bulk of the playing experience) classifies the game as Metroid-style *Metroidvania*, regardless of the franchise involved; a linear or labyrinthine mid-game classifies the game as Castlevania-style *Metroidvania* regardless of the franchise involved.*

For example, *Metroid Fusion* belongs to the *Metroid* franchise, and its gameworld is massive, closed and interconnected. And yet, the path Samus can take is incredibly linear. Mid-game, she is repeatedly forced into difficult, multi-staged boss fights (a *Castlevania* hallmark, reintroduced by *Dark Souls*). This makes the space in *Metroid Fusion* feel not just labyrinthine, but *Castlevania*-esque despite its franchise-faithful appearance.

Conversely *SotN* is part of the *Castlevania* franchise; its gameworld is stuffed with recycled *Castlevania* monsters. And yet, its mid-game is pretty open in terms of where you can go and who you can choose to fight. This owes itself to the *Metroid*-style blueprint Koji Igarashi used when making the *SotN* gameworld. What's more, the action inside its non-linear gameworld is atypical thanks to the RPG elements *SotN* introduces from games like *Zelda II* and *Dragon Warrior*.



### "Zeldavania": Open-space and RPG Components

Though inspired by *Zelda II*, *SotN* is not a "Zeldavania"; its space is far too closed and mazelike. However, the more experimental a cross-hybrid is, the more it features the open space and RPG action typically known to the *Zelda* franchise.

*Metroidvania* mostly operate inside **closed spaces**. Whether a giant maze or a series of smaller labyrinths inside a larger structure, these spaces are generally self-contained, and have no outer limits (excluding tutorial areas, re: Ceres Station). The player can never "leave" while the game is at play and there's nowhere else for them to go. They must beat the game to escape, usually by killing a central monster.

**Open space**, on the other hand, is somewhere for the player to exit to, often an overworld or town:

- Overworlds: Large, usually top-down open areas where the player is free to roam and choose where they want to go, but must physically traverse

(usually on foot). Multiple closed spaces (re: dungeons) can be accessed from the overworld, and the player is generally free to return to the overworld by exiting the dungeon. The overworld can be explored for its own sake, and often hides many secrets the player must discover.

- Towns: Places to rest, resupply and interact with quest mobs. Towns cannot always be teleported to; some exist inside a closed space and must be approached through that space.



Overworlds don't exist in Metroidvania. If they did, *SotN* would have borrowed that from *Zelda II*. It didn't, and its closed, maze-like qualities feel spatially closer to *Metroid* despite the game's *Zelda II*-meets-*Castlevania* combat. But a future cross-franchise "Zeldavania" hybrid could arguably introduce overworlds to the format.

A smaller overworld would certainly justify "Zeldavania" as a spatially unique subgenre in under the Metroidvania umbrella. This being said, a Metroidvania hybrid could only have so much open space before turning into a *Zelda* game.

That's why *Breath of the Wild* isn't a Metroidvania [despite its non-linear approach](#); exploring its overworld is fundamentally different than exploring the closed spaces typically seen in Metroidvania.

