

THE **ANATOMY**
OF **METROID**

DELUXE EDITION
BY JEREMY PARISH

AN IN-DEPTH GAME DESIGN ANALYSIS OF THREE CLASSIC NINTENDO METROID GAMES
UNOFFICIAL AND UNAUTHORIZED

THE
ANATOMY
OF
METROID

DELUXE EDITION: VOL. I & II

METROID
KID ICARUS
METROID II
SUPER METROID

*An in-depth game design analysis
breaking down three classic Metroid games
by Nintendo (and their weird cousin Kid Icarus)*

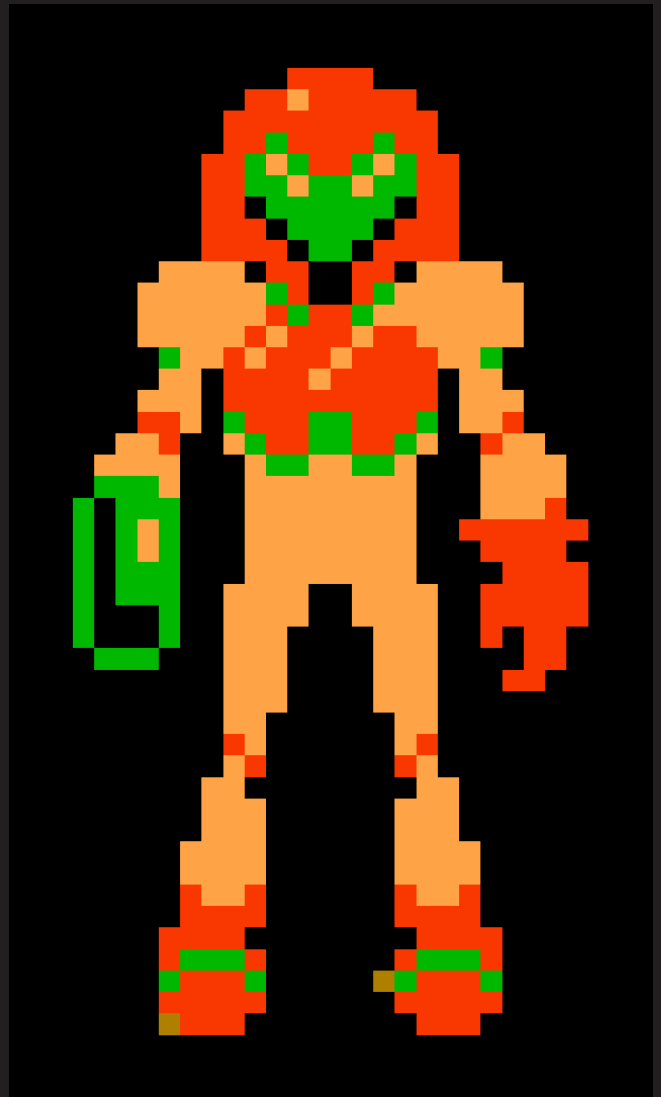
BY JEREMY PARISH

I've written about Metroid's opening moments before. It's the game that set me on the path of thinking about how level design works. In fact, my first musings along those lines date back to 2006 — apparently I've been banging this drum for nearly a decade.

Prior to the series now compiled in this book, I'd only fully analyzed the first few screens of the game without giving too much consideration to what lay beyond. It's not all positive, because this is one of those early attempts to do something bold and brash and deep, and as such it was staking out territory no other game had properly charted. Sometimes, such endeavors involve missteps.

And fair enough. Great design is timeless, while innovative design belongs very much to its times. To properly understand Metroid, you need to cast your brain into the proper mindset. The year is 1986, and nearly every action game on the market is either a reaction to Super Mario Bros. or else was undertaken a little too late to be able to reflect the development community's collective desire to make the next Mario by... trying to create a game exactly like Mario. In short, the market is suddenly glutted with games that try to imitate Mario's physics and rules, or else feel heartbreakingly primitive in their lack of comparative sophistication.

Metroid's designers, on the other hand, said, "Hey, let's totally blow Mario out of the water." They made a game that completely abandoned fundamental action game concepts like levels, scores, and ease of accessibility. It was a game with the sort of expansiveness you'd only have seen on a personal computer, except it ran on a console. That meant you didn't have to control the action with arrow keys, it had good music, and it didn't use black-and-white isometric graphics. It was like nothing else on consoles, which made it seem pretty awesome in its day. After all, its flaws didn't seem quite so glaring when we didn't have better efforts to compare it to.





Metroid kicks off with a degree of ceremony reminiscent of Namco's classic arcade titles — as in Xevious, Pac-Man, and Tower of Druaga, you hear a brief musical flourish before you begin play. The hero(ine) Samus materializes with a unique sprite (you only see it here and while riding the elevators between areas), then the action begins.

In 1986, side-scrolling games almost universally worked in one direction: Left to right. Look at Moon Patrol, Pac-Land, Super Mario Bros., Wonder Boy. Shooters like Gadius and Scramble cemented the auto-scrolling left-to-right horizontal format for that genre (Defender being little more than a strange blip in history). Even Rolling Thunder, which allowed some small amount of backtracking, offered the player no reason to walk left besides dropping back for tactical purposes. Why would Metroid be any different?



From the outset, Samus dashes right, gunning down what monsters she can draw a bead on — basically the pteranodon-like creatures that lurk on the ceiling and dive downward when Samus comes into range, launching a literal suicide attack by trying to skewer the heroine before lodging in the ground and exploding. These deathwish beasts serve their purpose, though: They teach players to aim and shoot upward and the value of rapid fire as advancing enemies will be halted for a frame or two of action when struck, allowing a quick volley of shots to take down a speedy foe before it can collide with Samus.

Her line of fire unfortunately does not include Zoomers, the short spiky critters walking along the ground, as they move below the range of Samus' blaster; sadly, she's unable to duck and fire or aim downward. However, she can hit them when they climb on walls and ceilings: An observation you're left to make at the end of the first room. Metroid operates on its own unique combat logic (well, "logic"), but it does a good job of allowing you to explore some of Samus' basic skills right away.

Samus begins the game with 30 points of health, and enemies in this region (Brinstar) will sap eight points per attack. This allows players to make three mistakes before dying, and most defeated enemies drop health refills worth five points. So basically for every couple of creatures you destroy, you can absorb another hit. For now, Samus' health maxes out at 99 health, so the game allows quite a bit of leeway for sloppy play — which is good, because she has very little mercy invulnerability and totally weird jump physics.

Metroid doesn't have levels, but it does break its world into rooms — a little like its contemporary Castlevania, but with a major distinction. Rooms in Metroid alternate between vertical and horizontal scrolling. Unlike nearly every other game of its vintage, Metroid can scroll in four

directions... but only two at a time, and the scroll orientation almost always alternates between rooms. I don't think the change in directions is a specific limitation of the tech the team used for the game. Given that Metroid's sibling Kid Icarus (they share quite a bit of staff) does something similar it seems to be a conscious design style by the team rather than some kind of hardware requirement.

In your first time through the game's second room, you can't actually move vertically yet. So instead, all the second room provides is a change in scenery; the level design goes from a fairly flat, open space to a series of odd-looking blocks arranged in horizontal layers, with one row situated above the floor. This forces players to scramble across the top while Zoomers crawl toward her. The raised platform and low ceiling mean you can't simply jump over these creatures, forcing you to either time your dash across the platform to when they're moving across its underside or else fire at them as they round the corner and come briefly into Samus' line of fire. Either way, this room places monsters directly in your path and forces you to come to terms with them. And it holds secrets that you'll uncover later.

The next room is structured more like the first, with two of the dive-bombing Skree situated near the entrance. If you simply dash forward, the arc of your drop from the platform beneath the door will cause you to fall directly into their diving path, and the Zoomers moving along the ground will further complicate things.

Instead, the correct approach is to slow down and drop gently from the ledge once the Zoomers pass beneath you, allowing you to lead the Skree one at a time and take out the Zoomers as they climb above you. For those used to the mad dash of a Super Mario Bros. or Wonder Boy, Metroid demands an uncommon degree of patience.

With the enemies taken care of, Samus comes to a peculiar low-hanging wall. With only a single-block gap between the overhang and the floor, Samus is physically incapable of advancing forward. She can't duck or crawl, and she can't pass through walls, so she's effectively stuck.

For the first-time player in 1986, this created a confounding situation. You couldn't advance; was there a secret? A trick? A mysterious way to get past this obstacle? You might begin to backtrack a little way to look for some kind of secret, something you'd missed. You'd push further and further back until you were back here, at the beginning. But the screen kept scrolling, and no invisible wall prevented you from running left from the initial screen as it did in games like Super Mario Bros. and Pac-Land. You could run left for an entire screen or two, pushing back against what should have been an invisible boundary.

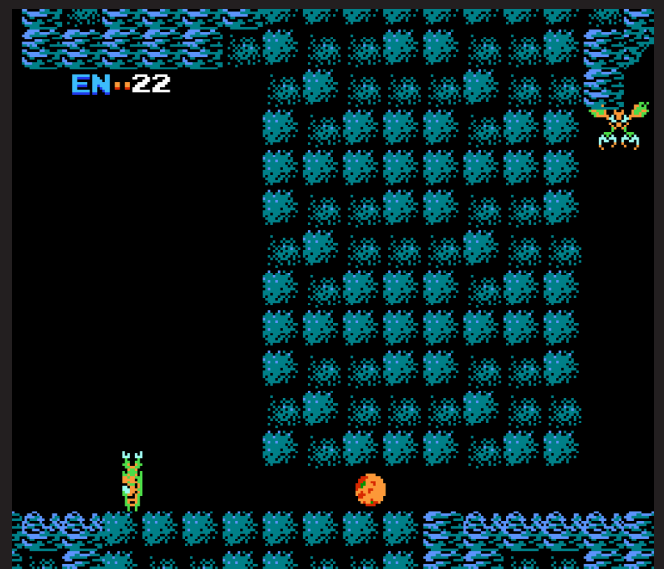
And eventually, you'd come to the Maru Mari,



more commonly known as the Morph Ball. The Maru Mari allows Samus not only to duck, but to roll into a compact ball one meter high — just small enough to roll through one-block-high gaps.

In fact, once you've jumped over the large construct immediately to the left of the starting point, you're forced to acquire and use the Maru Mari. The structure is too high to leap from the left, and it's too low to walk under. You can only return to where you started by ducking into a ball and rolling beneath the obstacle. Congratulations: You've just learned how to advance by using the Maru Mari.

You can do the same thing at that ledge in the third room. Welcome to the rest of the game.



It's impossible to overstate how brilliantly the Metroid team executed this whole thing. They could have gone about it any number of ways. They could have placed the Maru Mari along your path. They could have forced players to run left from the start. They could have introduced the low wall much further into the game.

By placing this obstacle in that exact location, however, Metroid's designers turned progress into a test, and in doing so drilled the importance of your actions into your own mind. Instead of parceling out instructions or simply creating a mandatory learning process along the main path, the game forced players (accustomed to one-directional ratchet scrolling) to deduce a lot of different things at once: The freedom to move in either direction, the need to backtrack and explore, the importance of collecting items. Along the way, players learned both to use the Maru Mari and how to deal with certain enemies, the process of moving from room to room, and the fact that the game ahead would be packed with mystery.

Something I find particularly interesting about this sequence is that the distance from the Maru Mari to the low wall is nearly the same amount of screen real estate as World 1-1 of Super Mario Bros. The path to the wall essentially comprises the same volume of content as a normal level of contemporary games. Yet because of the need to double back and deal with threats that need to be dealt with with specific strategies, this sequence feels considerably different than the brisk dash through an opening stage seen in Metroid's contemporaries.

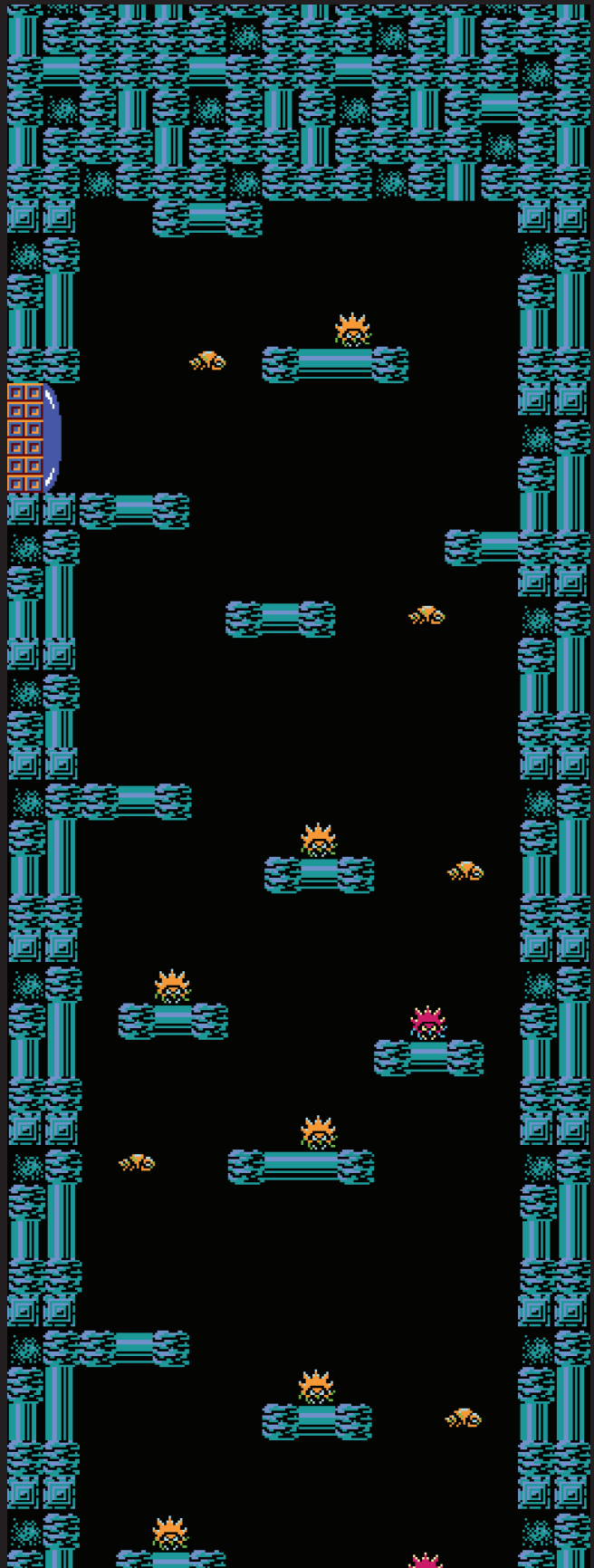
Whatever failings it may possess, Metroid begins with an extraordinary playable opening sequence. It may be hard to fully appreciate today, but viewed in the context of its time and place, this opening salvo served as a rousing statement of intent.

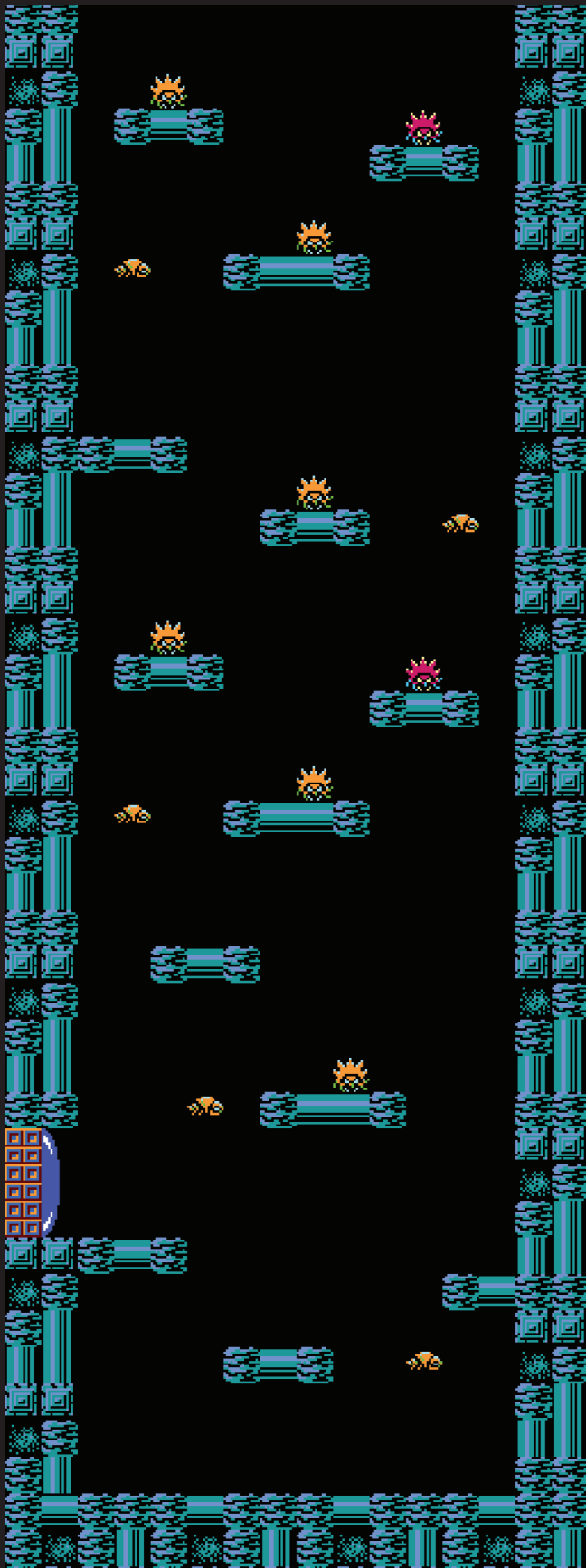
Then, once you make your way beyond Metroid's very clever, very brilliantly designed introductory moments, the game wastes no time in becoming promptly, well, weird.

Beyond the low-hanging wall that blocks the opening area from the remainder of the game, the first vertically oriented room of the game (or at least the first that you can scroll up or down at this point in the adventure) awaits. And it's a doozy.

The long shaft here serves a role not quite equivalent to a hub, but it's close. It rises (and rises... and rises...), and as it does so it provides a number of doors that you can duck into to explore. You enter the shaft from the bottom-left door, and it runs parallel to a similar (albeit shorter) vertical room located across a one-screen bridge which you pass through via the single door on the right wall of the long shaft, located about midway up.

Further up the shaft you'll find two doors in the left wall as well. You can't do anything with the rooms beyond at first; rather, you'll need to backtrack. But the





game allows you explore them in a limited capacity, leading you to mysterious dead-ends in order to build intrigue. If the doors inset in the shaft wall were simply locked, you might remember to go back and visit them. But allowing you to journey partway into the rooms beyond only to find yourself stymied by obstacles makes these areas more memorable — and therefore more likely to call you back to explore later, once you have the proper tools to access what lies further in. The shaft at the top leads to the final areas of the game, so it'll be quite a while before Samus can pass by that barrier — but the “obstacle” located there is unique in the entire game, and therefore quite memorable.

And it's a good thing these moments stand out, because the shaft itself is only memorable in how repetitive and lengthy it is. With the perspective of hindsight it doesn't seem so terrible, but thinking back to the way things usually worked in 1986, when games frequently consisted of single rooms strung together, it just kept going and going. The first time I played Metroid, I still expected to reach the end of a level at some point. Needless to say, when I crossed over the bridge and found another identical shaft, I nearly panicked.

At this point, Metroid gives you a lot of options with many paths that lack obvious dead-ends. There's a “correct” route through the game, but it's not immediately intuitive, and you can basically go any direction from that central connective bridge and get quite a ways before you hit an impassible wall or a red door that won't open with normal blaster fire. Go up from the bridge and you'll find a room with some unique pillars and tubes that effectively serves as a dead-end.

Straight ahead, however, you'll find a horizontal room full of acidic liquid that saps Samus' health if she falls into it. Further into the room is an extremely valuable item, an Energy Tank; it doubles Samus' maximum health capacity... though you still begin each game with 30 health, because Metroid is an old game and therefore kind of hates you a little. Still, that's all you can collect from here for the moment, and eventually you'll reach an impasse.

The bottom-right door of the second shaft, however, contains an essential key to progress: A missile expansion. This gives Samus a secondary form of attack, a powerful expendable projectile that hits enemies many times harder than her normal shot and is capable of destroying certain creatures that her blaster can't.

What makes the missile so interesting — and this sets a pattern of game design that carries through the Metroid series as a whole and in many ways defines it — is that it also functions as a key. Rather than forcing Samus to find a red key to open red doors, Metroid empowers her to bypass those barriers by shooting them with five missiles. Her gear thus offers multiple functions, and



the game world begins to expand as Samus grows more powerful. It's an extraordinary concept, and the moment you collect your first missile, you've become inducted into one of the most compelling schools of game design ever.

Make no mistake: *Metroid* doesn't work this well all the way through the adventure. But it builds the framework for true genius right here. Nintendo wouldn't follow through and realize its full potential for nearly another decade, but perfection takes time. For its day, *Metroid* offers some startlingly forward-thinking concepts.

Once you collect your first Missile expansion in the lower right area of Brinstar, *Metroid* leaves you again to your own devices — and, again, it gives you some freedom to explore, yet doesn't allow you to go too far or get in over your head.

Your first instinct after grabbing the Missiles is very likely to push forward on the same path you've been traveling, because after all you've had such success running in this direction already — and your first time through, the proper value of Missiles (which function as a key as well as a weapon) may not be immediately evident. And your adventurousness is well rewarded as you find an elevator to the fiery depths of Norfair a few rooms ahead.

Once in Norfair, though, you can't go terribly far. The new visual style — with pools of what appear to be magma and rock formations that look to have been formed from solidified lava bubbles or something — pairs with the change in musical style from triumphant to melancholy to communicate the sense that you've reached a deeper, deadlier area of the planet's interior.

The enemies you meet in Norfair bear this out, behaving in much the same ways as the Zoomers and Rios of Brinstar but inflicting far more damage upon contact. To the left of the elevator, you can only travel a couple of rooms before you literally hit a wall. It's impass-



able at this point.

To the elevator's right, you can range further afield. A room of cloud-like platforms above a lake of lava connects to another vertical shaft. This one, despite being much shorter than that monstrosity you encountered in Brinstar, offers three other doors to choose from. The top-most door leads to no less than three (!) Missile expansions in a row, rapidly quadrupling Samus' arsenal at this early point in the game (and suggesting that players are definitely meant to venture into this area right away). The other two doors, however, lead to more dead ends.

While the three pointless dead-ends seem to denote Norfair is a brief affair of a region, the walls contain secrets — but at the moment, Samus is ill-equipped to tap into their mysteries. Literally, she lacks the equipment. Norfair leaves you with a sense of incompleteness and mild frustration, but no matter what you do here you can't advance in this direction — though depending on how vigorously you flail about, you may notice certain portions of the wall that you can shoot away (or you can once you grab the Long Beam, anyway). But, again, you can't do anything about that now. It's merely a curiosity.

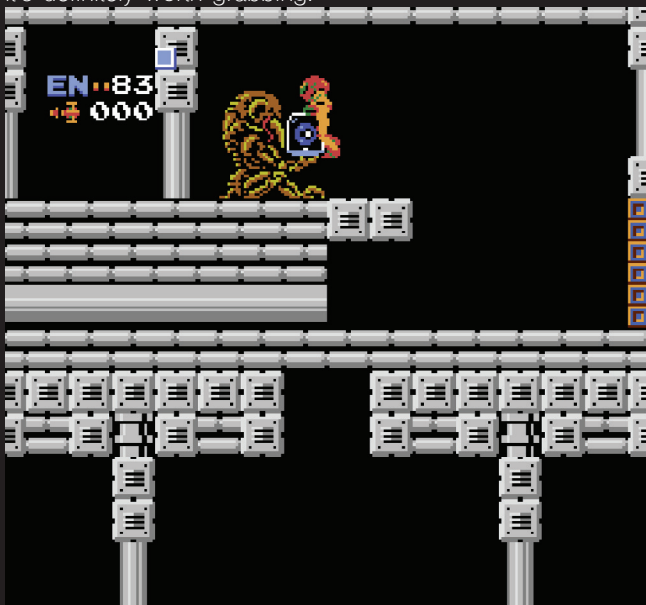
At some point, you gotta buckle down and face facts: Norfair offers nothing more for now, just some Missiles and a bunch of hard-hitting indigenous life forms. There's nothing to be done for it but to backtrack up the elevator. Again, the entire concept of backtracking was quite alien to action games in 1986, so I applaud the way *Metroid* introduces it here. The game lets you cast about along your usual left-to-right linear path, then reels you back in once you hit your head again the inexplicable obstructions along the way.

Back in Brinstar, you can double back on the path you took to reach Norfair and the Missile. This time, however, you're equipped with Missiles, which means



those infuriating Red Doors can now be blasted away to reveal the secrets inside. While you're able to access a huge percentage of Brinstar at this point, there are only a handful of Red Doors available — meaning these are the only new areas you can currently access. If you don't remember the location of these two spots (understandable, given the visual similarities of the area and the sprawl of the map), you'll still stumble into them eventually through simple re-exploration.

The lower left door in the immense first shaft takes you to one door, behind which you can find the Long Beam. This upgrade actually isn't essential — you can theoretically finish the game without it — but since it allows Samus' blaster to span the width of the entire screen instead of inexplicably petering out halfway there, it's definitely worth grabbing.



The real prize, however, you'll find almost directly above the Missiles in a room in the eastern half of Brinstar. While the topmost chamber of this side of the region remains impassible even with Missiles, the one below it off the shaft to the far right of the map contains an essential tool: The Bombs.

Again, Bombs work like the Missiles in that they empower Samus (allowing her to drop time-delayed explosives while ducked into Maru-Mari form) but they also give her additional exploratory skills. In this case, the force of the Bombs' explosions lift Samus about one block high, which you can use to propel her forward across long gaps that you couldn't normally traverse while morphed... or, more importantly, to help her rise high enough to enter meter-tall waist-high passages in walls, which she can't jump into on her own. Furthermore, Bomb blasts crack open damaged rock formations, like those in the room adjacent to the start of the game. And, it should be said, like those you had to shoot through in order to reach the room in Norfair with three Missile expansions.



Equipped with the game's three most essential upgrades — the Maru-Mari, the Missiles, and the Bomb — Samus can dig into the quest in earnest.