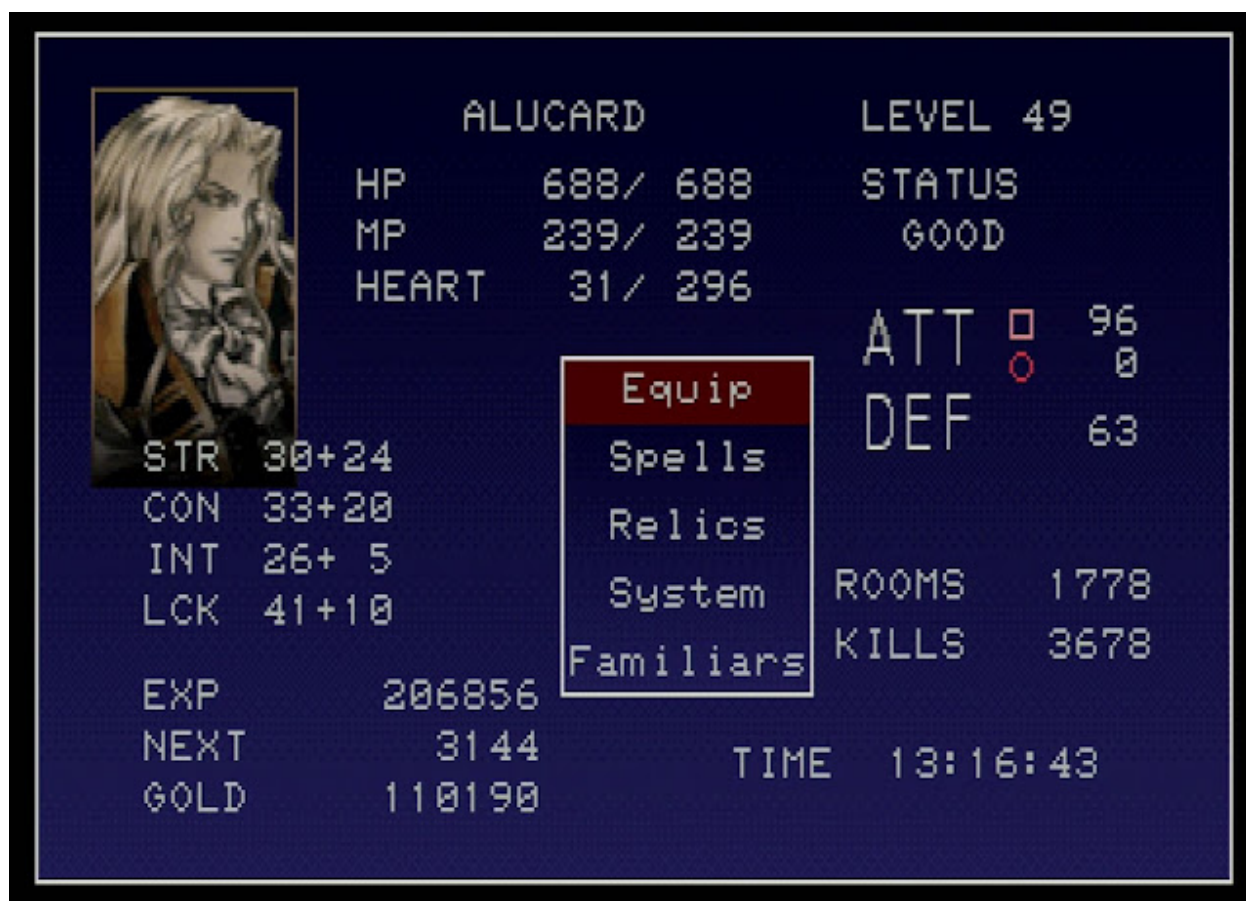
Despite the lack of an overworld, various classic *Castlevania* titles (re: *Simon's Quest*) and Iga-vania (re: *Order of Ecclesia*) let the player visit towns in between levels, or from a menu-based map screen. Towns aren't a part of the regular gameworld; they're a break from it, even when inside the closed space (re: Firelink Shrine from *Dark Souls 3*, or Dirtmouth from *Hollow Knight*).



Another point about "open" space in *Zelda* games: Overworlds [are hilariously easy for speedrunners to break](#). When broken, they allow players to walk into any dungeon they want, in any order, with no equipment. This issue has existed since 1986, and allows for a variety of speedruns: out-of-bounds, major glitches. This makes it difficult for closed spaces to contain the player, and so-called "[exploration glitches](#)" can all but destroy space-faithful routes, obstacles and gates inside dungeons. More often than not, and to varying degrees, this is a normal practice in many *Zelda* speedruns; not every *Zelda* game has a Major Glitches category.

Comparatively out-of-bounds in Metroidvania are generally confined to the limits of the game map. You can go out-of-bounds, but there's nowhere for you to go beyond the black map rectangle containing Zebes or Dracula's castle.

Furthermore, *Metroid*-style mazes are intentionally "brittle," and meant to be explored with missiles and bombs that wreck the gameworld, creating multiple paths for the player to choose from. So while out-of-bounds glitches certainly exist, they're generally less obvious when performed in the 2D *Metroid* titles, and often limited to Major Glitches categories (and category extensions). In 3D/2.5D (re: the *Prime* games and *Samus Returns*) OoB is normalized, but those titles are far more linear to begin with.