The road to acquiring Metroid's all-important Bomb proves to be a surprisingly well-designed one, not quite guiding the player to Samus' objectives but rather placing limitations on the game's free-roaming spaces that allow some degree of exploration, which in turn eventually comes to an end until you stumble upon the next tool to help Samus range further afield. Remembering (or mapping) tantalizing points to return to further on in the adventure proves key to efficient play, imposing a small burden on the player — not a terrible one, simply enough to force them to become invested in the open-ended world.

In a time when even scrolling in a fixed direction had only been widely available on home consoles for about a year, *Metroid* expected a lot from players; yet it admirably didn't simply chuck them in the deep end and demand they swim or drown. Brinstar and the road to the Bomb are perfect beginners' pools. You can take issue with the game for its repetitive visuals or Samus' weird jump physics or the way you restart the game with just 30 points of health every time (forcing you to dawdle around and farm health pick-ups whenever you continue) — but *Anatomy of a Game* is about the way well-designed games show you the ropes without resorting to in-ear navigation or tutorials. In that respect, *Metroid* does an admirable job.

Disappointingly, the game turns out to be somewhat less focused once you acquire the Bomb. That's definitely a part of *Metroid*'s charm — you're plopped into the middle of a vast extraterrestrial labyrinth and left to puzzle your way through the thing — but you can definitely see the rough edges here that serve as telltale signs of a young medium and an undefined genre.

Beyond the Bomb, *Metroid* can be frustrating thanks to its combination of unavoidable visual monotony, obscure mechanics, and some very poorly conceived room layouts. Combined with the freedom to go pretty much anywhere and do just about anything, these can lead to some truly infuriating moments as you seek to conquer Norfair and the boss hideouts.

Part of the problem is that while the Bomb represents the last absolutely mandatory piece of Samus' tool-arsenal, it's not the last addition to her repertoire. Most of *Metroid*'s pick-ups take the form of Missile expansions or Energy Tanks, but you can find four other items within the labyrinth. One of them is almost completely useless; another is incredibly helpful though not mandatory; and finally, two of them may be technically non-mandatory, but you'll find it difficult to finish the adventure without them.

However, these items are scattered throughout the game, and *Metroid* offers extremely little guidance to light your path to them. The most important of these, the Ice Beam, actually shows up in two different spots. However, one is deviously hidden, and the other is back in Norfair. The problem, though, is that players probably won't go back to Norfair immediately after collecting the Bomb. Instead, they'll almost certainly be enticed to venture into an area for which they're ill-prepared but nevertheless can explore almost in its entirety... a process destined to end in failure.

While the next "proper" step in the game is to venture down into Norfair and find Ridley's lair (and the useful doodad hidden thereabouts), the game really seems to want you to go to the "wrong" area instead. The path to Kraid's hideout has been taunting you since the very beginning of the adventure: It's the breakable rock



floor in the room adjacent to Samus' starting point. You've passed over it every time you've died and hit Continue and headed back to that tall, tall shaft. With the Bomb in hand, you can finally blow open the floor and see what lies below.

Furthermore, the route from Norfair's dead ends to the Bomb seems to be pointing in Kraid's direction. You could certainly be forgiven for going there next.

With deft play, you can even reach Kraid. Now that you've learned the basics of the game, *Metroid* has very few new tricks up its sleeve, so the game beyond this point is more or less simply a matter of coming to terms with the vast sprawl of Zebes and not letting enemies get the best of you. Reaching him requires persistence and a small amount of curiosity... and also the sense not to be fooled by the fake Kraid that you can destroy in a single shot. Hey, the concept of bosses in video games was pretty new in 1986. You could be forgiven for not knowing how they work.

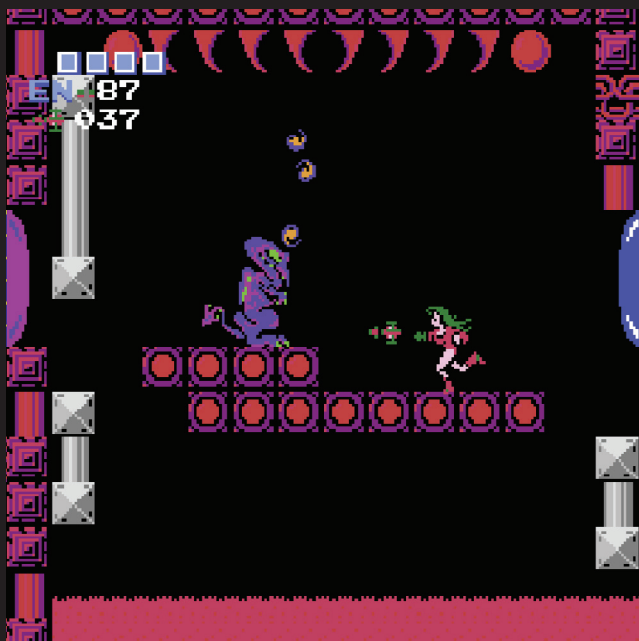
The problem is, should you head immediately to Kraid after getting the Bomb, you very likely can't win. He hits pretty hard and soaks up far more damage than you can deliver with the paltry amount of Missiles you'll have collected to this point.

You can leave a boss' lair at any time to regroup and recharge, but its health tally will reset and you'll have to start from scratch. You'll basically reach an impasse here... and should you elect to return to Brinstar, you'll find the only route there consists of climbing a shaft of breakable blocks you can only ascend by shooting them away and waiting for them to reform. Should one of the blocks reform while you're in its space, it'll damage you and the recoil will send you flying back down to the bottom of the shaft. It's a clever room design in the way it exploits the game's mechanics, but not fun in the least. If you can't get

the timing down, the only way out is to die... which means respawning at the entrance to Kraid's hideout with a piddling 30 points of health, per usual.

This isn't a major design failure, and it's not even something all gamers will experience. But it's an example of the rough edges Metroid possesses, the small design oversights that can make it difficult for most people to go back after so many years of seeing these concepts refined by sequels and would-be successors.

Despite the poor telegraphing of Samus' post-Bomb-acquisition pathway, the game still does a pretty good job of leading you to some of your next essential goods. While the Missiles, Bombs, and Maru-Mari are the only absolute gear requirements for completing the mission, you can find a few more items littered throughout Zebes to make the quest far more reasonable.



As an aside, I'm in agreement with those who are willing to forgive the weird disconnect in the placement of Ridley and Kraid. The former's lair is convoluted and filled with the hardest-hitting enemies in the game outside of the final area, while the latter's lair offers a remarkably direct path to the encounter and features creatures barely more powerful than those in neighboring Brinstar. Yet Kraid packs a wallop with his two-pronged projectile barrage of spikes and spines, while Ridley's sole offensive measure travels one of two arcs, one of which leaves a Samus-sized gap right at the boss' feet. You can literally stand in one spot and pump him full of Missiles without taking a point of damage.

Why the incongruity? I'm going to chalk it up to the fact that no one had ever created mid-game bosses like Kraid and Ridley before, and certainly not in a free-roaming environment. Heck, Metroid's manual introduced

the term "minibosses" to the world; when a friend first tried to explain their existence to me, all I could see in my mind were little mafia dons with tommy guns — clearly not a bit like the reality of Metroid. The fact that Zebes' zones hint at a proper line of progression with enemy damage tallies is admirable enough that you can't be too bent out of shape over the fact that the bosses themselves don't really match the difficulty curve of their surroundings.

The most important non-essential item in the game makes itself evident for the attentive. Actually, even the inattentive can find it regardless of their competence, because it appears in two different locations, one of which isn't particularly hidden. But for the keen-eyed, one Ice Beam awaits in Brinstar, not at all far from the Bombs.

You wouldn't intuitively know to go there — certainly its hiding point is less obvious than the path the Kraid's lair, which begs for exploration (whether correctly or not) once you've grabbed the Bombs — but you can easily break the game wide open in a matter of minutes by collecting the two weapons in sequence.

The Ice Beam makes for an interesting upgrade. Again, it handily fulfills the Metroid mandate of extending the reach of Samus' exploration while simultaneously making her more powerful. Although, technically, the Ice Beam makes Samus less powerful, requiring her to shoot an enemy twice as many times to destroy it as with her normal beam. Rather than increase her damage output, the Ice Beam causes her gun to fire a dual mode beam that freezes and unfreezes enemies. Frozen enemies defy physics by becoming temporarily rooted to the spot at which they're struck... even if that spot involves being in motion dozens of feet above the ground. Does it make sense? No. Is it cool and useful? Oh yes.



A frozen enemy becomes completely harmless. Not only will it neither move nor attack while frozen, but Samus can leap on its back to use it as a stepping stone. This can prove incredibly useful in many situations. Many of the game's vertical shafts include no platforms at all, only Rippers drifting back and forth. Even the invincible yellow ones can be frozen; in fact, they exist entirely for the purpose of using as makeshift platforms. When you shoot a normal, destructible enemy that's been frozen, it thaws instantly (rather than the freeze effect wearing off after several seconds), but shooting a frozen invincible enemy simply extends the duration of the freeze. As such, you're able to chain together frozen creatures as long as you need to reach otherwise inaccessible areas.

The Ice Beam also proves handy against infinitely respawning creatures, such as the various types of insects that appear from the pipes, rise to Samus' height, and zip toward her. They can be persistent irritants, but each spawn point will only allow one creature to be in play at a time.

Without the Ice Beam, the only way to halt their appearance is to wait until one drops a health or Missile pickup, causing that spawn to fall out of play until the drop disappears. But you can also simply freeze foes, removing their spawn point from your threat radar long enough to traverse a tricky area.

Very few areas in the game actually require the Ice Beam (especially if you're willing to exploit the wall-jump glitch) with the exception of the final area, Tourian: The Ice Beam is the only way to destroy the game's crushingly dangerous eponymous monsters.



What's clever about the Ice Beam in Brinstar is that it's hidden in a way that draws your attention. It's

located off a shaft beneath a bridge — one that doesn't appear to include breakable blocks. Yet for some reason you can see an enemy flying around beneath it, which seems odd; it's not like Metroid to include creatures you can't blow up.

And on top of that, if you watch its movement, it sometimes flies into the water below the bridge and disappears, seemingly caught on something out of sight. This is in fact your clue that not only can you blast a hole in the bridge to reach the space below, you can drop through the illusory liquid to the shaft below.

If you don't figure this out right away, a second Ice Beam appears in Norfair as well. But either way, you'll first need to learn the most subtle and unintuitive trick in Metroid's entire arsenal of secrets.

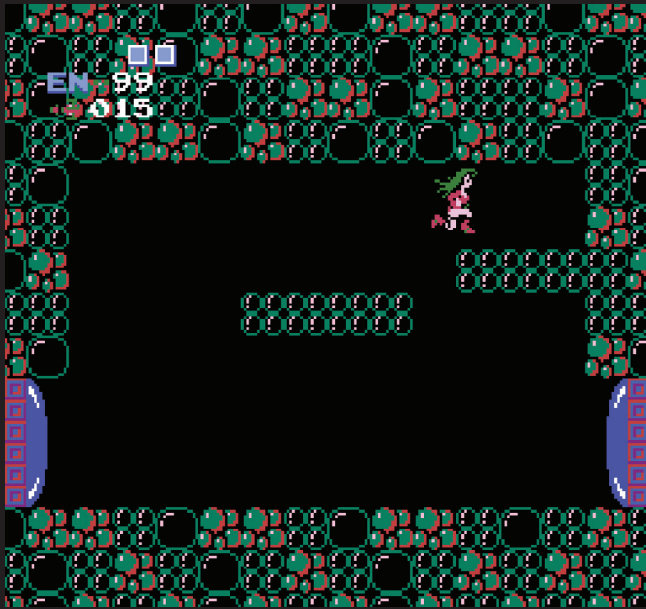
Metroid did a lot of really innovative and interesting things for a game of its genre and period, but perhaps the most important idea it brought to the table was the concept of power-up permanence. Samus doesn't simply collect items that make her more powerful; once she acquires them, she keeps them. The only impermanent additions to her arsenal are her beam modifiers and her Missiles.

The Ice Beam and Wave Beam can be swapped for one another if you run back to collect the replacement, while Missiles are a limited, expendable resource — yet even then, upgrades permanently increase her Missile carrying capacity, and enemies drop bits of energy to allow Samus to recharge her Missile tally.

The concept of collecting gear to permanently boost your avatar's abilities didn't begin with Metroid, of course. Role-playing games had it more or less from the start. So did adventure games like Zork. Even action-RPG hybrids like The Legend of Zelda (which launched a few months before Metroid) and Tower of Druaga drew on the concept of equipment and left you far more powerful at the game's end than at the beginning.

For platform-style side-scrolling action games, however, this sort of permanence hadn't really been explored before. For starters, the side-scroller had only gotten its proper kick-off about a year before, so the games that Super Mario Bros. inspired were only beginning to come to market around the time Metroid launched. But more to the point, that particular style of game still existed within an arcade-oriented mindset. They were meant to be brief, exciting, challenging adventures. Metroid, on the other hand, beckoned players with a huge, interconnected labyrinth that eschewed multiple stages in favor of a few regions that heroine Samus Aran could freely traverse provided she had the proper tools for the job. While Metroid didn't scrimp on its challenge level, the challenge that it presented was a different sort than action games normally went in for.

Thus the standard ephemeral power-ups es-



tablished by Pac-Man's energizer pellets and Donkey Kong's mallets would have been a poor fit for the needs of Metroid. Its world possessed a level of persistence unusual for that style of game, with scenery designed to be explored and covered repeatedly rather than dashed through in a linear rush to the end.

So when Samus acquired a new power, she kept it. Even more impressively, Samus' add-ons didn't just modestly tweak her combat capabilities, they multiplied her strength considerably. The fragile little soldier at the beginning of the game, with that sad little short-distance beam and nothing to her name but 30 points of health, became a deadly dervish of offensive power by the end. Even Samus' body itself becomes a weapon with the correct weapon equipped.

What I find most interesting about Samus' gear is that it becomes so seamless. Despite its scope and complexity, Metroid doesn't include a sub-screen. There's no in-game map (and I do wish that I still had the stunningly amazing graph paper maps I created for the game back in the day), and you can't juggle inventory. Besides the Ice and Wave Beams, Samus' powers are cumulative, each stacking on the other. And nearly every ability she gains increases both her combat efficacy and her ability to navigate Zebes' rocky chambers — only a few do only one or the other.

I've written about the Bombs, Ice Beam, and Missiles already, as they serve as the fulcrum for Samus' exploration. The other abilities she can collect throughout the course of her adventure, though technically optional, can be just as useful. The High Jump boots make the game massively easier, not only because they allow easier traversal of the game world without requiring the Ice Beam, but also because they allow you to leap out of certain lava pits (such as the sides of Kraid's chamber) that the sticky



liquid physics prevent you from clearing under normal power. The Energy Tank secretly hidden in the wall of Kraid's room is pretty much impossible to collect without High Jump, and I can't imagine trying to navigate the final escape sequence without them.

The other key item, the Varia, is actually the most difficult item to acquire in the entire game. Unless you're very clever or simply abuse a bug, you need the Maru-Mari, Bombs, the High Jump, and the Ice Beam in order to reach the room where the Varia is hidden. (It is possible to get there legitimately without High Jump by drawing the Waver in the lower part of the room into the hidden upper chamber and freezing it to use as a stepping stone. But it's a lot of trouble.)

This complexity is justified by the fact that the Varia doubles Samus' survivability, reducing the impact of enemy attacks by 50%. It essentially doubles your health, and clearing the Mother Brain's lair at the very end of the game without the Varia is a truly difficult task. It can be done, though, and if you're good enough you'll learn that Samus' natural hair color when she's out of her suit is brown, not green, as seen in the screens throughout this book — the Varia turns it green, the way it turns her yellow space suit white. This is one of my favorite little details of the game, the fact that Samus has a different color palette for completing an experts-only task that few would ever attempt. Once you acquire the Varia, you keep it forever, even in replays, meaning you have to finish the game quickly without the Varia to be able to see her true hair color. Before there were Platinum Trophies and 200-Gamer Point Achievements, there was brunette Samus.



And finally, the single coolest weapon in the game: The Screw Attack. The Screw Attack gives justification to the game's odd, difficult-to-control jumping physics. More than that, it forces you to master Samus' unique jumping properties. See, when she jumps while you're pressing forward on the D-pad, she does a rapid acrobatic spin that causes her movement to feel slightly slippery, especially upon landing. If you press the jump button without moving, she'll leap straight up without flipping, which makes her easier to control.

Once you have the Screw Attack, though, Samus' tricky flip becomes an asset: While spinning, her body discharges energy that destroys practically anything she strikes. She'll pass unharmed through invincible enemies, while everything else save the bosses will instantly explode upon contact. The weird jump that before seemed so detrimental turns into a bold weapon, and avoidance becomes less valuable than jumping headlong into foes. It totally changes the way you play Metroid, and creates a different mentality to action games, period.

The Screw Attack really makes the permanence of Metroid's weapon selections interesting. Unlike Pac-Man's energizers or Mario's Star Man, the Screw Attack allows you to destroy enemies on contact at any time, not for a few brief seconds while a special jingle plays. Rather than limiting this power by time, Metroid imposes a skill limitation on it: Your invincibility only works in specific situations and requires you to master the game's tricky jumping physics. Because of this — and because Metroid's goal is discovery rather than dashing to the game's end — the Screw Attack doesn't break the game.

Metroid doesn't suddenly become a cakewalk once you acquire it; after all, you still need to find the path to the end and figure out how to best the game's toughest foes. What the Screw Attack does, however, is make

the process of discovery far less of a chore, allowing you to reach your destinations and search for new passages without having to gun down enemies one by one, over and over again. It's perhaps the most subtle example of Metroid's unique approach to facilitating both combat and traversal at all once... which perhaps explains why the Screw Attack symbol has gone on to become an icon of the series.

Metroid looks and plays like an action game, a superficial child of the arcades. But its core challenge rests not in sheer combat difficulty, as it provides players with a huge arsenal, a considerable amount of life energy, and no (overt) timer to force you not to farm respawning foes for health. Once you have a few health expansions, there's really no reason for you to ever see the "game over" screen short of a few tough combat sequences, a deliberate suicide to access the password screen and record progress, or a time-saving shortcut to shave minutes off your clock after reaching the depths of Ridley's lair and wanting to jump back to the beginning of the game.

(In short: Suicide once and you'll be returned to the entrance of Ridley's hideout; go up the elevator and die and you'll be at the start of Norfair; go up that elevator and die and you'll return to your Brinstar spawn point at the beginning of the game. This is a handy technique for making the best time possible for the best ending and is a unique property of Metroid's unusual continue system.)



No, the hard part of Metroid is simply getting to where you need to go. Or rather, figuring out where you need to go and most of all how to get there. If you simply play the game by its obvious rules, you'll be able to see all of Brinstar, the span of Kraid's lair, and a moderate portion of Norfair. Again, Kraid may be the more difficult miniboss to fight, but until you sort out the hidden secret

of navigating Zebes, he's the only one you can find.

Even without reading the manual, a lost player knows they're missing something at this point in the game. You've found every power-up in Brinstar, cleared out Kraid's lair (even getting that trollish Energy Tank across the invisible gap in the floor, which might be the game's single biggest dick move), beaten the first miniboss, and found an obscene number of Missiles. And yet... there's still that one room at the top left of Brinstar's super-shaft where a door appears across a pit of acid. You want to reach it, but you can't. You shot the shimmering statue of Kraid and it rose slightly on some sort of piston, but there's a second statue of some lizard-looking thing that remains inert. Clearly, you need to fight another boss, somewhere. But where?



Norfair seems the most likely candidate, because its available space for Samus to explore appears to be so much smaller than that of the other zones in the planet. Why should this one region be so much smaller than the rest? Yet everywhere you turn, it's nothing but dead ends and weird environments that look to be made of melting fish eggs.

This is where Metroid stumbles a bit, and it's a critical stumble. The key to advancing beyond this point — essentially, to unlocking an entire half of the game! — lies in an oddly counterintuitive action. You need to bomb your way forward, just as you did to unlock Kraid's hideout. But where the game until now has telegraphed which blocks can be destroyed by making those blocks appear cracked and broken (with a very few exceptions, like the bridge over the first Ice Beam's location, which still offers a cue to drop a bomb), Norfair offers no such niceties. You need to intuit the fact that forward progress beyond here depends on finding bricks that can be destroyed

even though they appear no different from the surrounding environment.

This is the old-school game design mentality at work: Hiding things while offering no clues whatsoever and leaving the player to tediously test every single possibility. You saw it in adventure games of this era (and beyond, really), in those isometric action-exploration games for Spectrum, in arcade games, and even in Metroid's Famicom Disk System cousin *The Legend of Zelda*. But whereas *Zelda*'s most obscure secrets were almost entirely inessential (at least in the First Quest), here the need to bomb unremarkable walls gates the second half of the entire adventure.

In fairness, the game does offer a few small hints to the fact that most of Norfair is divided by unintuitive wall barriers that can be blasted through. The bomb-block passages can be either vertical or horizontal, and the horizontal ones tend to be right at Samus' level. An errant shot just might reveal a surprising secret by blasting away one of the blocks a few spaces inside an otherwise unremarkable wall. If you're lucky. And if you're curious, you might explore what's beyond. And you might string two and two together to come up with five and launch a bombing dragnet across the whole of Norfair.

Then again, you might have to rely on pure dumb luck to cause you to blow a hole in the floor elsewhere, like I did. After a month or two of being stymied by the game, I started goofing around and playing the game as much as possible in Maru-Mari form. (It was the only game I had for my new NES console besides *Super Mario Bros.*, so I had to take my jollies where I could find them.) When I blasted an opening in a nondescript floor in Norfair, I was fairly stunned — but once I did so, it was just a matter of days before I finished the game.

But I know not everyone was so lucky when they played *Metroid* cold, and for them the latter portions of *Metroid* remained forever hidden away. Besides sheer blind luck and a lot of free time to smash your head against seemingly impermeable walls, the only way to deduce the path forward is through word of mouth or the help of a strategy guide, which stands as decidedly unfriendly game design.

Still, once you do figure out the shenanigans of Norfair's hidden passages, the game opens wide.

The bombable blocks appear in fairly specific configurations, too, so once you sort out the three or four likely patterns you don't need to wander over every space dropping bombs. Even if you do, it's a lot less painful than bomb exploration in *Zelda* since Samus' bombs are limitless, can be dropped three at a time, and have a short explosion cycle. If you've been mapping the game, you can also make pretty good guesses about where to look based on what you have and haven't found already. Once you get the hang of finding Norfair's secrets, it becomes

an interesting metagame between the player and the designers: Which devious spot holds a fragile block in this room? (The part where they hid one beneath a pool of what turns out to be illusory magma is particularly nasty, in a clever sort of way.)

So the problem in *Metroid* isn't so much the methodology with which its secrets are hidden but the sheer obscurity of the design. The game doesn't offer any sort of substantial guidance at all to making this leap in deduction, and while there's something to be said for designers leaving players to their own devices, the bomb passages in Norfair prove that it's possible to be too hands-off.



Thankfully, future *Metroid* games would handle this technique far more gracefully; even *Fusion*, for all its hand-holding, never overtly says, "Hey, bomb here!" — yet when the time comes to use that technique to advance, it unfolds in a fairly obvious and intuitive fashion. Chalk this up to more game design growing pains circa 1986; R&D1's hearts were in the right place, but they didn't quite hit the mark.

Amusingly, once you pass beyond Norfair and into Ridley's lair, you won't need the bomb technique to advance any further. Ridley's lair consists of solid blocks all the way through, and it's remarkably straightforward in design. Almost an apology of sorts for the opaque hell of Norfair.

Most of *Metroid* centers on the process of exploration, eschewing the arcade-borne concept of difficulty (death and restarting as a penalty) in favor of something more esoteric. Samus certainly blasts her fair share of enemies en route to the end, but *Metroid* lacks bottomless pits or instant death traps, and the more gear you acquire the more difficult it is for Samus to die. By game's end,

you're an absolute juggernaut. The trick is in figuring out where to aim that firepower — and if those solutions can sometimes feel needlessly obscure, well, *Metroid* takes the same approach to secrets as contemporaries like *Ghosts 'N Goblins* did to enemy collisions: Hateful and mean. It's primitive, but at least it tried. And we've gotten better at this sort of thing thanks to games like this paving the way.

Once you do figure out the nature of *Metroid*'s secrets, however, don't go thinking it's smooth sailing all the way to the end. Nintendo R&D1 remembered to put a few road bumps in along the path, including the mini bosses.

I'd be interested to read a debate over which video game introduced the first boss. Was it the Galaxian flagship? Wizardry's Werdna? Donkey Kong? Sinistar? I don't know! But I do know that *Metroid* took a very unconventional approach to its bosses. Rather than treat them as obstacles to be overcome — impediments along the straight path to the end — *Metroid*'s mini bosses instead represent one of the game's main objectives in and of themselves.

The non-linear nature of the game meant that you didn't simply encounter these guys on the way to the flagpole at the end of the stage. Rather, they served as load-bearing supports (as it were) for the final boss, with their deaths opening the path to the end game. To complete the game, players need to seek them out, actively, to destroy them. All the tools and weapons and items you collect en route are merely means to an end. What you're really after is the bosses, whose deaths pave the road to the conclusion.

The first boss, according to placement relative to the game's beginning and every piece of literature I've ever read about *Metroid*, is Kraid. Like I've mentioned already, though, Kraid is by far the more difficult of the two mini bosses. Well, so it goes. In terms of backward difficulty curves, *Metroid* has nothing on its sibling *Kid Icarus*.

Each of the two bosses lives in a lair on a platform surrounded by toxic fluid. The recoil from their attacks can easily knock you into the liquid, and unless you have the High Jump boots you may not be able to get out again. But the greater danger is by far comes from their direct attacks. Kraid fires two different kinds of projectiles along two different paths: Large horns that fly overhead on an arc, and short spikes that fire straight ahead in a burst of three. The primary danger comes in the form of the smaller spikes, which don't simply fly toward Samus — they also deflect incoming fire, leaving only a small window of opportunity to pump Kraid full of missiles before the spikes regenerate and fly again.