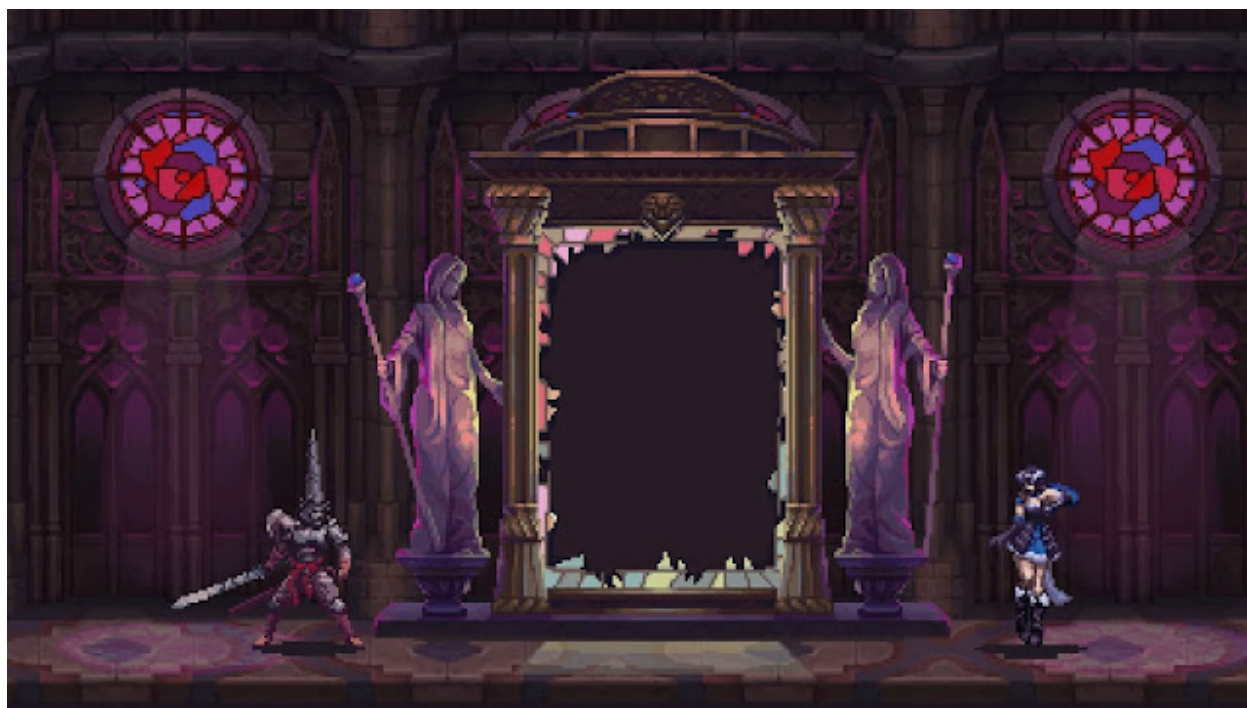


**RPG components** are atypical, even ironic, in "classic" Metroidvania, because the initial game for either parent franchise lacked any RPG elements whatsoever. This makes them historically biased, even if they change over time.

For example, newer Metroidvania are often "indie" titles that borrow from videogames inspired by *Metroid* or *Castlevania*. So while *Hollow Knight* sits comfortably in the *Metroid*-style category of space, it actually borrows the blacksmith and soul currency systems from *Dark Souls*, a game spatially comparable to *Super Metroid*. Context matters—when the game was made and with

what. Despite newer Metroidvania venturing beyond *Metroid* and *Castlevania*, their use of closed space—either mazes or labyrinths—doesn't change.

Space contains action; Metroidvania action varies tremendously regardless of the space type. For example, the gameworlds in *SotN* and *Dark Souls* are both maze-like, but the action differs radically within each maze, let alone when compared to the action inside *Metroid 1*. Similarly, the level design in *Blasphemous* is quite linear for a Metroidvania; its rigorous, demanding action is far more comparable to *Dark Souls* (or even NES *Castlevania*) than the sort of pedestrian, RPG-themed melees frequently portrayed in the handheld Iga-vania (re: *Aria of Sorrow*).



Iga-vania, Zeldavania, Soulsbourne. It'd be easy to say all of these games have little in common and belong to different genres, but in reality they're all Metroidvania; their themes, imagery and action consistently overlap (to varying degrees) inside linear and non-linear closed space.

#### 4. Action and Power

Despite these definitions and caveats, there remain finer points that FPS, *Castlevania*-style Metroidvania, *Metroid*-style Metroidvania, and survival horror tend to emphasize differently. These points—combat, exploration, platforming and survival—revolve around the gameworld, but also the action contained within, and the power it affords or denies the player.



*Note: Some of these points are relatively fixed; some are not. For Metroidvania, the most rigid and identifying component is space (re: mazes or labyrinths); though mazes are entirely possible, FPS and survival horror tend to feature labyrinths. The respective power roles inside each genre tend not to vary much, and player-controlled action more generally is the most flexible and varied component, relative to space and power.*

## **FPS (first-person shooters)**

FPS traditionally empower players through non-stop combat. Combat is stressed, core; sometimes platforming is also stressed, but not exploration or survival.

- ubiquitous; emblematic of gaming in general, iconic
- 1st person POV in a 2.5D/3D world
- male, one-man-army heroes; empowered
- combat-heavy
- projectile attacks; limited and optional\* melee attacks
- copious, powerful weaponry, armor and healing items
- copious fodder enemies that frequently drop health and ammo
- boss-gated episodes
- item-gated maps with color-coded door keys
- easy-to-navigate labyrinths; no fall damage, but some environmental hazards
- minimal exploration and backtracking
- moderate secrets
- variable platforming
- lack of all-around scares or genuine Gothic sensations\*\*
- no death animations
- 

Examples: *Doom* series and "clones," *Far Cry 1*, [Ion Fury](#)

*\*Exceptions include melee-friendly games like [Amid Evil](#) and [Hexen](#).*

*\*\*Exceptions include horror-themed FPS like *Blood*, *PSX Doom (1995)*, and *F.E.A.R.**



### ***Castlevania*-style Metroidvania**

*Castlevania*-style Metroidvania (re: games based off primarily the *Castlevania* approach to space and action) empower and disempower players through nonstop platforming and combat. Combat and platforming are stressed, but not exploration or survival.

- currently indie; dated, retro
- 3rd person POV in a 2D/2.5D world; side-scroller\*
- male "hunter-type" heroes; half-empowered, half-disempowered
- combat-heavy
- melee attacks; limited and optional projectile attacks (re: sub weapons, spells)
- one-use healing items (re: wall meat, Estus flasks)
- copious dangerous enemies that don't drop health and ammo
- boss-gated levels
- dangerous-to-navigate labyrinths, with killer pitfalls
- minimal exploration, secrets and backtracking
- copious platforming\*
- occupied, hauntological spaces (re: Neo-Gothic) that trap players in emotionally nostalgic worlds (re: monsters are awesome)
- minimal death animations

Examples: *Castlevania 1*, *Blasphemous*, *Bloodstained: Curse of the Moon*, *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*

\*Exceptions include the 3D *Castlevania* titles like *Lament of Innocence* or *Curse of Darkness*, which abandon platforming for a more *Devil May Cry* approach to combat.

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### **Metroid-style Metroidvania**

*Metroid*-style Metroidvania (re: games based off primarily the *Metroid* approach to space) empower and disempower players through occasional combat and nonstop exploration. Exploration and platforming are stressed; sometimes combat is also stressed, but not survival.

- currently indie; dated, retro
- 3rd or 1st person POV in a 2D/2.5D/3D world; side-scroller or FPS
- androgynous "hunter-type" heroes; detectives; half-empowered, half-disempowered
- moderate combat
- projectile attacks\* and bombs
- progressively powerful-but-optional weapons, armor and movement upgrades
- copious fodder enemies that drop health and ammo
- final area (and boss) boss-gated by elusive "mini-bosses" that must be hunted
- somewhat-dangerous-to-navigate mazes, with environmental hazards
- copious exploration, secrets and backtracking
- copious platforming
- derelict, hauntological (re: retro-future) spaces that trap players in emotionally intense\*\* worlds (re: intimations of death)
- quick, dramatic death animations

Examples: *Metroid*, *Hollow Knight*, *Dark Souls*, *Environment Station Alpha*

\**Hollow Knight* primarily features melee attacks.

\*\*Potential exceptions include [Shantae](#), [Guacamelee](#).

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## Survival horror

Survival horror disempower players through combat and exploration. Survival is stressed, but not combat, platforming or exploration.

- mainstream, but niche
- 3rd or 1st person POV in a 3D world; usually TPS, but sometimes FPS
- female or feminine "prey-type" heroes; always disempowered
- minimal combat
- projectile attacks, with limited melee attacks\*
- scarce and/or ineffective weapons, armor and healing items
- numerous dangerous enemies that hunt the player and don't drop health and ammo
- one or more "[unkillable](#)" bosses that boss-gate different areas
- item-gated through prop hunts and copious door keys
- dangerous-to-navigate labyrinths, with plenty of puzzles and traps
- minimal exploration; moderate secrets and backtracking
- zero platforming
- uncanny spaces that aim to frighten or shock the player
- multiple, protracted, [often gross](#) death animations (re: "You died" or "You are dead").

Examples: *Alien Isolation*, *Dead Space 1*, *Resident Evil* (2002), [System Shock](#)

\*Exceptions include: *Onimusha*, which are primarily melee-based.