The overhead horns serve to complicate matters. It's easy enough to jump over the spikes as they fly forward, but in doing so you're very likely to leap into the path of the horns.



The smartest solution is to freeze the spikes with the Ice Beam, taking them out of play for a few seconds and leaving Kraid vulnerable (since his spikes won't re-grow while other spikes remain on screen). However, even this requires caution, as frozen spikes block missile fire just as effectively as "live" ones. If you make the mistake of freezing the spikes while they're still lodged in Kraid's abdomen, you effectively make him invulnerable to attack. So, you need to wait until the spikes are flying — and you need to freeze them precisely, as the three spikes function independently and a sloppy shot can leave some in play. Out-of-sync spikes are the worst, since they fly at staggered intervals and make your attack even more difficult to time (and make you even more likely to take a few hits, too).

It's a complex battle, and a good one, forcing the player to make use of several different abilities at once. An excellent test of skill.

Ridley, on the other hand, is a joke. He stands in place and hops up and down, belching a trio of fireballs that bounce up and down along a sine pattern. Like Kraid's spikes, Ridley's fireballs deflect missile fire yet can be frozen in place. Unlike Kraid's spikes, though, the fireballs follow one of two set patterns, and the nature of that path is fixed when you enter his chamber.

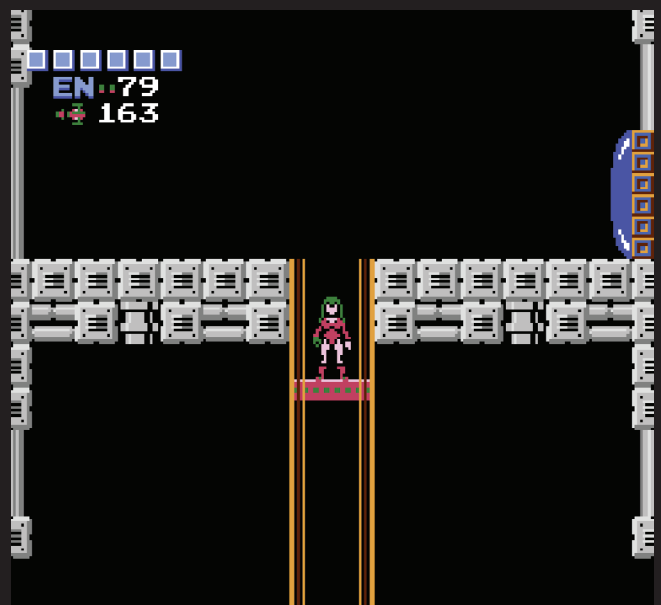
One fireball pattern is very tricky to deal with — the flames describe a very dense waveform and stay close to Ridley's body. The other, however, arcs far away from Ridley himself and leaves a convenient safe spot for Samus to stand at right at Ridley's feet. If you can get the game to use this pattern (and it resets every time you exit and reenter the room), you can stand directly in front of Ridley and pump him with missiles without taking a scratch or moving a pixel to avoid his attacks.

In any case, your reward for beating each boss

is a 75-missile expansion. Theoretically, you can complete the game just by collecting these two expansions along with the mandatory first one, especially since Ridley is quite easy to beat with the Screw Attack. Each boss' chamber also contains a hidden Energy Tank as a bonus; Samus can only carry a maximum of six expansions, but with these two accounted for there are actually eight in the game.



With these two guys dead, that strange statue room in the northwest corner of Brinstar — you know, up at the top of that long, long shaft — becomes relevant. The statues flicker with energy and, when you shoot them, they rise up to create a passage for Samus to roll through as destructible blocks appear below.



On the other side is a final elevator room — this one far cleaner and more sterile than the others in the game — that leads to the end.

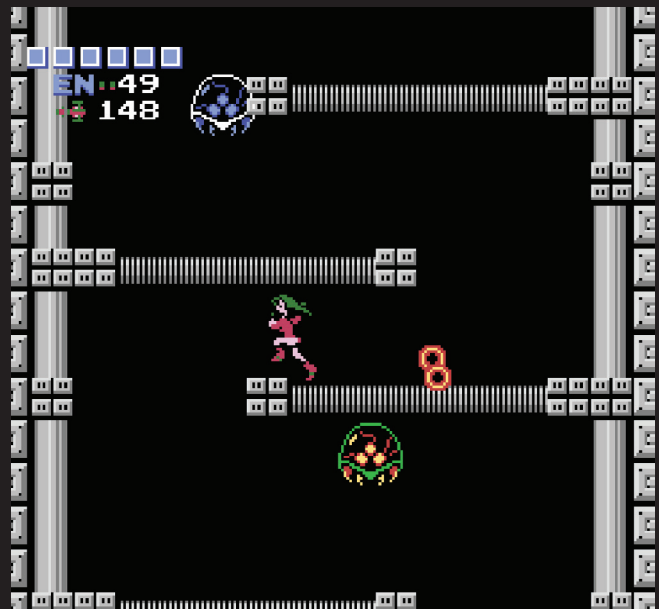
The player's arrival in Tourian (the final zone where the Mother Brain awaits) is accompanied by a shift in tone. The visuals are stark and mechanical, a contrast to the natural formations and ancient constructs of the rest of Zebes' underground. Even more strikingly, the background music ceases to be musical and instead adopts the dissonant sound of random computer noise. Clearly, this space represents the enemy's true lair, a futuristic expansion on the existing natural labyrinths designed for the cybernetic enemy leader. The message should be clear: "This is it."

Once you step off the elevator into Tourian, another difference makes itself apparent. This zone contains neither minor enemies nor any need to explore. It's a totally linear path to the end, and only two kinds of foes appear: The small energy toruses called Rinkas, and the creature from which the entire franchise derives its name, the metroid. Metroids represent a different kind of enemy than has appeared to this point — not just for this adventure, but for games as a whole. The closest contemporary analogue I can think of is Ghosts 'N Goblins' Red Arimer: Smart, aggressive, fast, and utterly deadly.



Unlike the other creatures that populate the corridors of Zebes, metroids don't waffle around with fixed paths or aimless meandering that makes a minimal sort of effort to drift in the direction of Samus. They lurk in wait at fixed points, and the instant Samus comes into their range (coincidentally, this range is marked exactly by the edge of the screen) they dart forward quickly to attack.

As for their attack, they don't settle for simply bumping into Samus and knocking x number of points off her health total. Instead, they latch on like parasites and begin draining her energy. A metroid is never sated, so it will cling to Samus until she's dead. Up to three metroids can appear on-screen at once, some more aggressive than others, but all intensely dangerous. The one upside to metroids is that the the health and Missile refills they drop are worth several times as much as normal refills... though even with the Varia, enemies here hit for 15 points of health, so it can be tough to keep ahead of the power drain once Rinkas appear. Heck, the first one to materialize actually spawns as Samus is passing through a door and hits her while she's locked in a screen transition — an unavoidable hit just to say "screw you, welcome to Tourian."



Once you descend a few rooms into Tourian, the Rinkas start to appear alongside the metroids. They spawn infinitely from various points around the room, and the screen always has three at a time. Like Kraid's spikes, you can freeze them to take them briefly out of play; if you destroy them, another will immediately respawn to take its place... and there's always a chance it'll respawn directly under Samus' feet, meaning it's much less dangerous to simply freeze them than destroy them. That's more easily said than done when metroids are closing in on you, though.

What makes metroids particularly dangerous is that they only have a single weakness: Ice. (Later games explicitly call out their vulnerability to cold, meaning any possibility of hand-waving the improbable physics of the Ice Beam's freeze effect as zero-point gravity or stasis

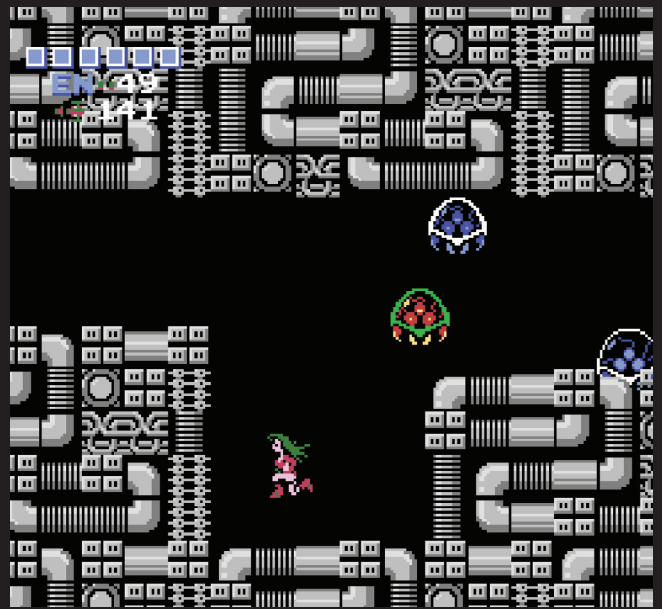
or something is right out... not that it matters in any way, shape, or form.) You can push a metroid away with Missiles or the Wave Beam or the Screw Attack, but these weapons don't actually harm the creature. Only by freezing it does it become vulnerable, and only then to five Missiles.

So, the strategy for this area becomes fairly straightforward in concept: Inch forward to lure a metroid from hiding, freeze it, pump it full of explosives until it dies. Dodge or freeze Rinkas when necessary. Repeat. This is more easily said than done, however, given the high speed and unconstrained motion of the metroids. They can attack from any angle, swooping in from above or below in a split second to latch onto a tasty Samus-snack. And you're often descending vertical shafts into Tourian, meaning they're coming up from beneath you and hovering hungrily beneath your feet, a tiny platform the only thing separating Samus from safety and a brief future of shriveling into a dusty husk of former humanity.

Metroids "pace" beneath you, drifting slightly back and forth until they get a clear shot, a behavior you can exploit to lead them up as you back away and line up a clean shot. Thankfully, when a metroid latches onto Samus, it briefly moves down to her level to line up its mandibles or whatever, so you have a brief instant of contact in which you can freeze it before it surrounds you. If you're too slow, however, the Ice Beam becomes useless.

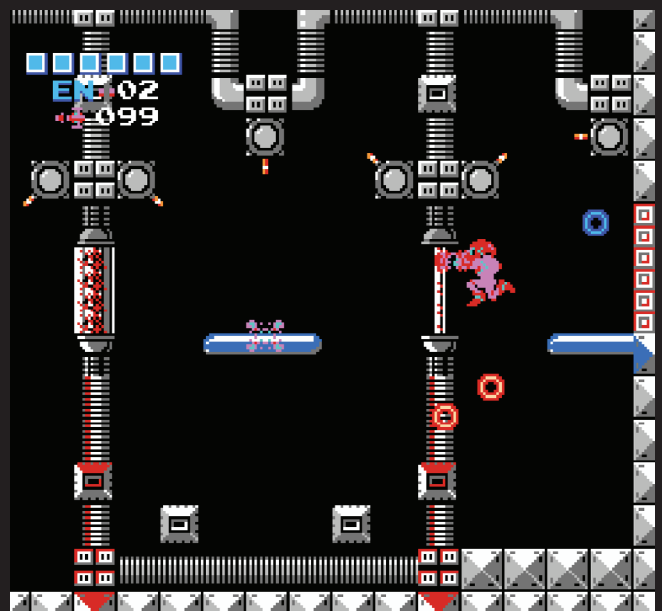
When a metroid begins draining Samus' health, she can only run back and forth while waiting for the inevitable; her guns become disabled. The only way to dislodge a metroid is to duck into a ball and lay down some bombs, then roll over them and hope the angle of the blast knocks the creature free. This gives you only a sliver of a reprieve, however, as the metroid will be stunned for a fraction of a second before shaking off the blast and moving back in for another nibble. This gives you just enough time to stand and freeze it.

Metroids create a harrowing sensation like nothing else in the game, especially once they start to appear several at a time. Until you know the trick of defeating them, they're utterly baffling in their sheer deadliness and persistence. Their intensely aggressive nature combines with their life-sapping properties to create a wholly unique kind of foe. According to designer Yoshio Sakamoto, the name "Metroid" comes from "metro" (as in subway) and "android" — that is, the robotic-looking Samus is exploring underground tunnels like a subway. But it's wholly fitting that the game's creators gave these distinctive foes the name, because they're far and away the most frightening and dangerous aspect of the adventure.



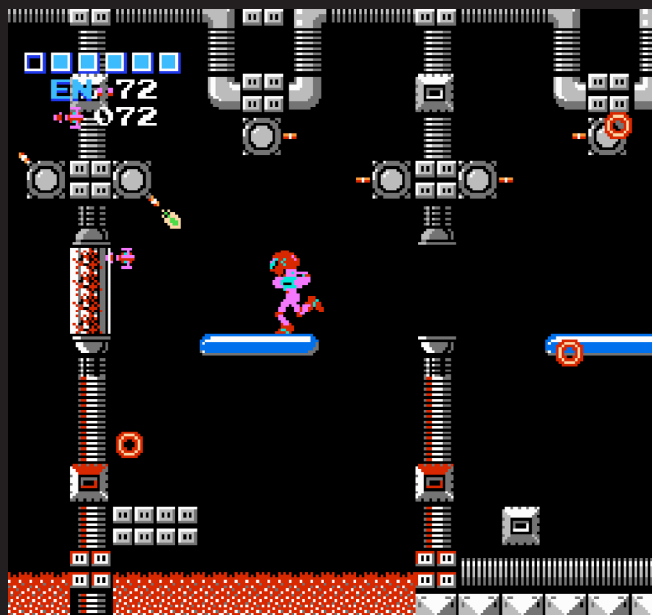
It can be a shock of cold water to go from aimless exploration in low-threat environments to a final run-up through Tourian's brutal metroid gauntlet, but this area forces players to use both their wits and all the combat skills they've picked up along the way to survive.

Tourian is as close as Metroid comes to having "levels" in the traditional video game sense. You make it through the gauntlet of Rinkas and metroids a screen at a time and arrive at last at the boss. Even the doors in Tourian say "serious business" — they're orange instead of red, soaking up ten missiles instead of five. The only other door in the game like that was the one behind Ridley. The message is clear: Every time you reach a door in this area, you should experience the same sense of elation you feel when you've just beaten a boss.



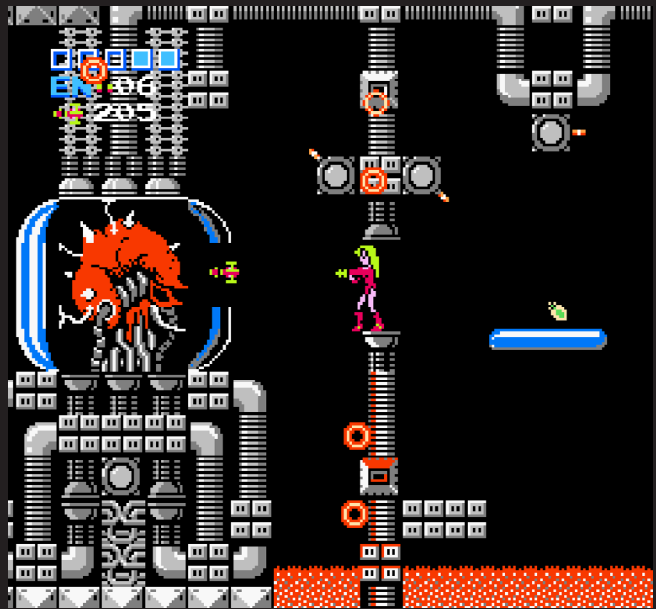
Behind the final door, the boss room awaits. And, you know, the idea of a “boss room” has become a real cliché in games. Even here in *Metroid* in 1986 we saw both Kraid and Ridley situated in strange, stark chambers where they did nothing but sit in wait for the hero to come blow them up. It’s kind a goofy concept if you stop to think about it; how miserable must that existence be, lurking in the dark with nothing to do until some do-gooder comes along to blow you up? You never see proactive villains in action games like this — though this very franchise made a brilliant and terrifying exception to that rule in its fourth installment — just slobs who sit and wait until the good guy finally gets through the deadly-but-not-too-deadly gauntlet leading up to them.

In *Mother Brain’s* case, however, this actually makes perfect sense. She’s a biological computer, and as such this is basically her server room. She’s totally immobile, powering Zebes’ systems or whatever from the safety of Tourian’s deepest sanctum, just like you’d expect a computer to do. And what she lacks in direct firepower — the *Mother Brain* is completely harmless unless you bump into her — she makes up for with supporting defenses.



Mother Brain’s lair is a single lengthy room divided internally into six different chambers by five Zebetites, which appear to be conduits or defensive barriers or something. Like *Mother Brain*, they’re biomechanical, meaning they possess regenerative capabilities. Each one takes several missile blasts to destroy, but if you don’t pour on steady fire they quickly grow back — you can gauge your progress, not to mention the ground you’ve lost, by the condition of a Zebetite. They start thick and slowly dwindle in diameter to vanishing as they take damage, growing back to full width if you don’t destroy them quickly.

Like *Mother Brain*, a Zebetite also can’t attack you directly. However, taking them out is anything but a cakewalk, because each one is elevated high off the ground with only a narrow platform adjacent to give Samus a clear shot. The problem is that while you’re doing this a trio of guns is rotating and firing energy beams at you in a not-quite-random fashion. And, on top of that, Rinkas are spawning rapidly from every direction.

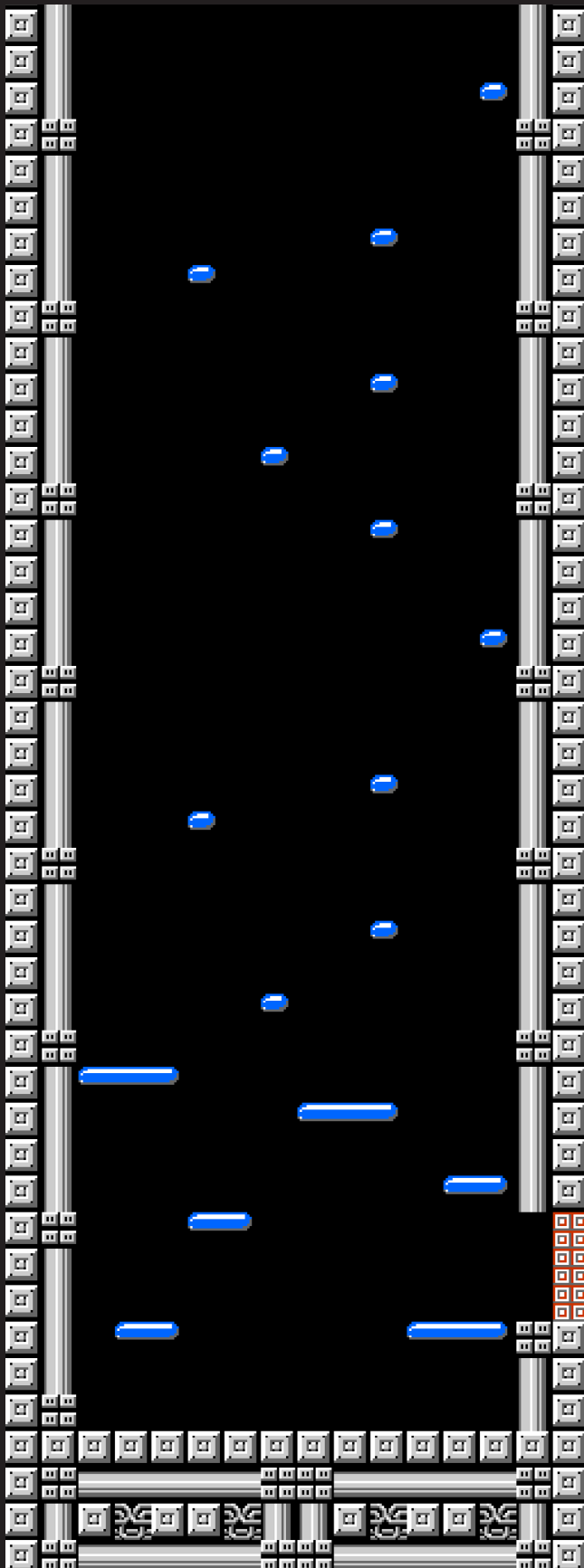


Despite the final boss’ lack of a direct threat, this is an extremely challenging sequence. Taking down the Zebetites burns through your stock of missiles quickly, and because Rinkas don’t drop energy pickups, so you have to go back and deal with a hungry army of metroids if you need to restock your resources. It’s a battle of attrition, a test of how effectively you can dodge the threats surrounding you and pour missile fire into your targets.

The developers do demonstrate a surprising touch of mercy here, though: Once you destroy a Zebetite, it’s gone forever. Like the minibosses, *Mother Brain’s* energy conduits don’t regenerate if you see a game over. In a worst-case scenario, you can fight your way through this chamber one Zebetite at a time, constantly restarting and fighting your way back, delving a little further into the room each time.

The further you get into the room, the more difficult it becomes. Around the time you hit the lava, it just gets ridiculous. Don’t computers need cold to work more efficiently? Shouldn’t *Mother Brain’s* server room be, like, super refrigerated? Pfft.

Really, this room can be as difficult or as easy as you like. The gun turrets follow fairly predictable patterns — some shoot at 90-degree angles, while others fire 45-degree-angle shots — and while the Rinkas materialize from all over the place and home in on Samus’



location as of the second they spawn, they obey the same strictures as they did during the metroid gauntlet. Specifically, there will always be a fixed number of them on-screen at any given moment, so if you freeze one it'll take that particular spawn out of play.

It's actually not too difficult to deal with the Rinkas while destroying the Zebetites, because each column has solid footing directly below it that allows you to skip the blue footings and jump up and down right in front of the Zebetite, firing several point-blank missiles per leap and wearing down the Zebetite in short order.

Mother Brain herself, however, is considerably more difficult. Once you shoot out the glass case surrounding the computer, you need to pump more than 30 missiles right into her face (and they have to hit dead-on or they won't cause any damage). Unlike the Zebetites, her health doesn't regenerate if you lay off your assault for a moment. That's about the only saving grace, however.

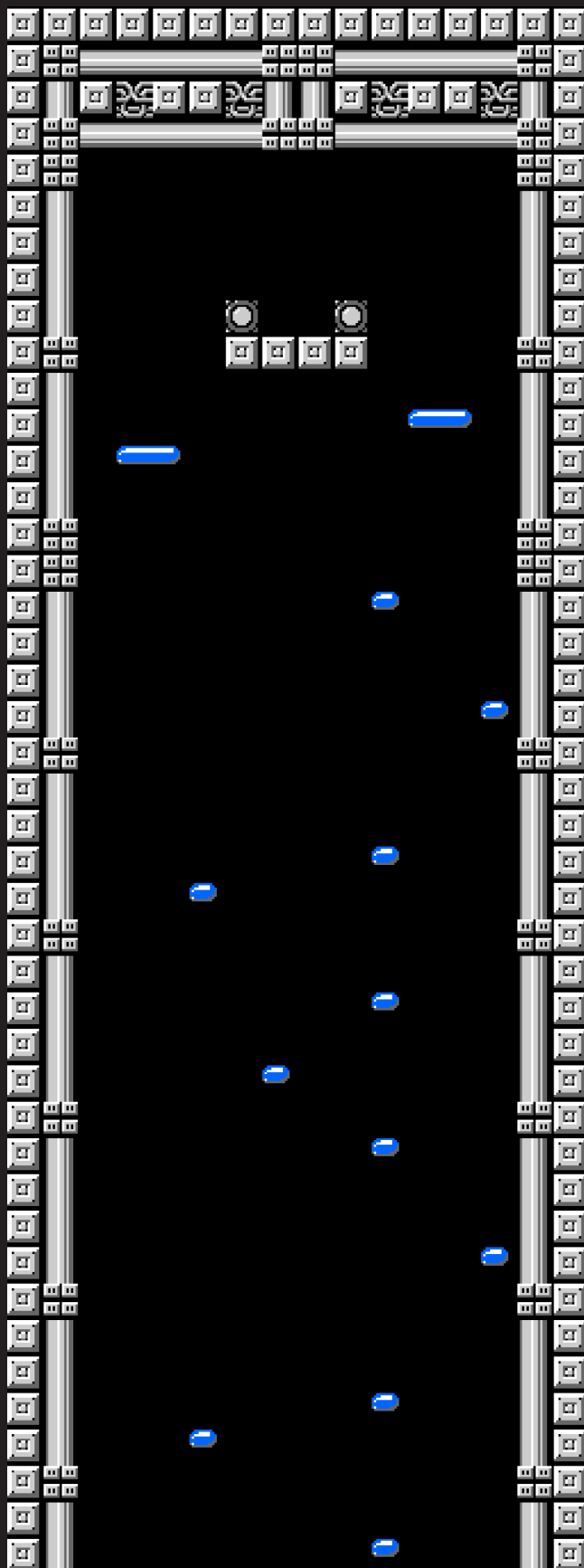
The most sensible place to attack Mother Brain from is the Zebetite junction directly in front of her — the blue platform further away works as well, but it's constantly targeted by both Rinkas and gun emplacements — yet this leaves you incredibly vulnerable.

Rinkas spawn constantly above and below you, and if you're hit there's an awfully good chance the recoil will send you flying into the lava directly in front of the glass chamber. The wall to the right is slightly too high to reach while jumping out of liquid, and if you try to use Mother Brain's platform as a foothold you'll take damage from proximity to the boss and be sent flying right back into the lava. The only reliable way out is to freeze a Rinka and use it as a foothold, but that's pretty difficult while you're being harassed by several others at the same time. The moral of the story: Don't let yourself be knocked into the lava.

Because there's no time crunch here, the smartest thing to do is to take your time. Drop back and freeze the Rinkas, giving yourself a short window of breathing room. But this tactic is slightly counter-intuitive to the design of the entire room; because the five Zebetites leading to Mother Brain required a rapid volley of missiles, your brain is still in "frantic" mode when you finally reach the boss herself. You actually need to stop and recalibrate your approach here.

With smart play and the good sense not to fall in the lava, you can eventually best Mother Brain... even if you have to keep dying and retrying to do it. But once that happens, the absolute trickiest part of the game begins.

With the Mother Brain defeated, Metroid ends up back again where it began. The final sequence of the game doesn't involve combat or exploration but rather a tense escape sequence up a seemingly endless shaft — an echo of the game's first sprawling vertical area, the one that definitively set Metroid apart from a legion of left-to-



right side-scrollers.