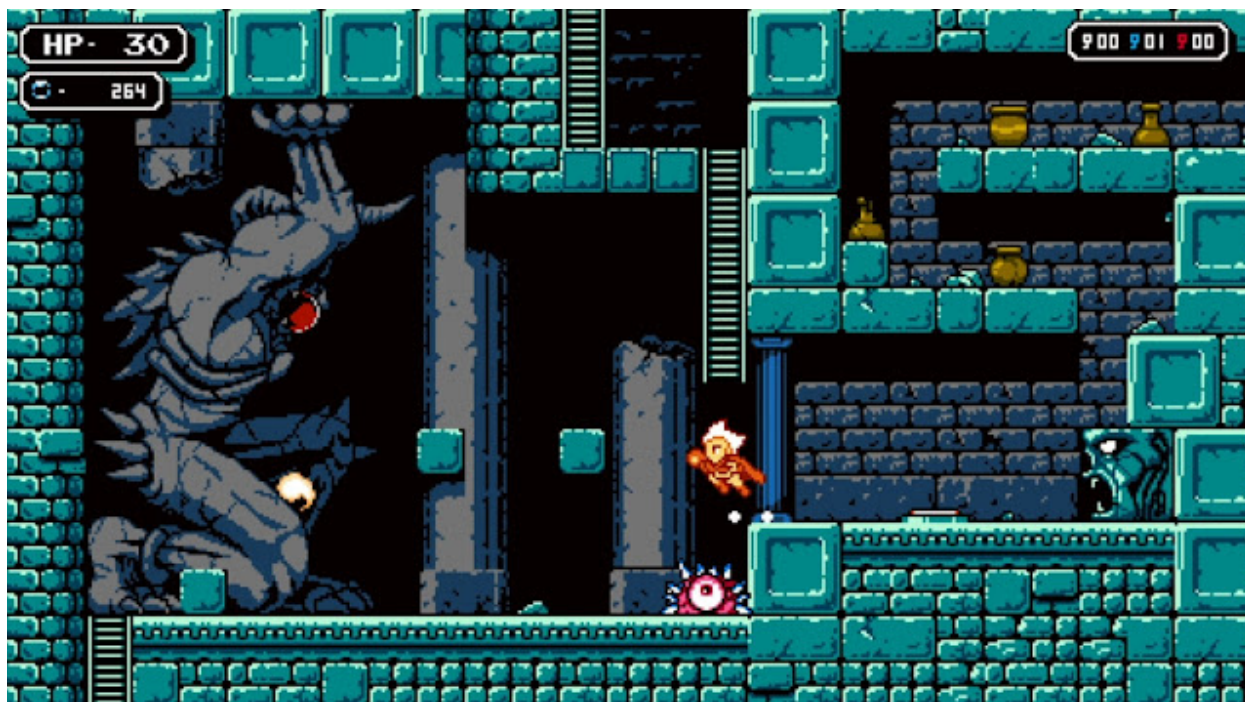
## 5. Research Goals

My past two series explored FPS games, which tend to empower players. "Mazes and Labyrinths" explores Metroidvania and survival horror—how they use their maze-like and labyrinthine gameworlds to disempower players/speedrunners while also telling an audiovisual story onscreen. The series examines how space is used in Metroidvania and survival horror to:

- Ludically disempower players by forcing them inside a gameworld that limits the power and quantity of their weapons, capacity and speed.
- Visually disempower players through spatial themes of the prison, graveyard, and abusive or tyrannical home: involuntary incarceration, live burial, hereditary trauma and compulsory/sacrificial power rites.
- Expose players to Gothic situations: monsters, oscillation, Numinous power and other Gothic variables (re: abjection, the uncanny or hauntology, etc).
- Communicate or contain other popular tropes: paralysis, imposter syndrome/doubles, self-destruction (re: the Faustian bargain, the Promethean quest).
- Explore various taboos: incest, infanticide, cannibalism, abuse fantasies, etc.
- Support, not deconstruct, these narratives when speedrun—at various speeds and routes, with various glitches and tricks.

I shall be interviewing speedrunners and Twitch streamers of various Metroidvania and survival horror. These include:

- The classic *Metroid*, *Castlevania* and *Resident Evil* games.
- *Metroid*-style and *Castlevania*-style Metroidvania within either parent franchise.
- Metroidvania hybrids from other franchises (re: *Dark Souls*, *Bloodborne*).
- Modern indie titles that continue to experiment with the form (re: *Axiom Verge*, *Hollow Knight*, *Astalon*, etc).



## Why Speedrunners?

[As outlined in my master's thesis](#), I'm largely interviewing speedrunners because they illustrate how well these games hold up narratively (from a Gothic standpoint) when played deconstructively. Casual players do the same activities, especially in classic *Metroid*, but speedrunners provide the so-called "stress test" decades later.

*Metroidvania*, in particular, feel like they were designed to be speedrun (re: sequence breaks, tech). This shows in the stories that manifest onscreen during gameplay. The story in *Metroid*, for example, is essentially told through motion—i.e., movement through a Gothic castle (re: a prison, a dungeon, a monster's lair) that elicits fearful and exciting emotions of so-called "past trauma" experienced in the present. These aren't just older, diegetic (re: in-game) heroes and plights that mirror Samus' current struggle; "past struggles" also include the speedrunner constantly trying to beat the game using the same avatar they've controlled for years.

Onscreen, the game's promise of trauma is literally written on the walls, but also on the armor that Samus pilfers from the vaults. The player borrows this armor to tell the same basic story over and over inside the gameworld. They add to a videogame's ever-growing history within the ludic space, but also project comfortably onto the icons themselves. Barring game-breaking categories, runners generally perform the game's audiovisuals in ways that reliably communicate

conventional unspeakables: blood sacrifice, imprisonment, futile struggles against "ancient" symbols of power (tyrants, castles), etc.

The maze or labyrinth is central to these outcomes, and remains integral to the game's story when told by speedrunners. Spaces do not change; a player's actions often do, depending on who's playing the game. Speedrunners have a habit of moving strangely. Often they adopt a kind of "runner's gait," a movement strategy that exploits a character's basic movement mechanics to move as quickly as possible from moment to moment.

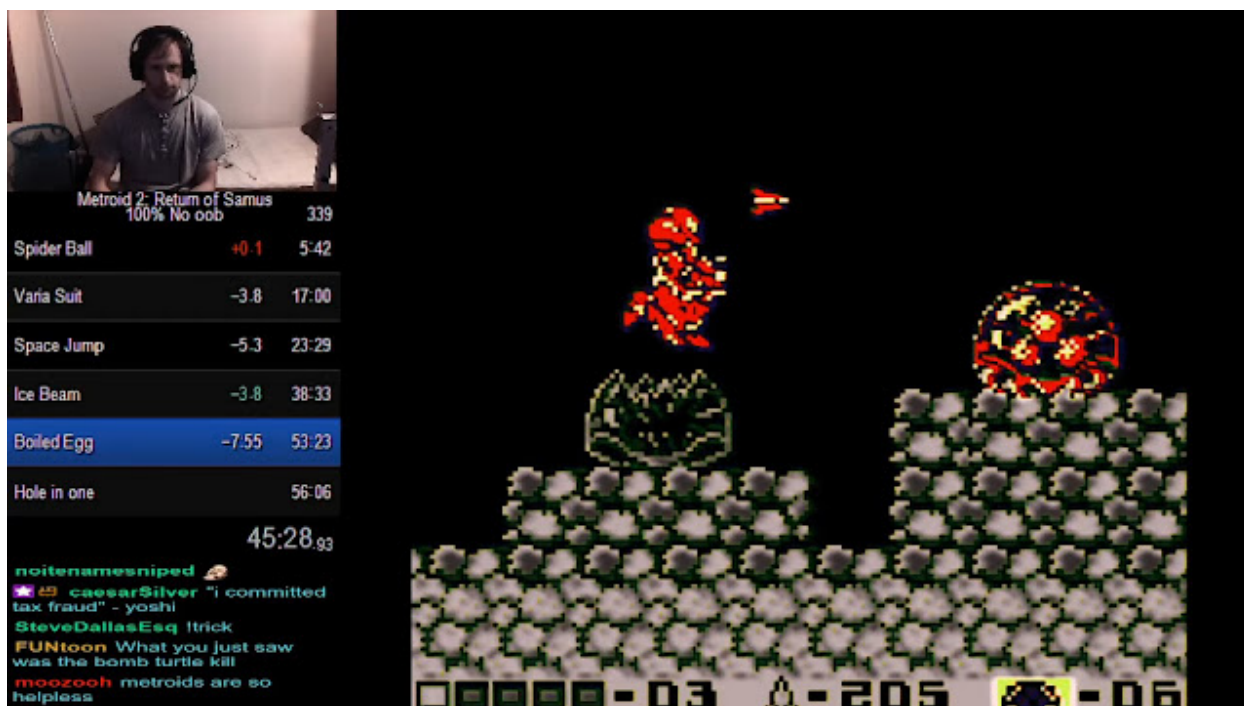


You might argue this deconstructs the story, if only because it's hard to take a hero with an ataxic or comical gait seriously. But this varies from game to game. A common tactic in *Super Metroid* is arm-pumping, a technique that saves handfuls of frames per room. This looks a tad quirky to be fair, but the movement abuse in *Castlevania* is much more broken. This is largely because movement powerups in Iga-vania don't go hand-in-hand with space; no wall jumps or running starts are needed, which means they can be spammed. This ranges from Alucard's perpetual backdash in *SotN*, [to Charlotte and Jonathan constantly swapping and shouting each other's names](#) in *Portrait of Ruin* to move as fast as possible.

The irony is that those aren't even glitches—they're normal features being abused by runners for maximum speed—but they look tremendously strange regardless. It's worth noting that various categories historically allow for different kinds of glitches. There are some glitches in *Metroid*, to be sure, but "blue suit" or "mock ball" are fairly inconspicuous and nowhere near as busted as the "exploration

glitches" seen in *Zelda*. The *Metroidvania* umbrella operates under closed space, so these glitches are less common; even so, *Castlevania* still sports some incredibly wild glitches (re: [this CV3 run, at 10:35](#)).