This is no straightforward reprise, however. That early tunnel was a teaching experience, helping players come to grips with Metroid's unconventional design. A host of patrolling enemies imparted the value of caution, while the seemingly unending upward scroll instilled patience and persistence. The wide platforms didn't simply force players to navigate by zig-zagging horizontally within the ascent, they also provided a sort of safety net in the event of a slip-up. You might fall and lose some progress, but not much.

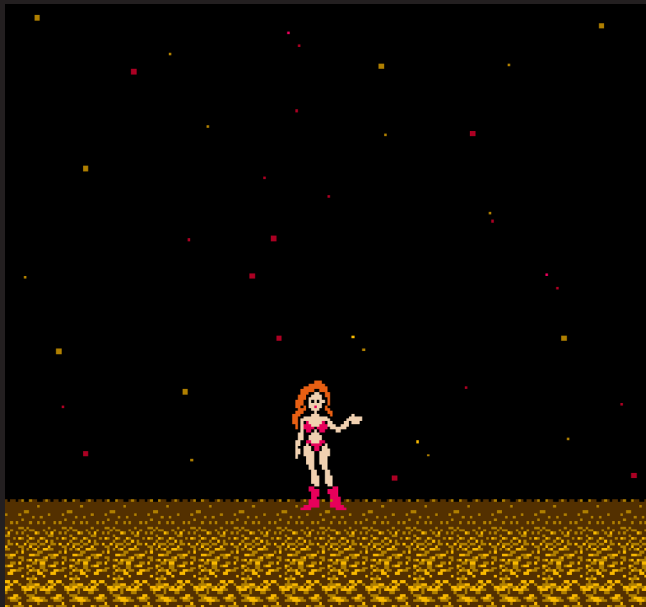
This shaft, on the other hand, affords no caution. It lacks enemies of any kind — after all, Mother Brain is dead, so what's the point? — but that doesn't make it easy. Samus is racing here to escape the Zebes underground before the space pirates' spiteful self-destruct countdown ends, giving you roughly 90 seconds to make the climb and escape.

This is much more easily said than done, however, because the shaft contains only itty-bitty platforms. The only surfaces in the game smaller and more precious than these tiny things are those three single bubbles floating in a line deep inside Norfair — and the worst thing that could happen if you missed one of those is that you'd fall into lava and lose a bit of health. A single slip here is likely to send you plummeting all the way back down to the start. You can only afford a couple of minor slips before you've wasted so much time there's no hope of reaching the end.

The escape sequences tests your understanding of Metroid's physics like nothing else in the game. For most of the adventure — especially since acquiring the Screw Attack — Samus' aerial summersault is one of the most important and powerful skills in the game. But here, it's absolutely deadly, because she's much harder to control once she starts spinning.

To survive here, you need to fight your programming and resist the urge to spin. By leaping straight into the air, Samus will remain upright and follow a much tighter arc with her jump. This means you have much less lateral range when you leap, but the platforms here are arranged in such a way that you don't need to move much to either side. After hours of wild, weaponized leaps, the secret to survival is to move cautiously and deliberately, employing the full range of Samus' skills.

Once you get the rhythm down, this sequence turns out to be remarkably easy. Keep your nerve and move with care and you'll reach the top of the shaft and escape to freedom, where you're visually graded on your efficiency. Take too long to beat the game and Samus turns her back to you in despair; play quickly enough, however, and she reveals her shocking (in 1986) secret: A feminine pronoun. Play even more effectively and you'll be able to control Samus in her unarmored female guise.



Play really well and she'll strip down to a tiny two-piece bikini for some 8-bit titillation. Nintendo was pretty progressive, making Metroid's protagonist a woman, but... well, baby steps.

So that's Metroid done the right way. Part of what makes Metroid so fun, though, is the way it lends itself to being played the wrong way. Like a lot of games at this sort of mid-grade 8-bit technology level, Metroid contains a fair few glitches and bugs that don't render the whole thing unplayable but rather make it more interesting. Metroid's underpinnings are complex enough that some things don't work quite the way they're supposed to, but simple enough that when the game goes looking for elements in the wrong part of memory or whatever it can still keep plugging away... albeit in a manner the developers never intended.



You see the same thing in Super Mario Bros. and Pokémon Red/Green/Blue as well. Unlike contemporary games, which are complex enough to contain advanced bug-checking filters or else simply fall apart when something goes wrong, Metroid bounces back when you hit it with unexpected data. It keeps on truckin'. As such, some of Metroid's glitches have become legitimate elements of many players' arsenal.

A lot of Metroid's instability comes from the developers' determination to push the NES hardware in never-before-seen directions. You can see the game struggling to keep up in the course of normal play; discolored scenery like that on the opposite page, for example, reportedly comes from the program code attempting to render scenery faster than it's properly able to keep up with, meaning that when you dash into a new area or plummet down a shaft at full speed, the game struggles to keep up and eventually just says, "Well, good enough."

Also unique to Metroid are a number of odd little game design oversights that the creators either didn't catch or didn't have time and resources to clean out before launching. For instance, one of the best-known quirks of the game is the way enemies, which normally are contained within the rooms in which they spawn, can be drawn into open doors at the same time as Samus' transition from one room to another. Normally, this is a nuisance, since she remains vulnerable despite the player being out of control of her actions — meaning she takes unavoidable damage during what should be "down time." But in some cases, you can do weird things.



For instance, you can lure standard enemies into boss battles. This doesn't have any real impact on the game, but there's a certain charming novelty in seeing a

Waver or Reo flutter around while you're blasting Ridley point-blank in the groin.

Of much greater value, however, is the ability to lure a Reo into the statue room immediately after acquiring some Missiles and the Bombs. Blast open the red door at the upper-left corner of Brinstar, pull a Reo into the room as you head left, and get it to fly down into the lower portion of the room and into the water/acid/whatever. Freeze it while it's at the water's surface, do a bomb jump off its back, and you can roll into Tourian long before you should be able to. This is a key tactic in a lot of speed runs of the game, although you'll probably get pasted by Tourian's hazards pretty quickly if you try doing this outside the confines of a tool-assisted playthrough. Still, it's there, and that's rad.

The bomb jump factor, of course, is another part of the game — an exploit that actually could be intentional. Because the explosion of a bomb propels Samus slightly upward and she can drop multiple bombs at any given time, you can harness this element of the game physics to allow Samus to "ride" the crest of sequential bomb explosions upward. With the proper timing, there's actually no limit to how high she can reach provided she doesn't hit an enemy... though it takes a steady hand to sustain a bomb jump for long.



Curiously, bomb jumps seem to be a specific feature of the NES version of the game; ports like the 3DS Virtual Console rendition of Metroid, despite being ostensibly accurate to the original game, make bomb jumps vastly harder to pull off. I don't think this is a deliberate action on Nintendo's part to quash the exploit, though. More likely it's simply a matter of different hardware timing.

As a corollary to the bomb jump, Samus can also use a related technique by exploiting the fact that bombs

propel Samus regardless of her pose at the time of the explosion and the fact that she can jump from her "neutral" animation frame. Drop a bomb and immediately stand up, and when the bomb explodes it will send Samus flying upward slightly without changing her pose. This means you can jump in midair and reach areas that might otherwise have been slightly out of reach.

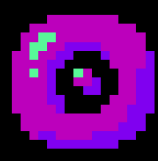
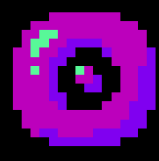
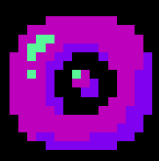
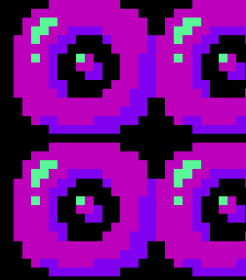
Of course, the greatest technique of all is the wall climb skill, made famous by the Nintendo Fun Club Newsletter. An arcane combination of the behavior of blue doors — they seal back up a few seconds after being opened — along with the way the screen centers on Samus' position and the physics of rolling into Maru-Mari form allows you to "climb" to new areas. When a door closes over Samus, she effectively becomes lodged in the scenery, though since she's rendered immobile the only thing you can really do when trapped in a door is shoot it open again... or roll into a ball.

If you simply roll into a ball, well, you're screwed. The bombs won't open a door, and you can't stand back up. But if you immediately stand after ducking, something about the animation makes it possible to rise again — and not only will Samus stand, she'll actually be situated one block of the wall higher than before ducking. Repeat this rapidly and Samus will slowly climb the inside of the wall and off the screen. However, if you tap jump rapidly, her attempts to leap will cause the screen to slowly readjust until she returns to the center. With an alternating combination of ducking/standing actions and rapid jumps, Samus can climb any vertical chamber.

This has incredible value in certain areas; I used it in my playthrough to reach the Varia long before I had the Ice Beam and High Jump. In others, it can be deadly. You need to reach another blue door in order to escape the wall, so if you climb a room with no door in the wall above your starting position, well... that's a shame.

But it's also possible to go into Metroid's equivalent of Super Mario Bros. "minus world" — areas above the actual boundaries of the current map. Here, you may be able to find shafts that shouldn't exist, rooms that beckon for exploration, strange mishmashes of graphics and color palettes, and more. Most of the time you'll simply reach a dead end and die, but until fans at sites like Metroid Database sorted out the particulars of Metroid's "secret worlds" and determined they were just buffer overflows and misplaced data pointers, many speculated that the creators had hidden away deliberate secrets — new areas to explore, additional goodies to acquire. But, no.

It doesn't matter, though. Metroid's oddities and errors have become an integral part of its legacy — unintended features embraced by fans. While sequels smoothed them out one by one, the series' stewards have paid tribute to this part of Metroid's heritage in various ways, e.g. Fusion's "shinespark" sequence break.



Before exploring Metroid's sequels, its "sibling" Kid Icarus requires a look as well. The two games shared a certain amount of overlap, as the Metroid staff helped put the wraps on Kid Icarus after shipping their own project.

Despite have been developed and released shortly after Metroid, Kid Icarus feels more like an earlier, transitional game that should have come, say, between Super Mario Bros. and Metroid. It's rougher around the edges; more linear; more limited. The control scheme is weird, the balance is wackily lopsided, and the systems are far simpler. Kid Icarus feels like a step backward for Nintendo R&D1.

And yet, there's this manic glimmer of genius in the game. Not only does it have a shop system, similar to Capcom arcade titles of the era, you can also potentially find a credit card with which to purchase goods that you can't currently afford (and which puts you in debt until you pay back the cash you borrowed). It features the rudiments of an experience system. It contains multiple endings. And it includes some coy references to Metroid, too.

Fundamentally, Kid Icarus' basic play resembles Metroid's quite a bit. Protagonist Pit begins the game using a weak weapon with pitiful range, which can be powered up considerably. He runs and jumps, traversing horizontal planes, vertical shafts, and complex labyrinths. He gains more health and has an "alternate fire" mode that helps supplement his strength during boss encounters. However, the two games differ considerably in the execution. Pit's power-ups are strictly progressive, and they don't unlock any aspects of the environment; they simply make him more powerful in combat. The different traits of the world design — horizontal, vertical, labyrinthine — are presented separately rather than in unison.

There's very little exploration to be done in Kid Icarus. Only three stages of the adventure (the palaces at the end of each world) break from the linear format, taking



on a form reminiscent of Zelda's dungeons: Single-screen mazes filled with monsters. But there are no puzzles to speak of, only enemies to fight and paths to determine. And in the end, it proves to be a fairly small adventure with a mere 13 levels to conquer. Once you're over the initial learning hump, the remainder of the quest unravels quickly.

To me, the real sign of Kid Icarus' intermediate game design nature is found in the presence of its score indicator. Pit earns points for his performance in a stage, with values (both positive and negative) assigned to every action you complete — much like arcade games of old. But your score doesn't appear during the action; it only tallies up at the end of a stage, and the points you earn are treated as experience. For every milestone you reach, Pit permanently gains extra maximum health. Furthermore, certain target scores cause a god to manifest in otherwise empty chambers to grant Pit a stronger weapon. It was one of the first video games to treat high scores as something besides an opportunity for bragging rights — though originally they served that purpose as well, since the Japanese edition of the game kept a record of the scores associated with different players' completed adventures.

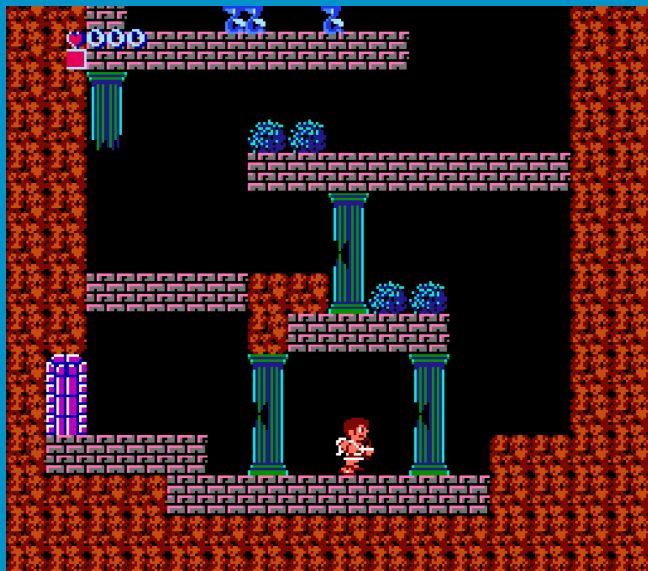


Much about Kid Icarus seems either strange or simply under-designed. Certainly it didn't offer nearly as much innovation and cleverness as contemporaries like Metroid, Zelda, and Super Mario Bros., which is why those franchises have endured through the years with numerous sequels while Kid Icarus has seen all of two follow-ups; Pit is usually seen more as a Smash Bros. character now than as the star of his own adventures. Even so, this rough-cut gem offers a few facets worthy of discussion.

Like Castlevania, Kid Icarus tells a story through its environmental design. Castlevania's story, I think, is relayed more effectively via its visuals, but Kid Icarus' nar-

rative actually fits better with the progression of its play mechanics.

In brief, the gorgon Medusa has deposed the goddess of light, Palutena, imprisoning both the goddess and her subjects while taking possession of the Sky Palace. The game begins with the youngest and humblest of Palutena's warriors, Pit, escaping from a prison deep underground and fighting his way to the surface.



Fittingly, the early stages of the game are far and away the most difficult. World 1-1 introduces most of the tricks and traits of Kid Icarus straight away, yet the player is armed with only a miserable short-range bow and pitiful little arrows. My suspicion is that the vast majority of people who play Kid Icarus never even make it to World 2-1, which is a shame because the game becomes hilariously easy once you emerge from the underworld and reach the surface. But here, in the stygian depths, it's a tough fight from the word go. Pit begins with a mere seven points of health, and shops and bonuses prove few and far between.

Not unlike Mario in Donkey Kong, Pit starts the adventure at the lower left of the screen with platforms and hazards above. You can move only right, and after that only right and up. To drive the point home that your goal lies upward, a formation of serpents called Shemun drops down from above as you advance. They shuffle their way toward Pit and plunge from any edge they encounter.

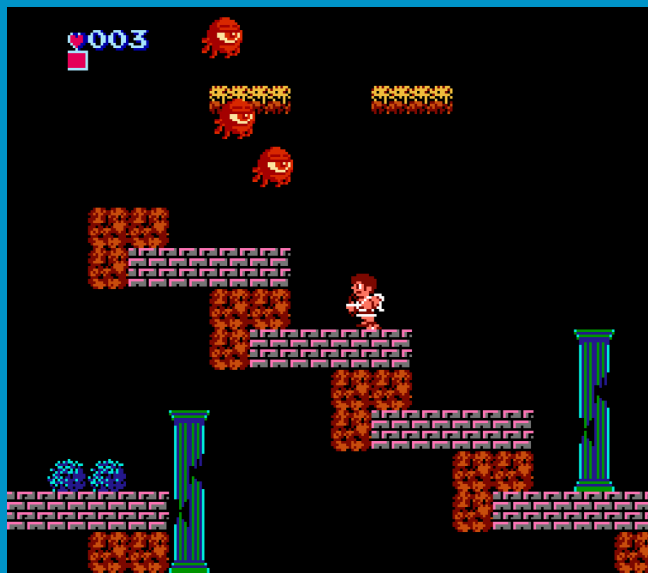
Right away the game presents you with essential information: Pit can leap three blocks high, fire on foes at short range, and shoot in three directions (left, right, up) much like Samus Aran. Since the Shemun drop in on you as they march down on you, Pit has the opportunity to make use of his full array of his initial skills (which admittedly aren't many). You can begin to advance forward between waves of Shemun — only four appear on screen at

a time — and pop them one at a time as you jog forward and upward.

After you scroll up a screen or so, the path twists to the right, forcing you off the side of the screen. This introduces one of the more unusual design mechanics of Kid Icarus: The vertical stages work a bit like Pac-Man, with wraparound tunneling on the sides of the screen. Rather than existing as finite boundaries, the edges of the screen simply send you to the opposite side of the screen. Both Pit and his enemies can pass back and forth in this manner (though only ground-based enemies do; flying monsters never stray past the edge of the screen). Projectiles, however, cannot.

This means you can't stand safely on one side of the screen and plink away at enemies on the other edge, but it also means enemy projectiles can't follow you around the wrap, so it works out greatly in your favor overall.

Before you come across the first screen warp, though, Pit encounters a small curiosity: A door built into the ledge beneath the platform warping over to the left of the screen. And inside the door is... nothing whatsoever. It's an empty room. Weird, right? This room can potentially be of benefit to you once you've completed a playthrough of the game, but your first time through it's completely empty and pointless. It's a strange design choice, and not a smart one. Rather than rewarding the player for indulging in the small amount of exploration Kid Icarus allows, the game leaves you wondering, what's the point?



Shooting enemies causes hearts to appear. Weak enemies like Shemun leave small hearts, but in time you'll find large full- and half-hearts as well.

Their use isn't immediately apparent (unlike in Zelda, they don't refill your health), but they're clearly important as they add to a running point tally at the top

of the screen: One for small, five for half-sized large, 10 for full large. Interestingly, respawning enemies (again, like Shemum) won't regenerate until you've collected all the hearts dropped by the previous group of that foe — presumably this has to do with technical limitations of the NES, but it adds a touch of strategy to the action as you can affect the timing of enemies to a certain degree based on how you collect hearts.

Once you wrap around from right to left and continue your ascent, a new form of enemy appears: Monoeyes, which fly in formations of four. Their flight path tends to describe something like a sideways figure 8, and they rarely pose any direct threat to Pit in this initial stage, preferring instead to lurk above and at the edge of Pit's bow range. Occasionally, a Monoeye will split off from the pack (generally as a result of the player scrolling the screen) to harass Pit, but on the whole these guys mostly serve as a distraction from more immediate threats.

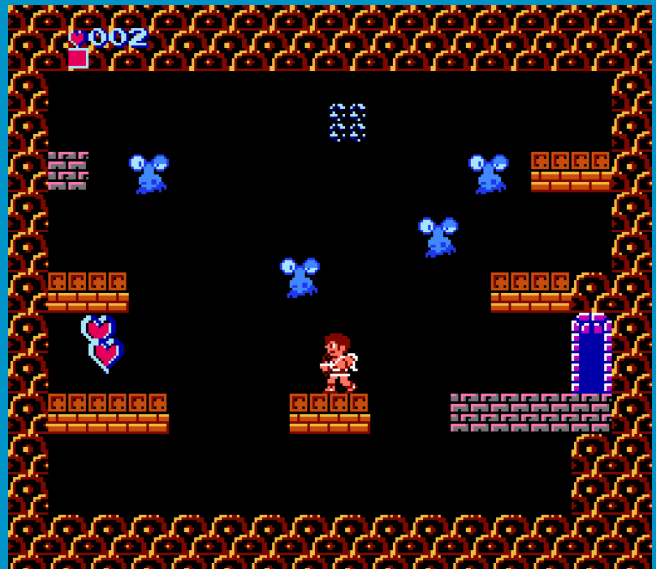
However, they do drop half-sized large hearts, so there's definitely value in shooting them (even if you won't learn that value until later in the game). Shortly after the Monoeyes debut, Pit encounters his first thin platforms. Thin platforms will almost certainly cause you no end of deaths, especially if you're accustomed to contemporary game design conventions. Like platforms in many action games, Pit can drop through thin platforms by ducking... but the difference is that Pit need only duck, rather than ducking and jumping as in most games. At some point (probably many points, honestly), you will duck to avoid an enemy or projectile and drop through one of these platforms to your death.

Oh, right, that's the other strange element of Kid Icarus' design: The screen scrolls only in one direction. If you fall off the bottom edge of the screen, you die instantly... even if there was a platform a couple of pixels off the screen a moment ago. The one-way scrolling is reminiscent of Super Mario Bros., Adventure Island, and other early side-scrollers, but the addition of vertical movement in Kid Icarus makes for a weird and often illogical mechanical limitation.

I suppose it's meant to hearken back to the olden days, when falling from too high would kill a guy like Mario (née Jumpman) or the Spelunker, but it creates some grating logical inconsistencies. And when these flimsy, drop-through platforms appear, it can be downright infuriating. Another new element appears here as well: A harp. Collecting the harp causes all enemy spawns to transform into mallets and slowly descend from the sky. You can gather up the mallets, though — like the hearts — their specific purpose won't be immediately apparent. But even if you don't know the purpose of the mallets (or choose not to use them when the time comes), snagging the harp at least gives you a brief breather in which you're safe from enemies.

Further up, the path splits. Since you can't scroll back down, you have to commit to one path or the other blindly and hope for the best. The more obvious path, in the center of the screen, doesn't offer any special perks, but it does pit Pit against one of the toughest foes in the early portions of the game.

The path to the right, on the other hand, loops off-screen and around to the left, leading up a narrow shaft largely safe from enemies (barring the odd drifting Monoeye) and leading to a doorway.



Unlike the last door, this one leads somewhere: Specifically, to a Specknose nest. These special rooms are totally optional, but they can be extremely beneficial. Specknoses are weak enemies that spawn in large numbers, each one sticking to its own set path. Individually, they're no trouble at all, but when you're in a room in which eight of them are zipping around in different orbits, they can be quite dangerous. But it's worth taking them out, because each one is worth 10 hearts and a ton of experience. On the other hand, four hits and Pit is out of action.

On the plus side, shortly after the Specknose nest, you can snag a goblet, which restores a block of Pit's health — at this point in the game, that's all of it.

Regardless of which path you select, Pit will eventually have to contend with this stage's most irritating foe, the Reaper. Though he doesn't seem too threatening as he patrols slowly back and forth along a patch of ground, the Reaper freaks out if Pit crosses his line of sight, making a mad dash for the protagonist while screaming, his eyes bugging out. His shouts summon a formation of "Reapettes," tiny flying Reapers that home in on Pit. They're easy enough to take out, but they'll keep spawning as long as the Reaper is alive... and since the Reaper takes 10 hits to fell at the beginning of the game,



taking him out can be time-consuming and dangerous.

The second Reaper patrols outside another door, this one leading to a treasure room. Treasure rooms are welcome opportunities to grab some cash by shooting urns to reveal the prize inside, but they're also a gamble — if you collect any treasures you've reveal, all unopened treasure pots vanish. One pot has the God of Poverty inside, and if you shoot that pot before revealing all the other treasures, you'll lose everything. On the other hand, if you manage to save that one for last, you'll get a rare or expensive treasure on top of everything else (including the credit card, which can't be acquired any other way).

It takes a few attempts to get the hang of it, but as it turns out the treasure rooms have a few reliable patterns that can be learned (or looked up online, or in the Nintendo Fun Club News) to give yourself a leg up.

Beyond here, two more Reapers await on patrol. They can be leapt over (carefully) if you don't feel up to dealing with their shenanigans. On the other hand, the first one can be dealt with by jumping up and shooting it, then ducking across the screen-edge warp to avoid the Reapettes. The second one doesn't allow for such easy flimflammy, as you have to scroll the platform that wraps across the edges in order to enter its line of sight. And as you're dealing with it, a new enemy appears from above, Nettler.

Like a lot of enemies in this game, Nettler is no big deal on its own, but it can be irritating in combination with other foes. It shuffles forward awkwardly, but it kind of does the "drunken master" thing as its erratic lurching masks a canny ability to duck beneath Pit's arrows. Two hits will take it out, but trying to hit it as it wobbles around, dropping from above into a fracas of Reaper and Reapettes, can be your undoing.

If you somehow manage to negotiate your way through this particular monster jam, World 1-1 has just



one last nasty trick for you. A couple of McGoos will pop out of the ground as you scurry toward the exit, potentially bringing your quest to a short and sudden end. McGoos, by far, are the most infuriating enemies in the entire game. They rise out of the ground, giving a roughly one-second warning before popping up and firing a projectile at Pit. You can duck the bullet, but by the time it's passed overhead, the McGoo will already have seeped back into the ground so it can pop up elsewhere for a second go-round. McGoos have the ability to appear on any kind of ground, often spawning directly under Pit's feet, and later stages use McGoos to maddening effect.

Once you dodge this last cruelty, Pit clears the stage, tallies his points, and marches to the next level. Whenever you die in Kid Icarus, you're send back to the beginning of the current stage (even if you're within sight of the exit), so reaching the second stage serves essentially as a checkpoint. If you can make it this far, the game ceases to be quite so insurmountable a challenge. The hardest part is over. (This is not how action games are meant to work.)

Depending on which version of Kid Icarus you play, the game's difficulty level will either climb or drop here in the second stage. In the 3D Classics remake, World 1-2 isn't as difficult as World 1-1; in the original NES/Famicom game, however, it's moderately more difficult. So if you go old-school, you have to struggle through a little more hardship before things start to taper off. In 3D Classics, World 1-2 is the beginning of the descent from World 1-1's punishing difficulty spike. The difference is in the way Pit handles. The 3D Classics version refines his jump so that holding the button causes him to glide.

This adds half a second of air time to a jump, but that half-second makes a huge difference when it comes to landing on tiny platforms. And there's a sequence that appears exactly midway through World 1-2



in which Pit has to navigate across the screen by leaping from one single-block platform to another several times in a row. It's a tricky situation when the game is so unforgiving about missing a jump; one slip-up and Pit will plummet to his death, unavoidably (unless you lucked into a Feather in the World 1-1 Treasure Room or bought one in the shop shortly before the jump sequence).

And the operative term here is "slip-up," as the thin platforms in World 1-2 insanely decide to ramp up the difficulty level early by acquiring an ice coating. So not only can Pit not duck on these platforms (lest he plunge to his death), he also can't stand still on them (because he slides quite a ways on their frictionless surface). The programming on the icy surfaces seems somewhat lacking, as you can halt Pit's slide by pressing up, or jumping... but as soon as he stops aiming up, or lands, he keeps sliding with no loss of momentum. Early NES games, folks. What can you do?



Two rather more beneficial features debut in this stage, however. The first is the shop, wherein a merchant sells wares. This turns out to be the function of the hearts Pit has been collecting: They serve as currency. As you'll find in this stage's shop, however, the prices tend to be quite expensive; the chances that you'll have gathered enough cash to buy the items on offer here by the time you reach the shop are pretty slim. You can potentially lower the price of merchandise by "intimidating" the vendor, but there's a chance that you'll annoy him and cause him to increase his prices.

You'll probably have better luck with the final room of the stage. While you could potentially uncover an empty chamber, you're almost guaranteed through normal play to unlock the secret of the room. If you perform well enough through the course of World 1-2, this last room will contain a man (god?) who materializes to grant Pit a strength upgrade. This chamber is actually identical to the



first one in the game, but because of the placement of the rooms—located at the end of the stage here versus at the beginning in 1-1—this is the first one in which you’ll actually see the room’s proper purpose.

Strength upgrades are dished out whenever you reach one of these special chambers, provided your performance in the current stage has been up to snuff. This is never explained in the game, but according to various FAQs on the game your actions carry a certain experience value. This is tallied invisibly and reset at the end of each stage. If you play well in a level, you’ll hit the requisite experience value to activate an arrow upgrade, which adds a point of strength to Pit’s attacks (which in this case doubles his power from 1 to 2, but offers less dramatic increases with subsequent upgrades). Therefore, the further into a stage a chamber appears, the more likely you are to be able to make use of it. Later in the game there are some chambers that appear very early on in a level, which require exact play in order to earn the necessary points to activate the god-dude.

But I think these are meant to be enigmatic, so maybe it’s OK that none of this is explained explicitly in the game or manual. In any case, it’s actually harder to reach the end of this stage without qualifying for an upgrade than not... and you’ll probably reach a cumulative score of 20,000 points here as well, which means Pit will “level up” — which is to say, gain an extra bar of life.

Again, in this case that doubles his health. By the end of World 1-2, chances are pretty good that you’ll have doubled both his hit points and his attack power, which plays a big part in decreasing the game’s difficulty level.

World 1-2 contains only one new enemy type, which you won’t see until the end: Commyloose, the jumping octopus... thing. Like pretty much every other enemy in the game, these guys appear in groups of four.



Unlike previous monsters, though, they approach from below, leaping into the scene from the bottom of the screen. They keep fluttering upward until they land on solid ground, at which point they start leaping horizontally toward Pit. Kid Icarus likes to throw new monsters into the mix right at the end of a stage as some kind of awful “screw you” gesture to cause you to die within sight of the exit and checkpoint. In other words, Kid Icarus is a jerk.

Kid Icarus may do some unconventional things with its design, like making the first stage the hardest in the entire stupid game, but even its famously troubled development led by an inexperienced director observes some basic rules of good sense. For example, we have World 1-3, in which only two minor new elements are introduced from the sandbox of the first two stages. Instead of continuing to throw unexpected challenges and concepts into the mix for players to contend with, World 1-3 effectively asks you to work your way through the rules and monsters you know arranged in a lengthy, difficult gauntlet.

Of course, it wouldn’t be Kid Icarus if some of that gauntlet’s scenarios weren’t a load of frustrating crap.

World 1-3 is much, much lengthier than the previous two stages; in fact, it’s about half again as long as 1-2. If you thought the first couple of worlds felt like a grueling grind, you’re in for a treat here. Some of the trickier enemies work their way into the standard formations of Shemums and Monoeyes, interrupting the predictable groups of four with random surprises.



The most irritating of these, unsurprisingly, are the McGoos that unexpectedly but invariably pop out of the ground under your feet as you’re trying to draw a bead on Monoeye patterns midway through the level. Since they pop up in an area with little footing, they have a tendency to appear literally beneath Pit’s feet, meaning you almost

certainly won't notice them until you've taken damage. And even if you do spot them before it's too late, they have a maddening tendency to materialize while you're standing on thin platforms so that if you duck to avoid their projectiles you'll slip through the platform and plunge to your death.

On one hand, I like seeing games combine mechanics and hazards in effective ways. On the other hand, these particular mechanics and hazards are both annoying, so it's a sandwich of annoyance.



You don't have to make it far before you come across the first new element in this stage: Lava. Or poison water. Or maybe it's just wine with a bad attitude. Whatever the case, it communicates its nature pretty transparently: These are clearly pools of some sort of liquid in an angry shade of magenta. Even with the day-glo limitations of the NES color palette, hot pink water is something you'll instinctively shy away from.

An interesting trait of Kid Icarus' death water: It's not immediately harmful. If Pit falls in, he has about half a second to jump back out again before it begins injuring him. This works rather differently than Metroid's acid and lava pools, which begin sapping Samus' health the instant she makes contact, but it's a nice touch of mercy. The game is so unforgiving about missing jumps that being extended this small perk in the event you bungle a leap feels almost uncharacteristically kind, as if someone wasn't paying attention and forgot to ratchet up the jerk-o-meter to max.

But the damage delay makes a sort of sense versus Metroid's mechanic, since Samus has a larger pool of health with more gradations than Pit. Her energy meter is divided by sets of 100 (or 99 for her base energy) and broken further into single digits, which begin ticking away as soon as you contact the liquid. Pit's health is broken



into sets of eight (or seven for his base energy), so once the lava starts chipping away at his health it goes pretty quickly. This is a small detail, but it is interesting to see how some of the same designers approached a common mechanic in two different contexts based on each game's limitations.

The stage's second new element is actually pretty similar to the first: Passive environmental hazards that progressively sap Pit's health. In this case, they're... spikes? Poison vines? Something. Anyway, they jut from the wall, and if you overlap them for more than a split second, Pit will take damage. In most cases they simply serve to make you more cautious about your jumps, though the few frames of mercy when you first make contact means you don't have to avoid them entirely.

You can brush along the tips of the spikes as you bound upward and the momentum of your leaps will allow you to clear the spikes before the damage has a chance to activate.

However, elsewhere, they create a more direct danger. Much of World 1-3 consists of moving platforms that traverse the screen horizontally, moving back and forth from edge to edge, and these spikes frequently appear at the ends of the platforms' paths. If you simply ride the platforms back and forth, you'll be dragged into the nettles... and the platforms' movement pattern, which causes them to slow as they change direction, guarantee you'll be stuck in the damage zone long enough to take potentially fatal damage. So you're forced to move quickly on the floating platform sequences. A lot of the hazards in this stage feel unfair, but this one is actually pretty smart.

World 1-3 also makes heavy use of Kid Icarus' screen wrap mechanic, forcing you to advance by warping from one side of the screen to another.

Generally this takes the form of obvious, stair-stepped level design that leaves you no other choice, but

in other places you're presented with huge empty gaps that can only be traversed by ducking back and forth. As ever, the warp effect can be advantageous for dodging foes (such as, say, when Commylooses approach from below as you're trying to deal with a Grim Reaper), but there are also a few spots where the level designer decided to be nasty: From time to time, you can warp to the other side of the screen from a platform only to find there's no corresponding platform on the opposite side. In which case you'll step onto thin air and plunge to death below. Kind of a cheap move!

Another cheap thing about this stage is that enemies like to drop from above, and the point of the screen from which they drop changes as you scroll upward. You can't always tell where they're going to start falling from, and you'll almost inevitably lose health to some random Shemum that appears right above you without warning. It's this sort of thing, not the more predictable threats, that makes the length of this world so tiring.



Mitigating this stage's difficulty and length is the fact that you should have been able to power up by now. Unless you're playing carelessly, you should have been able to earn a strength upgrade in World 1-2, which turns Pit's hair a nasty shade of green that NES developers generally avoided (the only other game I can think of where this color was applied to human forms were NPCs in Golgo 13: Top Secret Episode, and when your aesthetics resemble that game in the slightest you know you've made a horrible mistake). With that ugliness comes power, though, and an upgraded Pit can (for example) take out a Grim Reaper in five hits rather than 10 — a significant help.

Shortly before the end of the stage, you'll also come across one more room type: A challenge room, in which a god tests you by flinging a series of monoliths at

you. If you can endure his "harsh training," he'll give you a choice of sacred treasure, which you'll be able to activate once you gain a second health bar (if you haven't already) and fill it to maximum. Which means you can't really enjoy your new acquisition until World 2-1, since there's nowhere to refill your health before the end of the stage, and sacred treasures are deactivated in x-4 worlds.



With World 1-3 bested, Pit moves along to an even more advanced version of the vertically scrolling action that's transpired over the past three stages... oh, no, wait. Actually World 1-4 bears no resemblance whatsoever to the previous three levels. Instead of a one-way ascent, this stage instead plays out as a labyrinth of single, interconnected screens.

The x-4 stages, in my opinion, are the saving grace of Kid Icarus. They change up the experience considerably, briefly turning the adventure into something more akin to a Zelda or Metroid title than the one-way sidescroller that it otherwise resembles. These stages can be challenging, but the challenge is generally less one-slip-and-you're-dead nasty than the standard levels. On the contrary, you can't actually die from falling in one of the labyrinth stages, as none of the screens here are "bottomless" — in proper Metroid style, this stage has a fixed base level, and dropping through the bottom of one screen simply leads you to the next.

Because you can scroll freely throughout this stage, World 1-4 switches up certain play mechanics. For starters, you can farm enemies for points and cash, because they respawn infinitely if you leave a room and quickly return. Certain rooms have enemies that drop large hearts (the ones with a value of 10) and take only a single shot with a level two arrow to kill, which means there's really no reason not to max out your cash and take the time to earn your next health upgrade. Similarly, the shops



located here aren't single-use locations, either. While you can buy only one item per visit, you can simply duck out and back in again to reset the inventory. You can reload your health (though there's a pool at the lower left of the map, opposite the boss, that will restore your energy for free) and stock up on stuff like Feathers and Waters of Life.

The shops here also offer a couple of unique items: The pencil and the torch. These aren't much use on their own, but if you buy them after collecting the map located in a room near the beginning, you can switch to the sub-screen and chart your progress through the maze.

The pencil marks explored rooms on the map, while the torch shows your current location. It's a simple, Zelda-style map, so it doesn't show one-way passages (that is, ladders too high to reach again if you drop from another room), but it helps.

The mallets you've been collecting after snagging harps come into play in this stage, too. They work as a sort of "alternate fire" mode, replacing your arrows with a press of the Select button. They're no good against enemies, but if you hit one of the little centurion statues that appear throughout the labyrinth with a hammer, it will free a soldier from Medusa's curse to join you in the boss fight. They're only good for one hit, but they can briefly increase your firepower, which can be very useful in a pinch.

Of course, the most infamous element of the labyrinth stages is the dreaded Eggplant Wizard. They're the worst. The worst.

Eggplant Wizards, as their name suggests, look like eggplants. And they chuck eggplants in an arc. Weird, right? Someone at Nintendo seemed to have an eggplant obsession back then, since eggplants appear in several of their early NES games (this, *Wrecking Crew*, and *Ice Climber* come immediately to mind). This would be harm-

less and amusing except for the fact that if one of those eggplants strikes Pit, he's rendered completely helpless: His upper body is transformed into a giant eggplant running around on angel legs.

It's really bizarre, but the strangeness of it is overmatched by how annoying it is. Pit can run and jump and climb ladders in eggplant form, but that's it. He can't attack, which means that if you happen to wander into the boss' lair while eggplanted, you're completely screwed as the eggplant condition doesn't wear off naturally and there are no consumable remedies for the curse. Instead, you have to locate a clinic, where a friendly nurse (who evidently has taken up residence in the maze to help eggplanted adventurers) will restore Pit's proper body.

It's an interesting challenge, and a very unique one, but as with many elements of *Kid Icarus* it doesn't quite work as smoothly as one might hope. Being forced to run helplessly through the maze — sometimes through passages that make it impossible to leap safely over an enemy — in order to cure the condition sucks, especially in light of the fact that the clinic is so remote (occupying the otherwise useless upper-right area of the maze). Worse, one room places its Eggplant Wizards in such a way that you can't really avoid their projectiles if they decide to throw them at a certain angle. You can only enter the room from above, and there's a 50-percent chance that the two Wizards will toss their eggplants in an arc that hits Pit within a split-second of entering the room, impossible to avoid. Infuriatingly, this is the one room that links the upper portion of the maze to the lowest level where the boss awaits, so you don't have a choice about entering this room. Basically, advancing to the boss is a crapshoot: Will the game dick you over this time or not?

It's a shame about the unfairness of the Eggplant Wizards, because otherwise these levels are pretty great.

Even the wizards themselves are an interesting



and unique hazards; if they were placed a little more forgivingly, and if the eggplant status weren't permanent, this stage would be a slam dunk.

Thankfully, once you do reach the boss, he's quite a pushover. He starts from the lower right and advances to the left slowly, occasionally belching simultaneous flames straight ahead and at a 45-degree angle. When he reaches the left side of the screen, he leaps up to the upper level and then runs back over to the right. He has 100 points of health, so if you've collected a power upgrade you need to shoot him 50 times. The centurions help a lot here — every time you shoot, they do too, and they inflict just as much damage on Twinbellows as your own arrows. They tend to hover in a way that blocks Pit from Twinbellow's flames, too, so they can greatly extend your life. When you defeat Twinbellows, you acquire a special treasure that remains sealed until the very final stage and move along to World 2.

Incidentally, "Twinbellows" is either a really clever localization or a remarkably happy accident of localization. His name in Japanese is written as "Tsuinberos," or "Twinberos," suggesting he's meant to be a two-headed version of Cerberus (whose name is written as "Keruberos" in Japanese — or "Kelbeross," if you're the guy writing the *Ninja Gaiden* manual). But of course a bellows is also a device that stokes a furnace, which means that "Twinbellows" actually works remarkably well... maybe even better than "Twinberos" might have. I'd like to say, "Nicely done, Nintendo localizers from the 1980s!" but these are the same guys who took a slightly modified version of the Japanese spelling of "hydra" (hyuudraw) and rendered it as the nonsensical "Hewdraw." So, whatever.

The fortress labyrinth of World 1-4 does more than just provide a moment's change for how *Kid Icarus* plays; it actually marks a change in the game's overall style. After each of the three labyrinths, the format of the



action changes. The fortresses thus serve as a sort of transition from mode to mode.

The change in question shouldn't come as any real surprise to gamers familiar with *Kid Icarus*' companion piece, *Metroid*. Like its more beloved sibling, *Kid Icarus* features both vertical and horizontal scrolling. And like the other game, it segregates the two directions of advancement for, one assumes, technical reasons. But where *Metroid* presented them almost entirely in an interlocking manner with nearly every adjacent room in the game alternating between vertical and horizontal scrolling, *Kid Icarus* gives you three vertical levels followed by three horizontal levels, then goes back to vertical (with a fortress marking each change, of course).

In moving to a horizontal scrolling format, *Kid Icarus* becomes a much more familiar style of game. Moving from bottom to top outside of fixed-screen arcade titles like *Donkey Kong* wasn't too common back in 1986, whereas left-to-right scrolling was already old hat mere months after *Super Mario Bros.* popularized it, because there was a tremendous amount of creative convergence happening around the time Mario broke out.

Within no time at all — much too soon for them to be mere copycats — the market saw a ton of other games with format similar to Mario's, such as *Ghosts 'N Goblins*. By the time *Kid Icarus* rolled around to the U.S., early in 1987, side-scrolling felt natural and instinctive for anyone who spent any time at all following video games.

That's part of what makes *Kid Icarus*' early stages so daunting (and doubly so back in its day): The underworld forces you to traverse the platforms in a way that runs counter to how the medium had already codified its preferred action in a very short amount of time. When you move into the Overworld, things become far more comfortable and intuitive for a seasoned player. The threat of falling to your death is greatly diminished, and there's

much less platforming to worry about in general since you're traveling primarily by walking rather than by jumping. Enemies become less threatening as well, as Pit's three-directional shooting lines up more closely with how enemies approach you.



There are fewer threats creeping in from below, where Pit can't attack them (and will potentially plummet through a platform if he tries to aim at them). All in all, the change makes a huge difference, and once you reach World 2-1 the game suddenly becomes much, much easier to deal with.

So why wait until World 2-1 to give players a more approachable format to contend with? Alas, a clever connection between story and game design is to blame. The Underworld portions of the game represent Pit's escape from imprisonment, and it makes sense for him to be deep underground, in a dungeon, escaping to the surface. But it does mean that those first couple of stage are ludicrously difficult, creating a harsh roadblock to enjoying the game. If the designers had included something along the lines of a horizontally scrolling prologue level in which players could ease in (and maybe build up their health or attack power a notch), Kid Icarus would feel a lot less like a kick in the pants from the word go.

One thing that doesn't change here is the tendency of enemies to appear in groups of four. The puffball guys on the previous page, for example, leap from the bottom of the screen in evenly spaced increments, hover near the top of the screen for a moment, then drop back off. In fact, a lot of enemies here seem less like threats and more like targets of opportunity: Can you shoot them and gain hearts and experience from them before they vanish again? This is especially true for Rokmen, which are — yes — rock-men who fall from the sky in groups of four. They're a fairly minimal threat, but if you can take a

bunch of them out you'll earn a ton of points. World 2-2 even makes a sort of test of this, with an upgrade chamber early in the stage that only activates if you manage to take out the level's opening barrage of Rokmen with flawless style.



The horizontal format also diminishes the threat posed by certain other enemies. For example, the Kerons above attack a lot like Commyloose in the Underworld — but since they're leaping at you horizontally rather than from below, they're far more predictable and thus less dangerous.

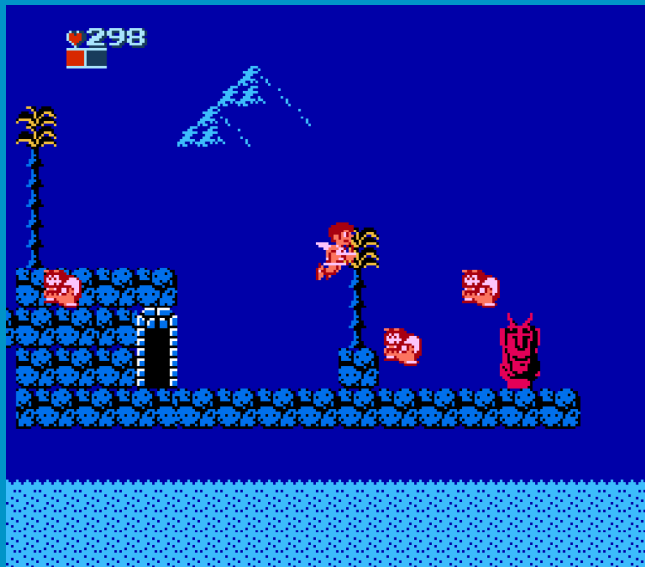
"Keron," of course, is an absolutely detestable pun, combining Charon (the boatman of the River Styx) with "kero," the Japanese onomatopoeia for a frog's utterances.

The Overworld continues to offer split paths as you advance, frequently dividing the road into high and low paths. Usually one path or the other has a chamber or health refill. Sometimes you won't know which is the better path until you've committed — remember, no backward scrolling in this game, even in the Overworld — while other forks actually offer different items on each path and force you to choose one or the other.

In terms of play, the upper path usually gives you more room to maneuver while making Pit slightly more vulnerable to enemies approaching from above or below. And generally speaking, the lower path is typically more sheltered but makes it tougher to dodge enemies.

In any case, there's more of a "grab bag" feel to the branching paths in the Overworld, because you're less likely to die in this much easier section of the game than you were in the Underworld. In the opening stages of the game, the high difficulty level means you have a tendency to traverse the levels repeatedly before you finally reach the end, so you become very familiar with the route

details. Here, there's a pretty good chance you'll never see a stage a second time, which means there's more of a lottery feel to your choices. Granted, I'm speaking from my own experiences here, but I can't believe they're completely atypical. The Overworld is simply much less harrowing.



Which isn't to say it's without its hazards. The worst of them is definitely Pluton, the robber god. These guys are the worst. They move more or less like Keron, taking bounding leaps of various and unpredictable sizes. They don't actually move until Pit crosses their line of sight, though, meaning you may need to get close to them before they attack. And they're completely invulnerable.

What makes Pluton so annoying, however, isn't its movement or invincibility but rather the fact that if one bumps into Pit, it'll steal one of his hard-earned weapons. You can earn those weapons back in the training rooms, or you can buy them from a merchant for an insane amount of cash, but the net effect of being struck by a Pluton is that Pit is semi-permanently weakened, losing one of his key tools.

Thankfully, Plutons only appear in a handful of places. They're ridiculously difficult to avoid in their initial appearance, but afterwards you're given reasonable opportunity to lead them and trick them. The one good thing about Plutons is that they're set in their movements and can only travel forward. They'll frequently fall off the screen near pits, and their ability to move through scenery (but only upward) means they will often become lodged in walls and forced to move to a higher level. They're dangerous and devious, but passing them unscathed is not impossible.

The other unique foes of the Overworld pale in comparison to Plutons. The most dangerous is probably the Snowman, who soaks up a ton of hits while firing fast-



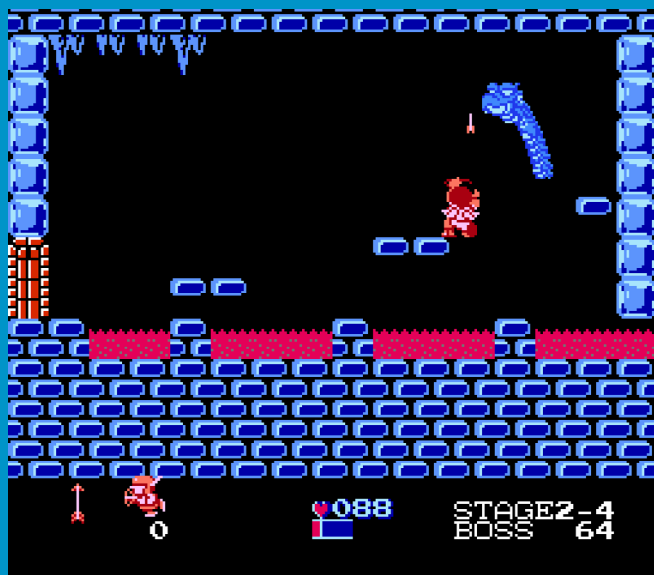
moving snowballs that can span the length of the screen. He has a tendency to show up near pits, often large ones that can only be traversed via moving platforms (which, incidentally, you'll still fall through if you duck). While a tough threat, the Snowman actually feels more in line with enemies you'd find in "typical" action/platform/shooter games of the era, your Mega Mans and whatnot. As such, he's much easier to deal with.

In fact, as you work your way through the Overworld, you'll find fewer and fewer new and surprising elements. There are vines and magma and other hazards to avoid, moving platforms over yawning chasms, and so on and so forth; but by and large we've seen bulk of the quirky, idiosyncratic elements that make Kid Icarus seem so weird compared other games. They're largely front-loaded, which means that at this point the game doesn't offer many more surprises. This is yet another factor that contributes to the fact that it's much, much more difficult at



the beginning than toward the end.

Really, there's not too much to break down about most of the second half of *Kid Icarus*. Like I said, the game shows its hand early, and once you've met Eggplant Wizards and Pluton, there's nothing else so aggressively weird or spiteful to be found. World 2-4 is of course a fortress world, one more complex in layout than World 1-4, but it's definitely not insurmountable. The free-form navigation of the stage and the persistence of certain stats when you die and continue (such as cash) means you can farm all the goodies you like here, if you really want. Unlike *Metroid*, *Kid Icarus* doesn't factor time spent mucking around in the world in determining the ending you see, so there's honestly no downside to stocking up on goodies.



The second boss of the game is Hewdraw, another famous critter of Greek mythology whose name ended up being mangled in translation from Greek to Japanese to English. It's the Hydra, basically, though with a slightly elongated first syllable that... well, it doesn't matter. Hewdraw is the Hydra. But with one head. It bounces around the room in a fairly predictable pattern and is easy enough to take down, though only its head is vulnerable.

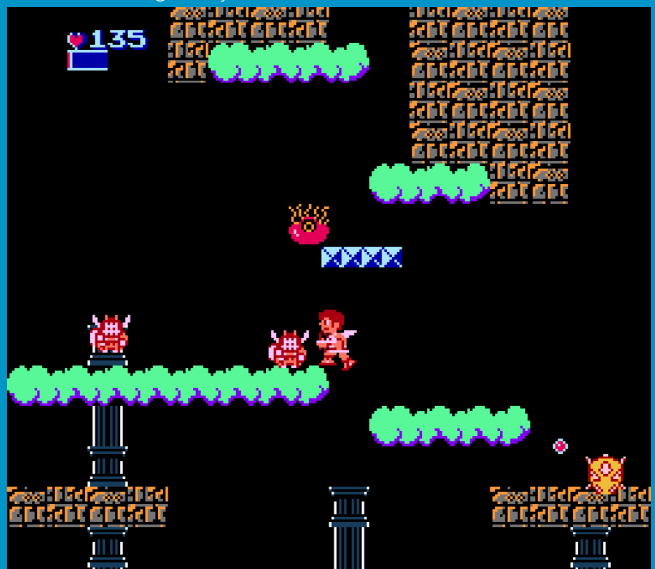
This serpent style of enemy would appear in many subsequent NES games, including two that have already been explored in *Anatomy of a Game: Zelda II* and *Castlevania III*.