At times speedrunner movement barely registers as normal motion, making their narratives a tad visually incoherent. But more often than not, this feature is category dependent, and generally less common than you might think. Nevertheless, my work will be focusing on "lite runs" that largely preserve the intended audiovisual experience. There will be few if any major glitches from the runs I examine.



As something to explore and survive, I'll be asking runners about the games they specialize in, but also their emotional experiences more broadly. Regardless of variation, I feel like there's still a lot of potential for the player—specifically the interview subject—to feel dominated by the space, imprisoned by it even though they have countless hours in the field. Maybe that domination—of the player by the game—is part of the appeal.

I would argue such attractions to power are generally tacit. Weakness, especially in connection to taboo themes, is generally understated in larger, decent society. For example, [my PhD research also explores my own attraction to power, including the sexualized components](#). It suggests that speedrunners are like anyone in a Gothic tale—guided by instinct and attraction to power (sex, or otherwise) through symbols thereof, without always thinking about why.



## Thoughts on Power

This series wants to explore arrangements of power and why people pursue them, including speedrunners.

The keys to power in videogames—at least in terms of player performance—are space, motion and equipment. To this, the exact relationship between the player and the space depends on what means they have to survive. The more guns, movement, and space a player has to operate, the more power they demonstrably have within a game's audiovisual narrative. This being said, the argument remains that players themselves are constantly conditioned by videogames—to play by their rules, and adopt whatever roles it offers to them: to specialize, in other words.

Simply put, powerful guns equal powerful players... provided the space doesn't interfere. Apart from arenas stuffed with jump pads and other means of player empowerment, many non-FPS spaces will enslave, confine or dominate the player (re: the haunted house, underworld, or prison). They accomplish this by denying the player access to their power source: a surplus of effective guns; a glut of useful equipment or environmental aids; or an army of disposable enemies. Denied these luxuries, a player might start to feel trapped by a claustrophobic world, forced to play by its rules (re: its physical boundaries—the floors, vaulted ceilings and walls).



To this, *Doom*, and FPS more generally, are about shooting stuff. Recursive movement and castle narrative\* are dismissed in exchange for straight-ahead

displays of might. The hero slays the dragon or demon, and does so in a straightforward tunnel or arena. Either there's no haunted house or emphasis on the past, or the playground is nostalgic and fun; in the latter case, the gameworld's "pastness" is nurturing to the player by inviting them to kill demons.

*\*[In my master's thesis](#), I explore Metroidvania "castle narrative" according to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the Gothic chronotope, or "time-space." The concept is [outlined posthumously in The Dialogic Imagination](#) (1981)—an architectural evocation of space and time as something whose liminal motion through describes a particular quality of history described by Bakhtin as "castle narrative":*

*Toward the end of the seventeenth century in England, a new territory for novelistic events is constituted and reinforced in the so-called 'Gothic' or 'black' novel—the castle (first used in this meaning by Horace Walpole in [The Castle of Otranto](#), and later in Radcliffe, Monk Lewis and others). The castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past [...] the traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible form as various parts of its architecture [...] and in particular human relationships involving dynastic primacy and the transfer of hereditary rights. [...] legends and traditions animate every corner of the castle and its environs through their constant reminders of past events. It is this quality that gives rise to the specific kind of narrative inherent in castles and that is then worked out in Gothic novels.*

*To that, castle narrative is effectively how Gothic novels and their spaces communicate their sense of time; i.e., through the narrative of the castle's fatal portraits, effigies, heraldry and other reminders of dynastic trauma and hereditary power exchange. I outline these ideas more in my master's thesis, as well as my various postgrad work.*

Conversely Metroidvania and survival horror offer a different kind of pastness. To varying degrees they combine exploration with a partially enfeebled protagonist—one who must either hunt monsters inside a perilous maze, or be hunted inside a labyrinth by monsters stronger than them. But the gameworld itself is littered with icons tied to a traumatic past. This trauma is recursive, bound to an ancestral, hereditary power that's forever contested, ambiguous and bloody.

Who's winning? Who's the boss? Often, what survives, and what grows in strength, is the space—one whose narrative is repeatedly quenched in blood. In FPS, this grim reminder is effaced or avoided; in Metroidvania and survival horror, it manifests through the gameworld as something to explore. By doing so, the gameworld conditions (re: masters\*) the player while also reminding them of their

lot in a grand, uncaring scheme: power is hollow, or they never had any to begin with.