The appearance of a fortress world precipitates another change in play format, this time going from horizontal back to vertical. Pit has escaped the Underworld, traversed the surface, and now he rises through Skyworld to Palutena's temple where Medusa has taken control. It's a pretty neat touch of progression that parallels what Konami was doing with *Castlevania* at the time, though the effect is somewhat muted by the time of day change. Since

World 2-3 went from daytime to night, you enter Skyworld in darkness, which makes it look basically indistinguishable from the Underworld. The 3D Classics *Kid Icarus* remake is much better about this and adds a few small details to give a better sense of ascending through the sky, but here you'll just have to take the clouds platforms' word for it.



Worlds 3-1 through 3-3 play much like Worlds 1-1 through 1-3. But anyone with the tenacity and skill to survive the Underworld will find the Skyworld laughably simple. These later stages do very little to build on the challenges of the earlier worlds — though some of the teeny-tiny platforms you face are far more easily negotiated with the modified jumping style of the 3D Classics version — and since you'll almost certainly have considerably more health and strength here than you did in the Underworld, you can more or less tear through foes. Chances are good you have a number of items stocked



up, too; Feathers will prevent falling deaths, Water of Life will restore your health, and the rare but essential Barrel will let you store up to eight Waters of Life. It's entirely possible to be fully powered-up by the end of World 3-3, and once you've reached that point the entire world of Kid Icarus may as well be wet tissue paper for you to tear through.

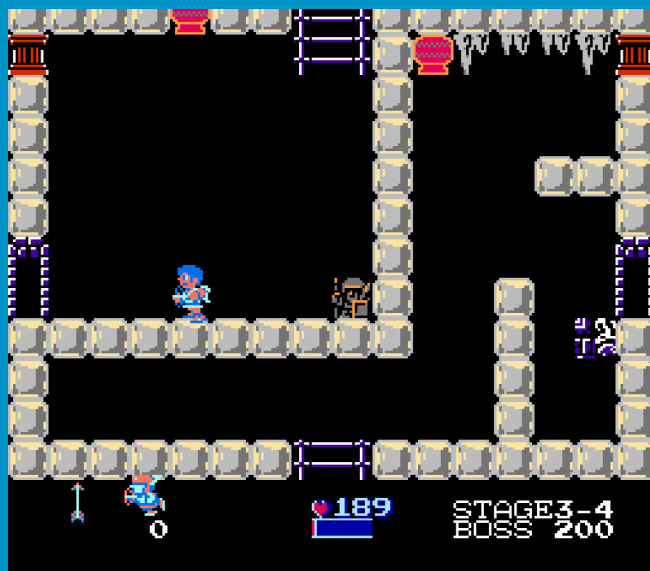
The Skyworld features two new enemies of note. While most foes here are essentially just reskins of monsters you've faced before, there's an important new variant.

Namely, Pluton Flies, which are smaller, faster variants on Pluton. The flying version sits at the edge of the screen until you pass its line of sight, at which point it zips into action and flies straight across the screen in an attempt to swipe your goods. The advantage you have here versus in the Overworld is that a Pluton Fly moves more predictably — literally in a straight line — and a single shot will take it down. Again, Kid Icarus' threats are front-loaded, and the game gets easier as you play.



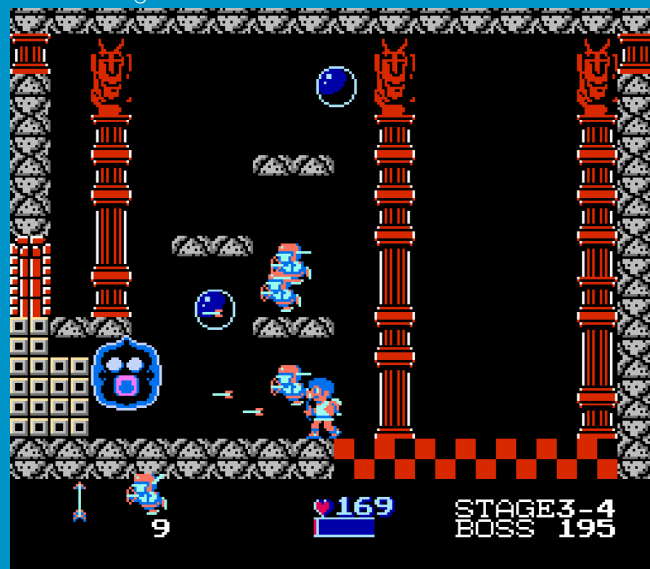
Secondly, there's a new flying enemy, Komayto, that behaves just like Monoeyes. But they look like Metroids! They go down a lot easier than Metroids do, but the resemblance is remarked on even in the instruction manual. The Japanese name for these creatures, Kometo, makes the connection even clearer — “meto” is the first two syllables of the Japanese name for Metroids (metoroido), and the ko- prefix usually means small; a kitten, for example, is a koneko, a small (ko-) cat (-neko). So basically, these are Metroid hatchlings. Can you imagine how different things would have been if Pit had let them imprint on him rather than just shooting them out of the air?

And finally, the Skyworld ends with the game's third fortress. This is by far the biggest and most complex area of the game, as difficult in its own way as the early stages. The challenge here stems not from devious mon-



sters (the Eggplant Wizards aren't as cheaply placed as in that first fortress) or deadly traps but rather from the size of the fortress and the winding route to the boss. This stage makes full use of what appears to be the maximum size available to the dungeons — it consists of an 8x8 grid of screens, and all 64 room spaces contain something. It's roughly the size of the first two fortresses combined, and you almost certainly need to map your route — not just to the exit, but the hot springs, clinic, and shops as well.

The boss, Pandora, turns out to be surprisingly unthreatening after all of that. It wobbles slowly around the room, occasionally becoming invulnerable, the only real threat posed by its two indestructible companion blobs that vaguely home in on Pit while blocking his shots. Pandora's auxiliary bits are murder on any little centurions you happen to bring into the battle, but otherwise there's little challenge here for a Pit powered up sufficiently to take on the final stage.





Having escaped the Underworld, traversed the Overworld, and ascended through the Skyworld, Pit at last arrives at Palutena's palace. And once again, the game changes formats... though this time it's a far more radical transformation. The three treasures you've wrested away from the fortress bosses (the mirror shield, the wings of Pegasus, and the arrow of light) allow you to enter the Sky Palace and take on Medusa.

The arrow can slay the Gorgon, the mirror shield will reflect her petrifying gaze, and the wings? They transform Kid Icarus from a platformer into a shoot-em-up.

The final stage of Kid Icarus doesn't so much represent a change in style as it does a complete shift of genre. Whatever else you want to say about Kid Icarus, this was a pretty crazy move. You didn't really see a lot of multi-modal games at this point in history, and the ones that did come along (Tron, for instance) generally were presented explicitly as such.



Kid Icarus' shifts are more subtle than that, and the rules don't really change from one part of the game to another. You're playing in a different style here than you did in the previous 12 stages, yes, but it feels more consistent, as if taking flight were simply the logical extension of how you've been playing so far.

It helps that there is some limited flight throughout the earlier portions of the game, potentially. If Pit falls off the screen while holding a Feather, he'll have about six seconds of air time to allow him to wing his way back up to safety — or, if you're really devious about it, past a particularly tricky series of jumps. Taking flight permanently simply reworks that minor feature into the core action, giving you a much better weapon in the process (the arrow of light pierces foes and can cut through an entire four-enemy wave with a single well-placed blast).

This also extends Kid Icarus' ridiculously inverted difficulty curve to its logical extent. This final stage is as toothless as the first level is brutal. Enemies pose the only hazards here, and most of them approach in simple, predictable waves. You will meet occasional foes that pose a slightly greater threat, like the one-eyed guys opposite (who appear to be skeletal or zombie versions of Eggplant Wizards). Their bodies materialize by flying in from off-screen in three pieces, settling on the wall and firing quick projectiles at you.

But that's about as dangerous as it gets. Even the scenery poses no threat; you don't have to worry about collisions with walls or the floor, because everything here is simply a background element. The screen scrolls automatically at a fairly slow rate, and you can move freely about to any point on the screen. If you've taken the time to pump up your health to the maximum available (five bars) you practically have to go out of your way to lose here.

Of course, it just wouldn't be Kid Icarus if you

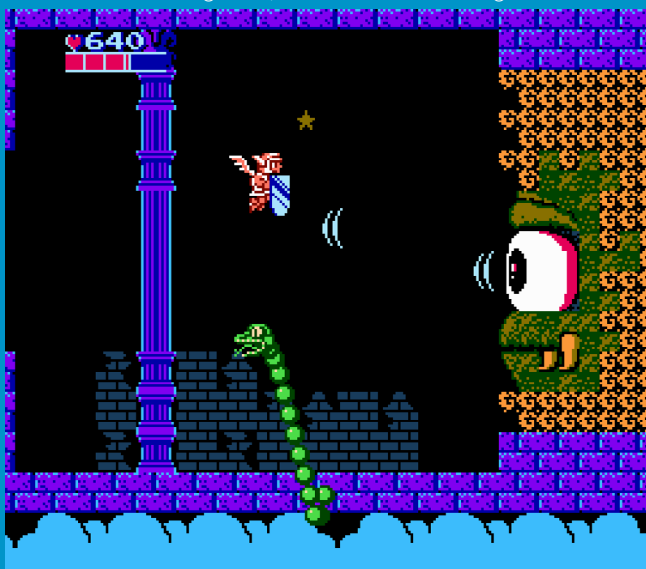


didn't have to contend with invisible, not-entirely-intuitive game parameters. Palutena's palace will continue to loop infinitely, sending you past the same scenery and threats in an endless circle, until you shoot enough enemies.

Only after your score reaches a certain point will the loop break, sending you to the final showdown with Medusa. This isn't actually communicated anywhere in the game, and players trying to take a conservative approach by finding a safe spot out of the way and hovering there will eventually wonder why the game just keeps going and going....

When at last you do reach Medusa, Kid Icarus brings another Metroid connection into play. The final boss here, like Mother Brain, is female. She exists as a large, stationary piece of scenery. She has a single massive eye, which also doubles as her weak point. And she's defended by smaller, infinitely spawning companion creatures.

That being said, Medusa has nothing on Mother



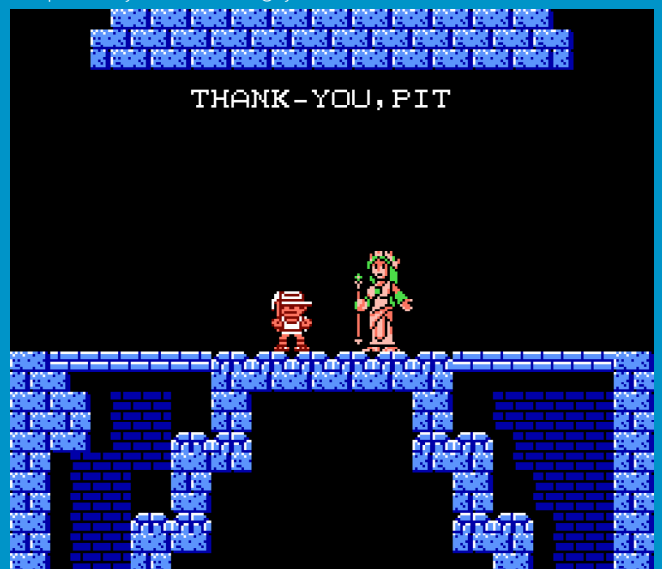
Brain. That battle is downright nasty, flinging threats at you as you struggle to maintain your purchase on the single tiny perch from which you can attack without being knocked into magma.

Here, Medusa fires a handful of eye beams (easily dodged) while snakes attack in a sine wave pattern (what is it with Medusa and sine waves, anyway?). It's a pretty low-threat scenario, and you can pump her eyeball full of arrows with little trouble.

Eventually, Medusa is revealed to be a Wizard of Oz-like façade hiding the true Gorgon, who it appears in truth is a green, busty, one-eyed naga. She collapses, and the temple begins to explode! Time bomb set — you have 100 seconds to escape.

Just kidding. There's none of that Metroid challenge here. Once Medusa goes down, the game is over.

You do get one final Metroid connection, though, for posterity. The ending you receive from Palutena is



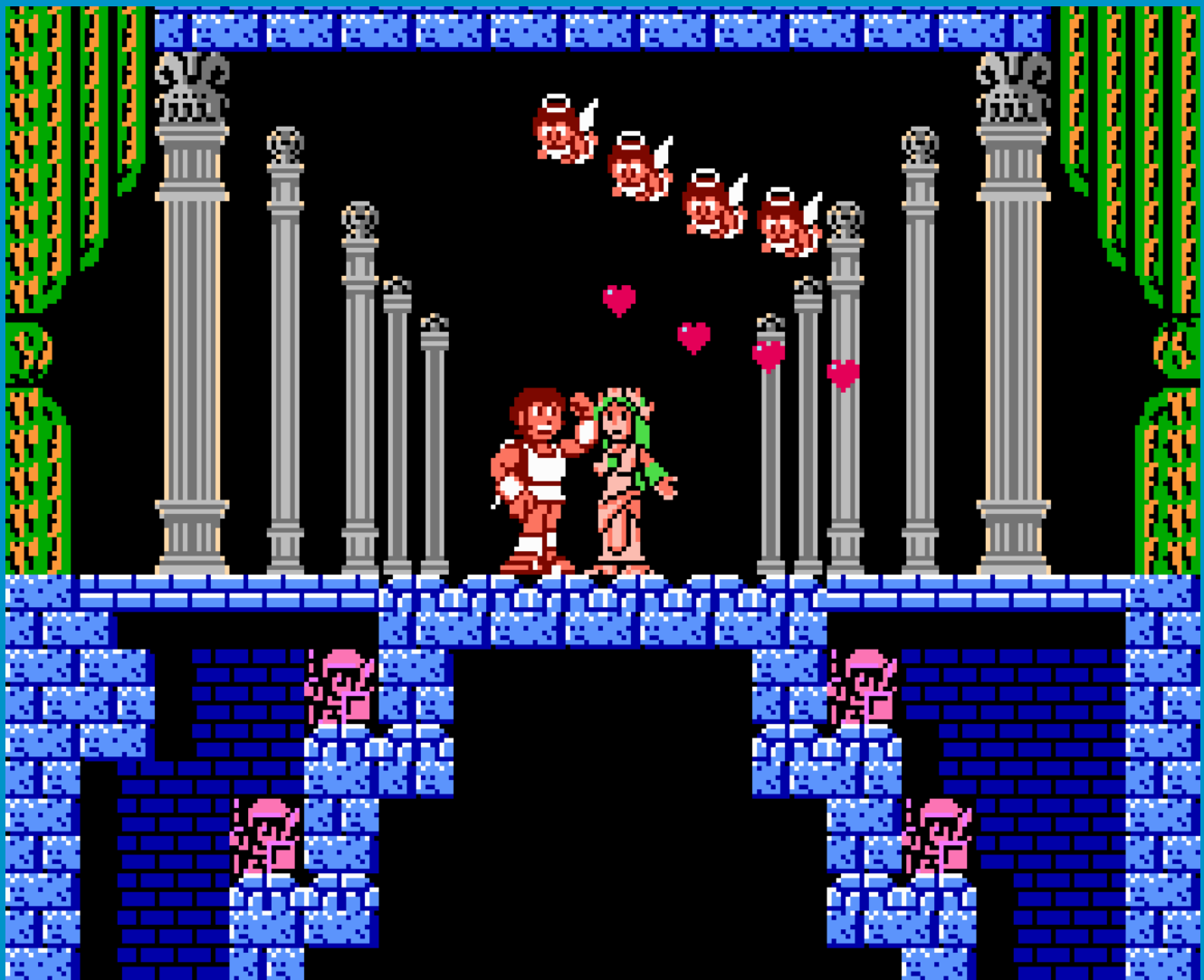
based on your performance. As mentioned before, time doesn't factor in here; your reward is based on your character parameters: Strength, health, possession of sacred weapons, and cash. The more of those factors you manage to max out, the better your ending.

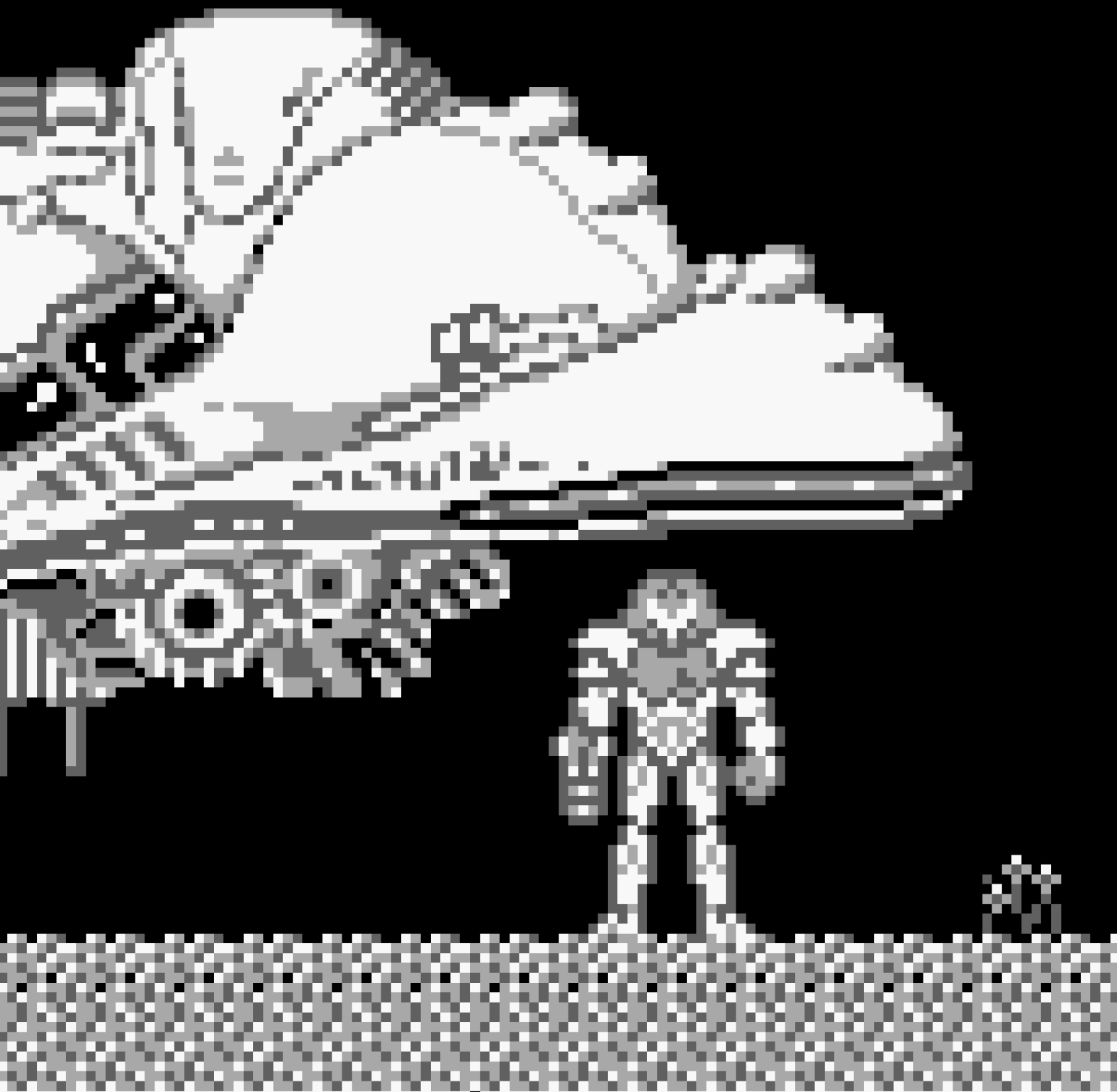
Max out none of them and Pit apparently becomes demoted to working as a farmer, or something. Hit the limit with them all, however, and you get a rather elaborate colonnade backdrop as Pit suddenly leaps straight past puberty and into a adulthood for a makeout session with the goddess. Don't do it, Pit! Sure, she's beautiful, but sexing up members of the Greek pantheon never brought anything but tragedy upon anyone.

You can also start again after finishing the game with a New Game + mode that lets you carry all your gear into a second playthrough. It's deeply satisfying to tear through that accursed first level with a Pit who's loaded for bear. However, in the inimitable Kid Icarus style, this comes with a tragic flaw: If you simply collect a password in World 1-1 on the second go 'round, it won't record your upgrades.

You have to make it World 1-2 again to be able to save that element of your progress. Idiotically, this flaw carries over into the 3D Classics version... the downside there being that the game auto-saves your adventure, so there's no reverting back to the World 4-1 password. As I discovered the hard way while writing this series.

So, that's Kid Icarus in a nutshell. A weird game to be sure, much less polished than its peers despite being considerably less ambitious than Metroid. You can tell that the creators had a lot of big ambitions, changing up the play style and telling a sort of story with the scenery, but those efforts didn't pan out nearly as well as in its contemporary, Castlevania. Kid Icarus starts hard and gradually becomes easier, which makes for a second half that's barely memorable because (1) you've seen it all before and (2) you can breeze past the later stages with far greater ease than the difficult early levels. On the plus side, the freewheeling final stage makes quite a carrot to lure you forward. It may be an uneven adventure at best, but it ends on a high note... so anyone who bothers to make it that far at least gets to go away feeling happy.

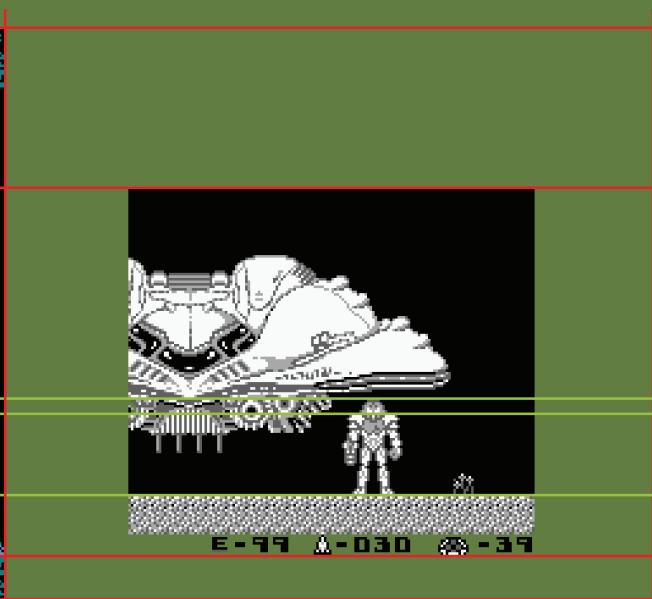
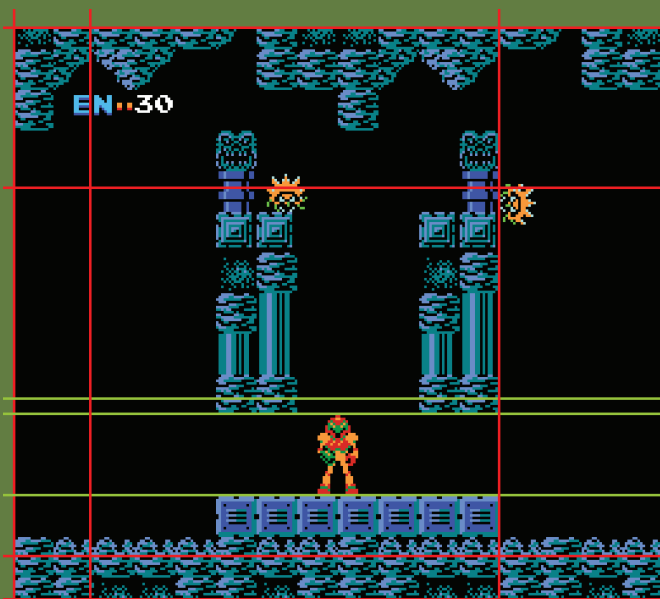




E-99

4-030

6- -



As a sequel to *Metroid*, *Return of Samus* doesn't stray too far from the original game's fundamental premise. You are a woman alone in an underground labyrinth full of space monsters, with no one and nothing to rely on save your extraordinary armored suit and its remarkable capacity for absorbing power-ups ancient races left littering the planet's interior. In this case, however, you're not out to thwart the metroid-breeding plans of space pirates but rather to exterminate the metroids themselves. In their natural environment, metroids turn out to be rather more diverse than the events of the first game would let on — but we'll get to that.

From a fundamental mechanical perspective, *Metroid II* differs from its predecessor in terms of the hardware that hosts it. The Game Boy lacks some of the limitations that affected older NES games such as *Metroid*, so now the game world can scroll freely in all directions — no more alternating horizontal and vertical chambers. This also means fewer insanely lengthy shafts to ascend.

However, the ability to scroll freely is also something of a necessity, as the Game Boy's pixel dimensions are considerably smaller than those of the NES — 160×144 versus 256×224.

A single screen of the NES game represents more than a screen and a half for the Game Boy. To make matters worse, Samus is actually slightly taller on Game Boy than on NES — 36 pixels versus 30 — in order to let her sprite “read” more easily in a world without color. The added height allowed the designers to make her slightly more detailed (including the introduction of a trademark feature of her power suit, the acquiring along the way of large shoulder pads to denote the Varia power-up), but it also means she occupies that much more of the screen.

This is not an insignificant consideration, as you

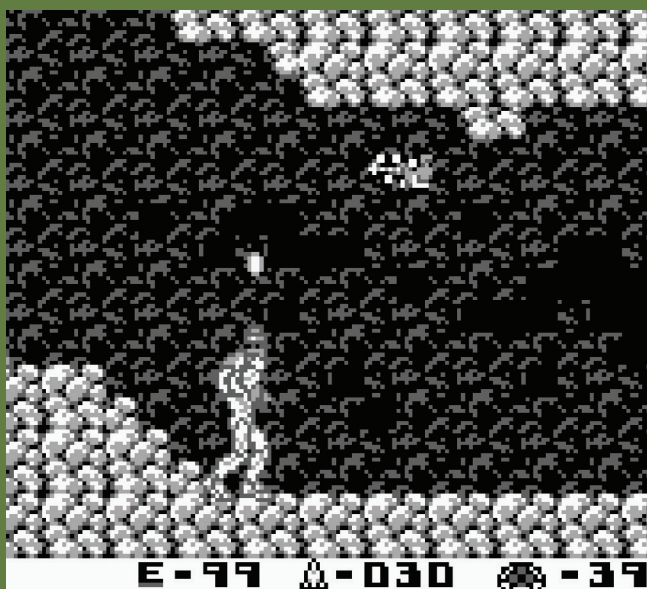
can see here with this side-by-side comparison of Samus' height versus the screen dimensions in each game. She's gone from occupying about 1/8 of the screen to 1/3 of the active screen (the permanent status bar at the bottom being functionally useless in terms of revealing the game world). By increasing the protagonist's size while shedding a massive amount of contextual environmental information, *Metroid II* by its very nature plays differently than the original game.

The action becomes slower to prevent you from rushing ahead too quickly and falling athwart hazards, and to keep enemies from taking cheap shots from off-screen. It reduces Samus' range of attack. It complicates jumping once you've boosted Samus' powers. Combined with the monochrome visuals, it makes differentiating environments more difficult, resulting in a more linear game to minimize



confusion. Nintendo R&D1 (and specifically two talented directors who went on to create the Wario Land and New Super Mario Bros. series, Hiroji Kiyotake and Hiroyuki Kimura) aspired to bring an NES-quality experience to Game Boy, and compromises were in order to make it possible. But dammit, they tried.

One thing I appreciate about Metroid II: It pays more than narrative lip service to the fact that it's a sequel. Samus doesn't start in the same diminished state as at the beginning of the first Metroid. She's hardly powered up to the maximum here, but she does at least enter the adventure with missiles (30 max to start with) and the Long Beam. Very few sequels resist the urge to hit reset on their protagonists — including subsequent Metroid games, it should be said — so it's actually pretty unusual to see the heroine return with a handful of power-ups in hand.



This is a conscious choice by the designers to empower the player at the expense of reducing some of the early challenge of the game; no doubt the fact that this removes missile-access doors from the mix entirely (thus taking a barrier to progress out of the adventure) is why no other Metroid adventure gives Samus missiles from the outset. Sometimes narrative consistency proves to be less important than mechanical variety... though in an ideal game, the two exist in harmony.

However, Metroid II is much less a game about exploration and discovery than any other entry in the series, so the absence of missile doors as a barrier to progression makes no real difference. Again, this is a far more linear and directed quest than its predecessor, and that fact becomes clear at the very outset. Where the first Metroid required you to backtrack left from the starting point before you could progress to the more traditional right, what you'll find to the left of the starting point here is... a wall. It's right-scrolling only for now, sister.



The early creatures you'll face somewhat resemble those of Zebes. There are little guys that look like corn on the cob, but they drift left and right somewhat like Rippers from the first game. Unlike Rippers, though, you don't need a missile to blow them up. There are also frog-like monsters that jump at you. Everything here is slow and poses little threat... and in any case, this game starts Samus with 99 health from the outset instead of forcing her to build up from 30 via enemy drops. A small but welcome touch of grace. Metroid II also presents you with occasional refill stations to max out your health and missiles automatically, greatly reducing the rigorous grind of the original game.

You can only progress right at the beginning of the game. Right, and then down. Where the original Metroid presented you with that maddeningly endless shaft to climb right at the start, here you instead have a much easier trip downward. There's no other path forward, which means you can only drop into this hole. If you've never played Metroid, this is where the game confronts your misgivings about pits equalling instant death.

There's no such thing in this universe, and by forcing your hand a couple of screens in, Metroid II nudges you past your platform gamer's instinctive terror of gaping openings with no obvious bottom in sight. "Jump in," it says. And when you pause in fear, it waits patiently while you cast about fruitlessly for an alternative and finally give in and jump already.

You'll survive the fall, which isn't deep at all, only to be confronted with barriers. These blocks are designed with the universal cartoon shorthand for "fragile rock," and it should be clear both from the cracked texture and the blocks' lack of the surrounding walls' organic smoothness that you can blast through them. This part is clearly intended as a revelation specifically for Metroid veterans;

where someone groomed on the likes of Contra will assume it ain't no thing to shoot downward, Samus could only fire forward, backward, and up in her debut performance. To destroy things at ground level, she had to duck into a ball and drop a bomb. But you don't have the ability to lay bombs yet. So what to do?



If you duck here to roll into a ball, you'll make the surprising discovery that Samus now ducks before rolling. (You have to press down twice to enter the ball state now, hence her evidently baffling inability to crawl.) This means she can shoot things at ground level — something that would have come in quite handy in the original game. But ducking still doesn't let you shoot downward. In order to do that, you need to jump and aim down while in the air. Easy enough, but it's also the first of Samus' new abilities, and the game does well to make its mastery a requisite to



advance from beyond the introductory area.

If you continue pressing forward (that is, rightward and downward), you'll eventually come to this little pylon, which is one of Metroid II's other new features: A save point. By pressing Start here, you'll save your progress. No more messy passwords to deal with. This is a simple function of technology — Metroid slightly predated the spread of battery saves from the premium Legend of Zelda into games without fancy gold carts — but a very welcome one.



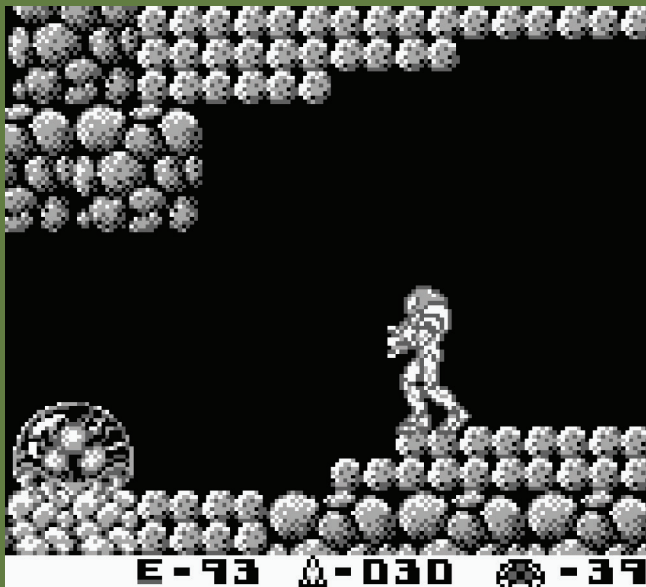
Eventually, though, the path to the right dead-ends with a lake of acidic liquid that will kill Samus pretty quickly if you attempt to take her for a swim. This is as far as you can go the right, and at last you're forced to reprise the original Metroid and see where heading left will take you.

It doesn't take long for Metroid II to differentiate itself from its predecessor. About... five minutes, I'd guess? That's about how long it takes, 10 at the outside, for you to encounter your first metroid.

Despite its name, Metroid for NES wasn't really about metroids. Those creatures only showed up at the very end as an impediment to the real objective, the living supercomputer Mother Brain. Theoretically, you could complete the game without killing a single metroid, whereas both Mother Brain and her guardians Ridley and Kraid had to be taken down.

In Metroid II, however, killing metroids is Samus' entire purpose. Exterminating the species is so central to the action, in fact, that a third of the status display is entirely given over to indicating precisely how many metroids remain living on planet SR-388. You start at 39 with a goal of working your way down to zero.

The first of the metroids appears very early in the quest, well before Samus has acquired the Ice Beam. So,



you're in trouble, right?

Thankfully, no; in their home environment, metroids mutate into new forms, and they leave their jellyfish-like shell behind in order to evolve. You can see that evolution at work here, as the creature that emerges from the first metroid larva you encounter retains the species' trademark inner cores and quadruple fangs. But its core drops, becoming a sort of transparent heart. Handily, this is also its weak point — and it turns out that absent their larval shells, metroids needn't be frozen in order to destroy them. Five missiles, no ice, and this guy is down for the count.

In profile, you can see the first-stage metroid (designated an alpha metroid) is like some sort of weird crustacean floating around with a giant belly attached to it. Doesn't really seem a practical approach to physiology, but what do I know? I'm no xenobiologist.

Alpha metroids are considerably less threatening than their pupal counterparts. Not only do they no longer need to be frozen, they also move more slowly and much less aggressively. The only real challenge here is that they recoil from missile impacts, so you can't just pour on the destruction — you need to re-aim after every hit.

This search-and-destroy design makes Metroid II the most straightforward of the core Metroid titles. You have one goal: Eradicate every metroid.

The linearity doesn't simply stem from the mission structure, though; the world design also turns out to be far more straightforward than in other Metroid games. The main path through SR-388 takes the form of a central passage flooded by acidic fluid, connected to isolated pockets of caverns that branch away from the main route. Once you defeat all the metroids in a given pocket, an earthquake will cause the fluid levels to change, exposing the way to the next area. The only other game in the





series with a slightly similar design philosophy was Metroid Fusion, which deliberately referenced Metroid II, and even there you could find a number of passages and shortcuts linking the isolated regions of the space station.

You experience Metroid II's first quake after defeating the lone, newly molted metroid found in the cavern to the left of the entrance to the planet's underground areas. Once the shaking comes to a halt, the liquid that blocked the shaft to the right settles further down and allows you access to your first main area of the game. Although it's not designated as such, you could think of this as the game's first level.

I said that Samus' possession of missiles right from the start precludes the use of "missile doors" as an impediment, but that doesn't mean they don't exist in the game. This time, however, the highly resistant doors aren't meant to frustrate you in the early portions of the game and force you to return to explore them once you've located a missile. Instead, their presence serves as an indicator: There's something valuable back here. Unless I'm forgetting something, missile doors exist only at the entrance to power-up chambers. So if you see one of these, you know there's something good on the other side.

In this case, the first missile door you'll come across contains the Bomb. You need a Bomb to clear an obstructive block in a wall, which works exactly like it did in Metroid and lets you open the path to your next target. This is still really early in the game, but now that you have the ability to drop Bombs there's no cause for backtracking. None of the handful of areas you've encountered before this moment had bombable bricks hiding secrets; in fact, Metroid II deprecates the entire concept of backtracking.

For the most part, the only time you'll ever really need to retrace your steps is to return to the central path once you've caused a quake. As such, there's no reason



for the Bomb to have been handed out like this; it could just as easily have served the same role in the game had Samus possessed it from the start, as she did with other Metroid powers like the Long Beam, the Maru Mari, and the 30 missiles she kicks off with. But she doesn't, and collecting it like this gives a sense of empowerment to the player. It's little more than lip service to the concept of becoming stronger, since the block you have to break here is the first time you've encountered an impediment like this, and the Bomb is located immediately adjacent. But there's something to be said for allowing the player to feel like they're making progress. The only possible detriment to starting with Bombs is that you wouldn't have been forced to shoot downward to destroy those fragile blocks in the descending shaft a short bit ago.

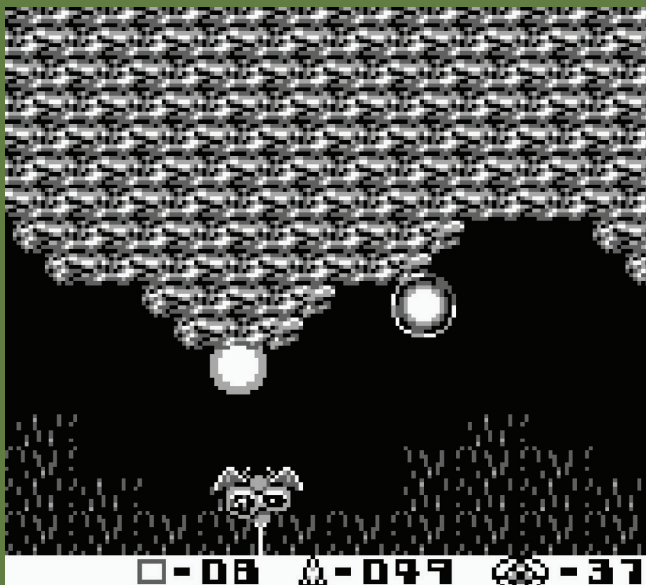
Curiously enough, there's a second power-up located in this section, too: The Spider Ball. Not 15 minutes





into the adventure — chances are you've only killed the one metroid so far! — and already you've found two key skill upgrades.

The Spider Ball works like nothing you found in Metroid. By double-tapping into Maru Mari ball form, you can cause Samus to cling to any and every surface in the game — save those covered with spikes — which greatly improves your range of exploration. In fact, the only thing that can prevent you from accessing an area once you acquire the Spider Ball are deliberate obstacles, like acid pools and wall protrusions that cause damage. You're barely into the game and already you have the ability to go practically anywhere you like. This is a pretty strange way to parcel out character empowerment for a game like this — normally such versatile upgrades are doled out only toward the end, once you've been teased and taunted at length by environmental puzzles. Here, you gain



a powerful traversal tool right at the beginning.

The upshot is that you can go where you like you like; the downside is that the latter half of the adventure feels pretty flat, because there's not too much more you can do to enhance Samus' power. Also, I'm not a huge fan of the Spider Ball in general, as rolling along every surface of the game at half-speed in search of passages soon becomes as dull as bombing for secrets in the first game.

It's an interesting concept for a skill, and the designers were incredibly bold to hand it out so early, but it needed a little more time in the oven, I think. Besides grabbing the Spider Ball and Bomb, all there really is to do in the first little pocket of SR-388 is kill some alpha metroids and snag a few missile expansions.

This first area gives you a pretty good sense of how the entirety of Metroid II's structure works. Generally speaking, each separate breakout area consists of a large central structure crisscrossed with corridors and surrounded by something akin to the vertical shafts from the original Metroid. Multiple smaller corridors branch off from the perimeter walls of the main expanses. Basically, SR-388 contains several enormous caverns in which a huge central building has been erected, with small spurs leading to dead ends that generally contain a power-up or a metroid battle. These caverns are then connected to one another by the main path that winds through the underground, which is full of acid that gradually subsides as metroids die... for some reason.

This design approach stems in part from the game's cramped point of view. Because you can see so little of the screen at any given time, the levels must by necessity incorporate a less complex layout to minimize the likelihood that you'll get lost. It's fairly easy to pathfind your way around these breakout areas, because they mirror one another's design and revolve around the presence of a large construct beneath an enormous open cavern. Once you stumble across one of those structures, you can easily make your way around its perimeter, delving into each offshoot corridor one by one to clear them out before returning to the central chamber, and then back to the main thoroughfare (once you feel the earth shake, of course).

Unfortunately, until you get the Space Jump — which, strangely, isn't actually that far ahead from this early point of the game — the most reliable way to explore the full extent of the central cavern is to use the Spider Ball and roll with agonizing slowness around the perimeter of the main chamber, taking care to avoid the various creatures that drift back and forth near the walls and ceiling; if they hit you, you'll fall and have to start over.

This is generally not much fun even if you manage to avoid being hit, and exploration really drags. On the plus side, the game is pretty good about cluing you

into the presence of secrets. Generally you'll be able to spot missile expansions and energy tanks hidden in the walls, and the challenge becomes figuring out how to reach them. Sometimes it's as simple as bombing a block nearby, but other areas are far more devious about it and will force you to approach from a different room entirely. It's not perfectly executed, but *Metroid II* definitely demonstrates a growing canniness of the potential of integrating puzzle elements into exploratory level design. Unlike the previous game, you never need to bomb haphazardly to find passages to advance; the way forward is made far more obvious, even if you have to work for it on occasion.



Another nice touch is the use of discarded metroid husks to clue you in to the proper direction ahead. You'll almost always find a molted shell near the junction of a corridor that leads you to a metroid battle — even, it seems, the ones where the metroid has yet to molt from classic to alpha form.

Logic aside, this visual cue makes it much easier not only to brace for combat but also to navigate through the murky depths of the planet. In one spot, for example, you need to bomb two boulders in a lower passage in order to advance — something you might not think to do if not for the presence of the metroid husk to nudge your mind.

The second main area of the game contains the High Jump Boots. A major key to progress in a *Metroid* game, and already here it is. Again, *Metroid II* greatly front-loads the essential tools to navigating its world in order to emphasize simple combat over exploration. Acquiring the High Jump Boots makes traveling up those tall chambers much less of a hassle, though it does reinforce a severe shortcoming of the game: The short line of sight.

With the High Jump Boots in hand, you can jump higher than you can see. You therefore need to exercise



this new power with caution, because there's a good chance you'll leap straight into a monster or other hazard unwittingly.

This becomes especially frustrating in the vertical portions of the game, since the screen "leads" forward of Samus on the horizontal plane (the camera pans to put her about a third of the way toward the back edge of the screen, giving you more of a line of sight when moving forward) but not the vertical.

The constrained screen dimensions introduce another issue as well, though this may have to do with the Game Boy's memory limitations: If you can't see something, it doesn't happen. If you drop a Bomb and scroll it off the screen, it disappears rather than exploding. If you fire at an enemy just off the edge of the screen, your bullets vanish even as the enemy continues tracking. When you clear vanishing blocks of sand, they'll reappear once

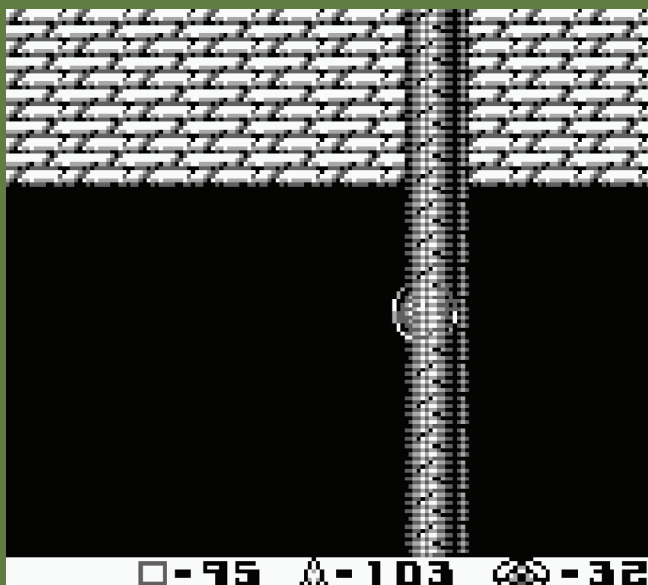


you scroll that space off the edge of the screen. Even more than the actual visual limitations, this makes Metroid II feel claustrophobic and sometimes frustrating.

The designers begin playing around with Metroid conventions here in the second phase. Here, you find a Chozo statue missing its usual item sphere, even though you've never been to this room before.



Turns out the sphere in question is in a storage space behind the statue. Shoot through a pile of identical orbs and eventually you'll find the one you want, which contains the Varia suit to double Samus' resistance to enemy damage. It's an interesting piece of storytelling through design and layout and makes you wonder what happened. Did someone forget to put out the Varia before these ruins were abandoned? Or maybe before whatever apocalypse wiped out sentient life hit SR-388, they started



to put their most valuable items in hiding? Were metroids that apocalypse? Is this really their origin?

Another interesting trick: Layered environments. A certain pillar you run past in this phase appears to be a non-interactive background element the first time you spot it. But eventually you'll come across the far end of it in the course of your exploration and discover that it's a pipe through which you can travel, bridging a gap between two separate rooms by passing through a space you've already cleared in a different manner. This would be explored further in later Metroid games, but it's a pretty clever trick.



Speaking of trick, there's also this Chozo statue whose orb springs to life when you shoot it. It's a de facto boss battle. The creature in question is like some sort of horrible armadillo that rolls around in its invincible shell



and ducks into hiding the second you open fire on it. The only way to defeat it is to roll up into a ball yourself and leave Bombs in its path.

This is the first mandatory use of Bombs in a Metroid game outside of freeing yourself from a metroid's clutches, so it may throw you for a loop until you can figure out how to damage the creature indirectly (the fact that the creature begins as a ball and constantly rolls into a ball is a helpful clue). Once you triumph, though, you receive the Spring Ball, which makes getting about in Morph Ball form much more convenient. You can now jump in ball form — no more relying on Bomb-jumping.



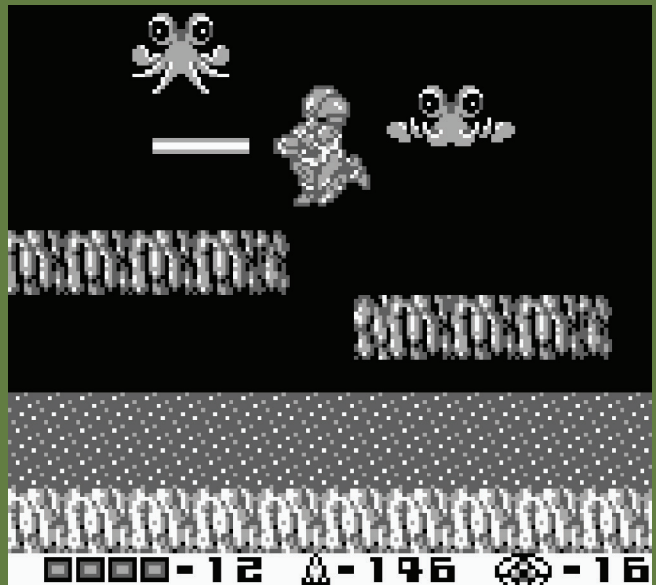
And the final surprise of phase two: You meet your first gamma metroid. (There are no beta metroids; I guess they all died off after being friend-zoned, because they were such Nice Guys that lady metroids didn't want to get with them.) The gamma mutates from the alpha — a process you witness first-hand a few times, because the metroids are considerate enough to wait until Samus shows up before evolving, which makes it clear to the player that, hey, this is one of those things you need to blow up.

Gamma metroids definitely resemble alphas — you can see the eyes and central body orb — but their claws have begun descending to somewhat resemble bipedal limbs, and a hard shell is emerging from the base of what appears to be adapting into its head. In terms of combat, though, the important thing is that a gamma metroid takes 10 missiles to destroy, not just five, and it features an electric attack that can both damage Samus and deflect incoming fire. Its body is also more resistant to attacks, and you have to aim carefully at its exposed underbelly to score the most damage.

Not every metroid you'll face from here on out will be at gamma level; there's even a lonely alpha in the

very final batch. But this is definitely your sign that you need to get serious about finding more missiles and track down the Varia Suit if you haven't already. The threat level of your enemies grows considerably from this point.

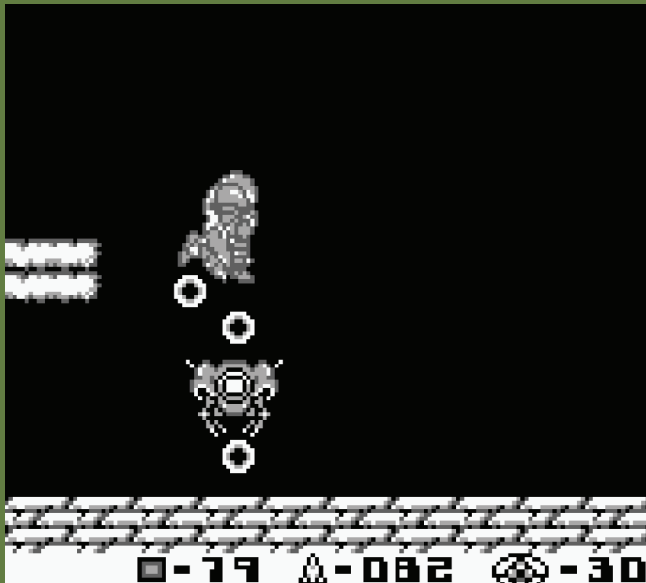
One thing I really admire about Metroid II: It has a ton of different creatures populating its world. Some are biological entities native to the planet; others are mechanical constructs presumably built by the vanished society responsible for all the structures and weapons you encounter. Sometimes it seems that every room you enter has a creature you've never encountered before, and quite a number of them occupy only a single room or two.



Like these planarian things that fly up and float downward. Other enemies have similar behavior, but these guys only appear in a couple of places.



Or this one room where fanged birds rise from



the lava, stop at Samus' height, and belch a projectile. Meanwhile bats hover overhead, dropping bombs that explode upon striking the ground. Neither of these creatures appear outside of this room. Likewise, there are certain robots that you only encounter once or twice. Now, a bunch of enemies appear repeatedly throughout the adventure, but sprinkled amidst them are what seem like dozens of enemy types that only show up in a single room.

I suppose this is something Metroid II has in common with the original game. Not the proliferation of unique enemies per se, but the common thread of straining against sharp technical limitations. For Metroid, the hindrance came from the limited storage space of the Famicom Disc System and early NES cartridges. There, it manifested in the repetitive world design and stark visual style, and the designers compensated by color-coding much of the labyrinth to provide visual clues to your current relative location.

Metroid II's designers had far more memory space to work with — its ROM was roughly twice the size of the original's — but no colors. So they compensated in turn by using that extra capacity to create a more diverse graphical set. Problematic as the game's narrow field of vision and lack of color can be, you can still see a great deal of effort went into differentiating every area of the game (sometimes every screen of the game) by adding in a ton of visual variety. The environmental graphics vary from place to place, mimicking different rock formations, artificial constructs, and eventually far more alien landscapes. The weird, one-off enemies take it all a step further by giving attentive players a sort of living landmark. Metroid II would have benefitted greatly from even a simple in-game map, but failing that the approach its designers took works well enough.

Of course, Super Metroid wouldn't have to con-

tend with either of these issues: At 24 Mb, it was the the largest Super NES game ever made at the time.

Someone mentioned in the online comments for this series that they played through Metroid II without ever encountering the Spring Ball and never felt like they missed anything. And that's a reasonable enough impression. Most of the gear Samus collects throughout her adventure here is wholly optional; in fact, if I'm not mistaken, the only items you absolutely have to collect are the Spider Ball, the Bomb, and the Space Jump. The Space Jump shows up about halfway through the game, in the third cavern/pocket of SR-388. At this point, you can hunt down the remaining metroids and beat the game. Anything else you collect is just gravy. The concept of a tightly crafted environment in which nothing is superfluous and progress resembles a puzzle is still a year away as of 1991, but A Link to the Past will break that ground soon enough.



The Space Jump is entirely new to Metroid II — the original double jump, and then some. It allows Samus to “fly,” effectively, by performing infinite leaps.

It has its limitations; you have to spin jump to activate it (a standing jump won't work), you have to chain a new jump near the apex of the previous one, and if you hit something in midair (like, say, a ceiling), you'll probably break your chain. Still, with a little practice, it's an incredibly powerful skill... and a brave one on the creators' behalf. Between the Spider Ball and Space Jump, Metroid II literally lets you go anywhere. Most designers would recoil in terror at the thought of giving the player such freedom.