*\*Game mastery is a large part of my research. However, I'm interested in players being dominated by the game, not the other way around. Seth Giddings and Helen Kennedy touch on this in "Little Jesuses and \*@#?-off Robots" (2008). They write:*

*conventional assumptions that players learn the game system to achieve mastery over it—and that this mastery is the source of the prime pleasure of gameplay—is in fact an inversion of the dynamics and pleasures of videogame play. Games configure their players, allowing progression through the game only if the players recognize what they are being prompted to do, and comply with these coded instructions (13-14).*

*According to them, the game prompts the player. My argument is less interested in games at large, and more in the relationship between players and Metroidvania' ("Our Ludic Masters," [source](#)).*



One way is the disillusion of choice. Merely this fact, that someone didn't explicitly choose anything and were instead influenced heavily by the gameworld they're drawn to, can undermine a person's sense of free will. Meanwhile, the space becomes a cathedral, a reliable site of gorgeous

rapture and tremendous emotion; it's the hero, the boss, the supreme power. Call it a Dark Mother of sorts: Without its nurturing framework, the player can never be the hero; with it, the player becomes something of a zombie—a brutal, king-for-a-day killer or pathetic victim.

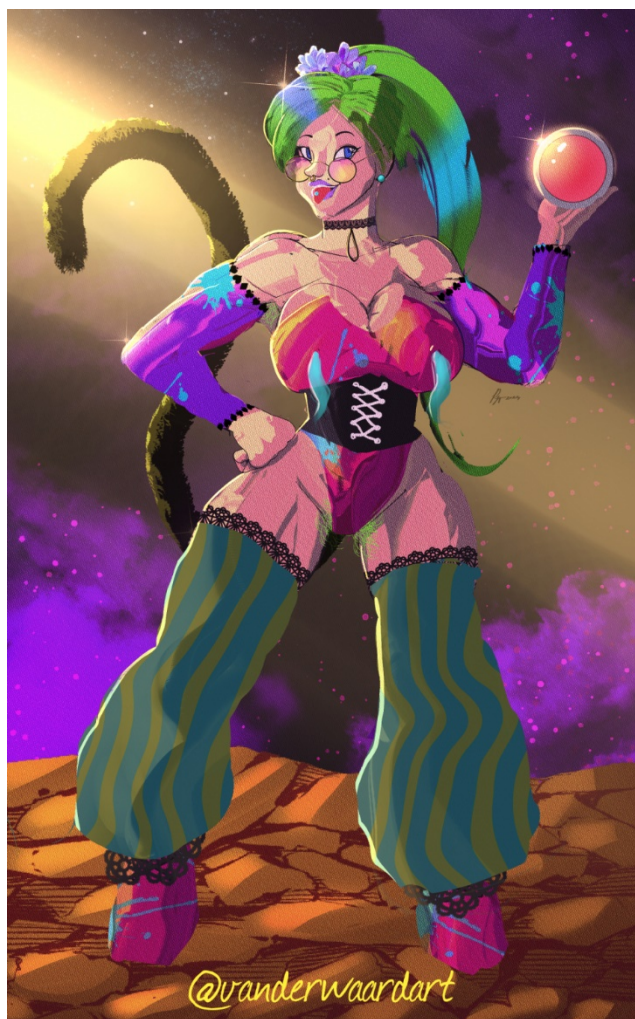
This arrangement might seem completely alien to players conditioned exclusively by FPS games (to wield power and take it for themselves). The paradox is, the ghastly arrangement outlined above may very well be why many Metroidvania and survival horror fans consent. We're not all conditioned to pursue power to wield it ourselves; sometimes, the role of submission—literally basking in

someone or something else's power—can be equally delightful. Pursuit of power is not unusual, but power takes many forms.

Cosmetics aside, this includes the exchange itself, namely voluntary submission; within realms of consent, submission—not dominance—is the strongest power of all.

\*\*\*

## About the Author (reprise)



(artist: [Persephone van der Waard](#))

Persephone van der Waard is the author of the non-profit book series, *Sex Positivity*—its art director, sole invigilator, illustrator and primary editor (the other co-writer/co-editor being [Bay Ryan](#)). She has her independent PhD in Metroidvania, and is a MtF trans woman, anti-fascist, atheist/Satanist, poly/pan kinkster, anarcho-Communist and erotic artist/pornographer [with two partners](#). Including her multiple [playmates/friends and collaborators](#), Persephone and her seventeen muses work/play together on *Sex Positivity* and on her artwork at large as a sex-positive force. [She sometimes writes reviews, Gothic analyses, and interviews for fun on her old blog](#); or [does continual independent research on Metroidvania and speedrunning](#). If you're interested in her academic/activist work and larger

portfolio, [go to her About the Author page to learn more](#); if you're curious about illustrated or written commissions, [please refer to her commissions page for more information](#).