Pleasantly optional this time around — especially once you find the Space Jump — is the Ice Beam. In the original Metroid, only the obstinate would elect to go battle-spelunking while using the Wave Beam. Sure, it was more powerful than the Ice Beam, but it greatly hindered



navigation. Freezing enemies allowed you to use them as platforms to new heights, greatly facilitating your exploration of Zebes.

Here, however, the Ice Beam is more of a detriment than anything. It has a narrow field of fire and low stopping power. Well, “stopping power” in the figurative sense; it still literally stops enemies by freezing them in their tracks, even when doing so violates the laws of physics. This proves to be vastly less useful in Metroid II than in any other game of the series, however, because (1) you gain new traversal skills so rapidly and (2) once again, that narrow field of vision. The tactical advantage of freezing monsters is greatly diminished when you see so little of them.

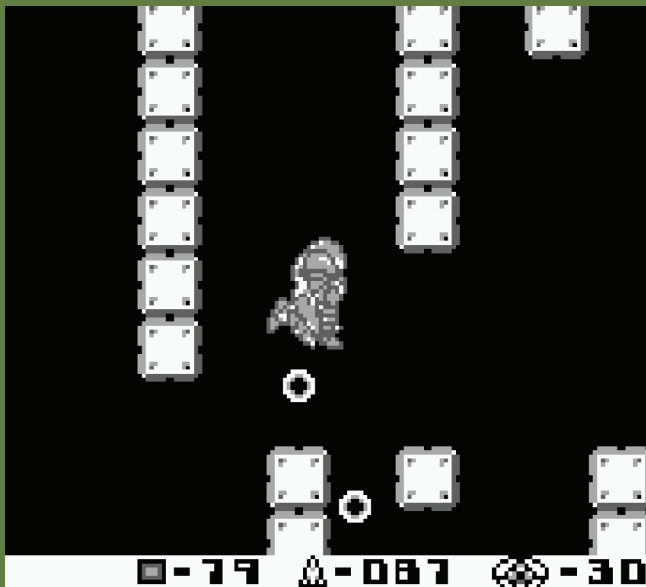
But that’s fine, because Metroid II offers a wealth of other combat options. There’s the Wave Beam, which works exactly the same as the one in the original game.



Alternately, you can elect to equip Samus instead with the Spazer (a triple beam with an effective spread similar to the Wave Beam’s sine pattern) or the Plasma Beam (a long but very narrow piercing shot that requires precision but hits several times harder than any other beam). Eventually, you will need the Ice Beam again, but the game is kind enough to provide that upgrade again when the time comes. Until then, you can experiment with other forms of firepower. Of course, it’s an either-or proposition in Metroid II. Combining beams is still a sequel away.

Unfortunately, the third area of the game is a real chore to explore until you get the Space Jump. It consists primarily of vertical shafts dotted by tiny, tiny platforms. Endless vertical corridors bookended the original Metroid, of course, with one at the beginning and another at the very end. Here, they show up in the middle of the





game, and while none of them are as taxing as the ones in Metroid, they still irritate. Most of them utilize the small footholds of Metroid's escape sequence; in the previous game, they existed to make that final dash to safety harrowing. Here, they're irritating for no real reason.

This isn't a difficult portion of the game, so being forced to jump onto platforms barely large enough to hold Samus just comes off as hostile design for the sake of being obnoxious. It wouldn't be so bad if this one area (with hazardous plants lining the bottom of the shaft) were the only instance of this, but the entire phase works like this — and if you miss a jump, you'll very likely plummet all the way to the bottom since the close-in camera angle shows very little of what's below Samus and makes it harder to maneuver her to a platform as she falls. And, as mentioned before, the field of vision makes climbing tougher, too, since you can leap higher than you can see (and often must, here), which always puts you at risk of jumping into an unseen threat. Of course, leaping into an enemy will cause Samus to recoil up and away, quite likely making you drop to the bottom of the shaft again.

The Space Jump somewhat eases the tedium of this area, but even then it has its shortcomings. For one, the Metroid II version of Space Jump requires very precise control compared to its appearance in later games.

And two, the Screw Attack doesn't show up until the fourth phase, so you're very vulnerable as you make your ascent... which doesn't really make it that much more advantageous than simply jumping up the platforms.

The Metroid encounters in phase three become considerably trickier. Alphas and gammas behave the same as ever, but now you'll frequently encounter them in rooms where environmental elements obstruct your shots. One room contains a mesh through which Samus and the metroid she's fighting can move freely, but even though it appears to be a background detail it can be shot



away... which means that if you shoot at the metroid while it's behind the mesh, you'll destroy a portion of the mesh instead and your projectile will be nullified by the scenery. Several metroids also appear in rooms filled with sand blocks, spawning inside the sand, which means you have to shoot away all of that clutter to get a clear shot.

And it just wouldn't be a new phase of the game without a new metroid type to go along with it. The zeta metroid mutates from the gamma type, and it's quite a radical transformation. Gone is any insectile/crustacean appearance, replaced by a fully bipedal monster that flies around like an H.R. Giger xenomorph equipped with a rocket pack. It can no longer attack with static discharge, instead belching fireballs at you.



Most of the zeta metroid's body is invulnerable. Its head and belly are weak, and if you can slip behind it to fire at the TMNT shell on its back you'll inflict extra

damage. But it's much harder to shoot from below, and because it rises to hover and attack from above, you're forced to jump to keep it in your sights. The zeta metroid goes down after 20 missiles — twice as many as the gamma. (Yes, there's a pattern to these damage tallies.) It hits a little harder than its lower-ranking brethren, but moves slowly enough that it doesn't pose too much of a threat.

Never has the series' desire to be *Aliens* been so obvious as in the design of this dude.



As the metroid counter winds down, Samus Aran enters the final areas of the game. SR-388 offers one last cavern super-structure followed by a couple of smaller tunnel networks that house the climactic encounters. Now that Samus has every piece of gear in hand, the game doesn't feel particularly compelled to play nice.



At this point, a contemporary player will probably start to feel the lack of backtracking. You've acquired all these tools and skills, yet you don't have any need to revisit any previous portions of the game to explore sections that were off-limits to a less empowered heroine. Instead, you press ahead toward the end, which makes the game feel a lot shorter than it actually is. This isn't necessarily a bad thing; the *Metroid Prime* series, even at its best, showed how easily backtracking can go from "compelling test of observation and awareness" to "tedious slog to stretch a few hours of gameplay into more."



Instead, you'll see level design puzzles like this Energy Tank, which looks like it should be a cinch to grab, as sometimes you can drop through metroid husks — but not this one. Instead, you have to roll through a separate passage and find your way through a pitch-black room by bombing unseen blocks in Spider Ball form to create a route. To make it extra-tricky, the dark room contains a Missile Expansion that's quite easy to reach, which could fake you out into thinking you'd grabbed the prize in the confusing black chamber. It's a clever one-time gimmick that could easily overstay its welcome, but since it only shows up once it simply feels like a novel application of your Spider Ball and orienteering skills.

And rather than send you back to retrace your steps, *Metroid II* offers challenging sequences like a deadly spiked room, which demands mastery of the Space Jump. This room does kind of overstay its welcome, since you have to navigate four of them in both directions. Then again, they're really not that big a deal. By this point, you should have maxed out Samus' health and collected the Varia Suit, which means you could pretty much walk through the spikes and be fine.

This area's reliance on the Space Jump feels less burdensome than the earlier region's thanks to the

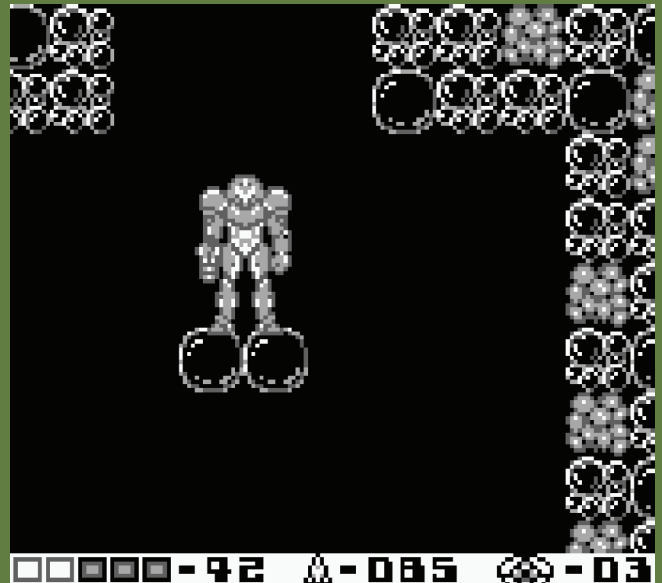


handy appearance of the game's last significant power-up, the Screw Attack. The Screw Attack of course turns Samus' acrobatic flip into a weaponized action, rendering her touch deadly (or at the very least blunting an enemy's attack and granting her invulnerability). Now, if you can maintain a Space Jump, you'll destroy everything in your path as you go (save a handful of enemies that require more specific tactics). This doesn't help clear those rooms of spiky protuberances, but it makes moving through the final big cavern much easier. It also lets you brush away metroids when they start crowding you — you can jump into a mutant metroid and force it backward to give yourself some breathing room in the midst of close encounters.

The final cavern space is otherwise unremarkable outside of one interesting feature: The central structure houses a tall shaft which branches off into multiple off-shoots, each containing a different one of Samus' possible weapon types.

You can't combine weapons at this stage of Samus' career, but you can pick your poison for the final batch of metroid encounters.

With the metroid counter sinking into lower single digits, you can move beyond the fourth and final major section of the game and into the endgame. The scenery here takes on a familiar appearance for fans of the series, replicating the bubble-like rock formations of Metroid's Norfair region. I'm not sure if this was meant simply as a casual callback to the previous game or if there's meant to be some other meaning. Maybe this is how Metroid's graphic designers think you should represent the inner depths of a planet? Or maybe the idea is that metroid somehow terraform their surroundings to share their gelatinous appearance, kind of like the resin secretions that Aliens' xenomorphs coat their nests in (never mind that there weren't any metroids living in Norfair).

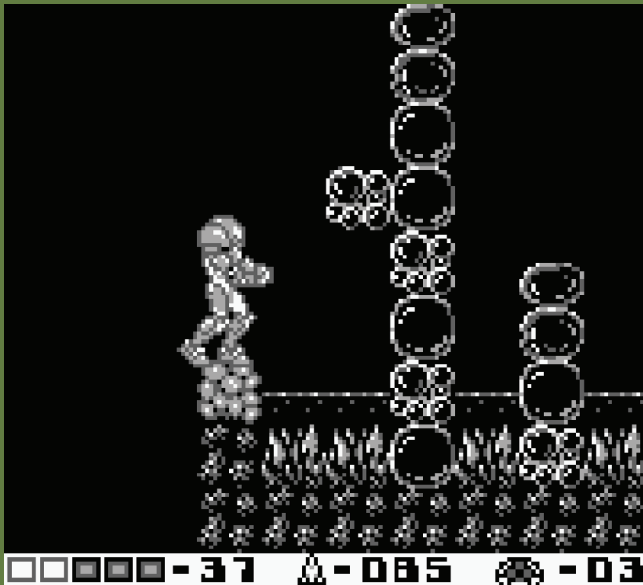


Is this real life? Is this just fantasy? No, it's just a visual flashback to Norfair as you prepare to encounter the nastiest metroids in the game: Omega metroids.

If you've only ever seen the omega form based on the one at the end of Metroid Fusion, you may be surprised by how relatively small they appear in Metroid II. They're barely taller than Samus, and nowhere near as bulky as their redrawn versions. They also can't take your health down to 1HP in a single swipe, which is nice. However, they are tough.



Omeegas behave a lot like zetas — they hover slightly above Samus, blast her with projectiles, make swooping attacks, and attempt to destroy you. In keeping with the exponential strength curve of the metroid evolution chain, omegas take a full 40 missiles to put down — though, like zetas, you can pepper the vulnerable spot on their backs with missiles to make things considerably



easier on yourself.

An omega metroid hits Samus for 12 HP per attack (24 if you somehow missed the Varia), so these amount to battles of attrition. Because omegas are so large, and so fast, it's nearly impossible to avoid their diving attacks... and 40 missiles is a lot to score with in that amount of time.

The final omega battles are made all the more difficult by the fact that very few lesser creatures appear in this final loop, and there are no charging points. If you run low on health and missiles — and you will! — you either need to grind for refills on the few mundane beasts that appear in these chambers or else backtrack to the refill points in the fourth and final cavern. The further you delve into the depths of SR-388, the more insecure you feel; there's no "home" or safe spot in the entire game, and this final push really plays on that. I do feel that the lack of



convenient energy and missile restoration here works to the game's detriment, though. You'll either need to waste time retracing your steps or waste time killing the same few enemies over and over, neither of which increase the game's difficulty. They just make things more time-consuming and annoying.

The game also does a nasty trick with its earthquakes — at one point you kill a metroid and a quake strikes... which fills in a previously open passage. You're forced to hunt down the remaining metroid in this area before you can advance. It's a small moment and not a particularly difficult one, but it's harrowing; it offers a surprise twist on a recurring game mechanic to trap you right as you begin to feel that the adventure is winding down. When you whittle the metroid counter down to one, a final earthquake drains the acidic fluid from the shaft located in the center of the final omega cavern loop, and you can advance to destroy the very last metroid.



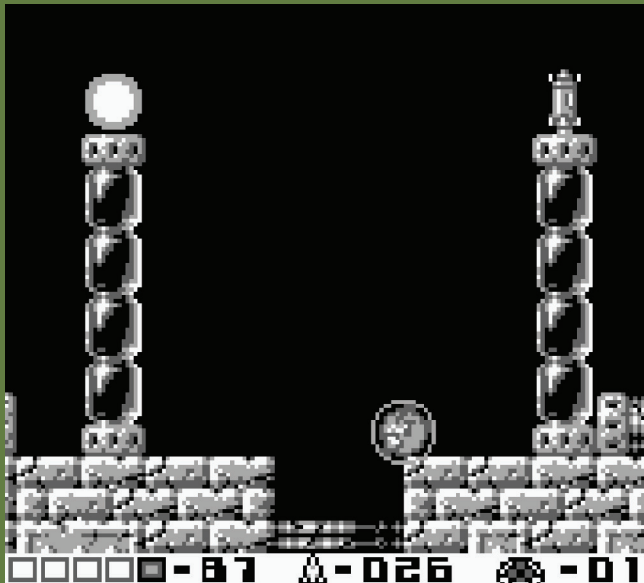
As you move to hunt and destroy the final metroid and complete your dark plan of galactic genocide, the nature of the game changes. You enter a series of caverns devoid of all life, filled with rocky pools of a viscous liquid that does a bang-up job of giving the impression of alien slime with its dull, flat appearance. You'll pass through several caverns of these tiered pools, which almost certainly are meant to be birthing chambers for the monsters you've been eradicating over the past few hours. Clearly, you've reached the heart of the swarm, such as it is.

Despite this being the final stretch of the game, it's eerily silent. There are no more minor creatures here at all — the metroids' voracious appetites clearly having wiped the area clean of other life. It's just you and the silence and the pools of goop, and it stretches on for a surprisingly lengthy time. This is prime-grade atmosphere-

building, the sort of thing games aspire to create but usually fail to accomplish. At any moment, you expect to trigger some trap or stumble across the final metroid, but no. This area is dead.



The only sign of life comes in the form of passive little platform creatures that hover below the ceiling of the final cavern, offering a slippery foothold beneath a few outlets in the roof.

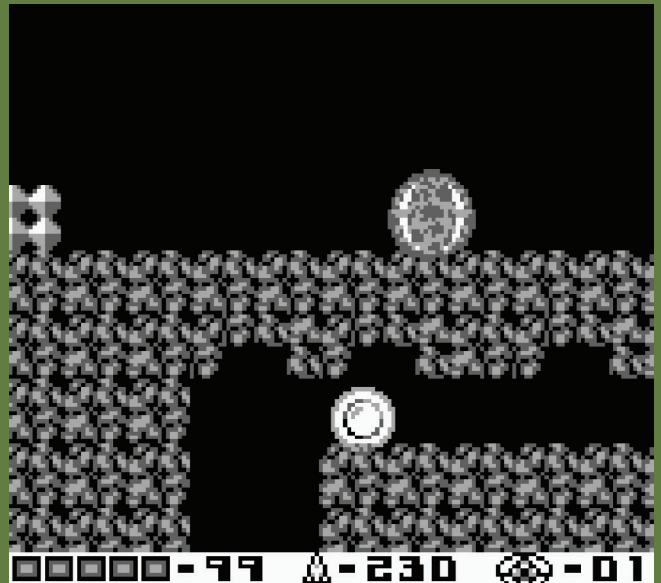


One outlet offers a bounty of energy refills, placed conveniently adjacent to one another for the first time since near the beginning of the game. Whatever lies ahead, the designers clearly felt that dragging out the process of bringing Samus up to full power would be a pointless distraction.

Not far from the refill station is one final weapon-bearing Chozo statue offering an Ice Beam. While the Ice



Beam is intact, the statue itself has been shattered, its head on the opposite side of the room from its body and the hand propping up the weapon cracked off and “hidden” behind the statue itself. It’s almost as though some intelligent being recognized the danger inherent in this device and did its best to destroy it and remove the peril to itself. Hmmm.



The westernmost aperture in the cavern ceiling leads to a narrow duct that Samus has to Spider Ball her way into. This leads to a passage in the floor of another room (above, right) which contains... hmm. Isn't that the poster for Alien? This doesn't bode well for your plans to be heard screaming in space.

As you pass through this area, something finally happens: The metroid counter suddenly changes. In the blink of an eye (and with a jarring musical sting) it leaps from 01 to 09. Either Samus' gear was malfunctioning 'til



now or a whole bunch of babies just hatched.

Of course, the answer is the latter. Finally, you face off against classic — that is, not yet evolved to alpha form — metroids. Obviously, this is why you needed the Ice Beam (you did collect it, right?). These metroids behave exactly like their counterparts from the previous game, making a beeline for Samus and latching on to begin draining her life energy. Freeze them and hit them with five missiles to destroy them. Bomb them to shake them loose if you happen to get caught.

For Metroid veterans, this shouldn't be too taxing, but for a first-timer I could see this being a real panic-inducing situation. None of the "evolved" metroids required the use of Ice Beams to render them vulnerable, so the change in rules here could be a real shock. While anyone should be able to make the connection between these guys and the other metroid forms based on visual



information alone — several times in the course of the adventure you see a standard metroid evolve into an alpha — they behave very differently from their grown-up peers.

Even someone who has faced metroids like this before may find these guys a little trickier than they expect. Their movement is a bit looser than it was in Metroid, meaning that when they round corners and swoop in on Samus they often make wider turns, frequently taking them up and out of Samus' range of fire. Since Samus can fire at two different heights now thanks to her newfound ability to duck, you have to aim and respond a little more quickly, too. The narrow field of vision doesn't help, of course; you have much less time to react to an approaching metroid than in the previous game.

In short, hi! Welcome to the deadly final gauntlet. The one grace here is that if you screw up super badly you can backtrack to the nearby cavern and hit the charging depot to refill. Once these guys are gone, they're gone for good. There's no respawning for metroids; they're unique enemies.

For extra fun, you face off against these metroids in trickier situations than you faced in the previous game. Sure, you can defeat a metroid... but can you defeat two, over a bed of spikes?

Once you've cleared the metroid counter back down to 01, you need simply find the final room — an entire chamber lined with spikes — and drop into the illusory floor at the very end. It's one of the few pieces of floor that isn't covered with spikes, so you shouldn't find it too tricky to figure out the path forward.



And, finally, the last metroid, not yet in captivity. The queen metroid is like a massive, bloated omega that's gone through a weird reverse evolution; as metroids metamorphosed, they increasingly took on a bipedal form. But the queen is more of a bestial quadruped. You can

still tell she's a metroid, though — there's that "core" in her belly, the same multiple eye clusters, the same fleshy triple-bladed carapace on her back. It's just that she's huge and four-legged and has an extending neck.

Since you don't have a power loader and Samus isn't tasked with protecting a helpless child quite yet, the Aliens parallels appear to have run their course.

The queen attacks by firing off a couple of projectiles that rebound from the wall and track Samus as they fly off-screen. Meanwhile, she steps forward to the front of the ledge she occupies and darts her head forward to smash into Samus. It's possible to win this fight by playing fair — jumping carefully over each head-dart and launching a couple of missiles into her face every round — but that's a slow and tedious process. The queen takes something like 100 missiles to the face before she dies, and once she's taken a fair chunk of damage her attacks become faster and more aggressive.



No, the best thing to do is hit her in the gob when her head darts forward and she opens her mouth to take a chomp of Samus. If you hit her in the open mouth with a missile, she'll be momentarily stunned. You can take this opportunity to roll into a ball and slide into her mouth.

This isn't terribly intuitive, but her mouth is just the right size for a morphed Samus. A moment later, she'll retract her head, pulling Samus along with her.

Now, you can bomb her face for some up-close heavy damage... or you can roll down into her belly and drop a bomb there instead. Like the proverb says, a bomb in the belly is worth 20 missiles in the face. (That is how it goes, right?) Perform this action five times and you'll destroy the queen from within... or just do the jump-and-evade thing over and over again. Your choice. It can be a tough fight or a total breeze, as you prefer. The gap in

the floor to the lower left takes you to the refill chamber in case you need to juice up again — though of course if you drop through there you have to make your way back through the chambers formerly occupied by the old-school metroids.

With the queen defeated, the lower gap fills in as the game's way of saying "only one way out." So you pass through the space formerly occupied by the queen and reach that egg you saw earlier...



Which hatches into the cutest little baby metroid, which is very confused and assumes Samus is its mother.

This is just as well. No doubt Samus could make short work of the hatchling after taking down the queen of the species, but she can't destroy the barriers leading from the queen's chamber to the planet's surface without help. So the baby (sorry, I know Other M ruined this name) fol-



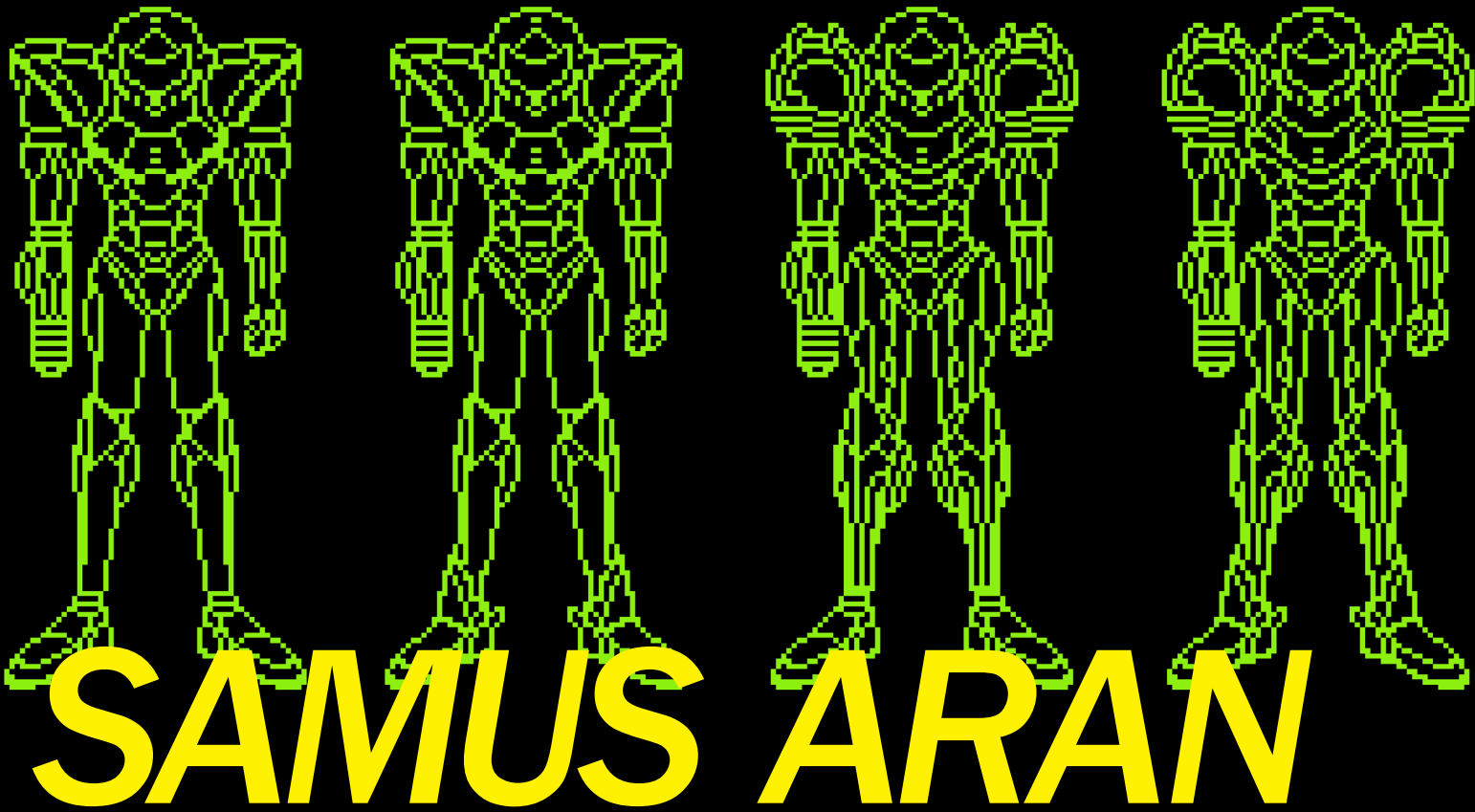
lows you around and breaks through the partitions, leaving you free to return to the outside world.

Where your ship waits. The game is literally one big loop, meaning that the circle is complete. Incidentally, you can actually reach the entrance to the queen's lair early by backtracking with the Space Jump to the starting point, but you can't make it all the way to the final battle in reverse. Not only can you not break those barriers without the baby's help, you have to climb into a toxic space that saps Samus' energy... which for some reason doesn't affect her on the way out.

The last-minute escape has been a Metroid tradition from the start, and Metroid II keeps the dream alive... but this is a different kind of escape. It's totally stress-free, untimed, with no danger to worry about. Yet another difference between this and every other Metroid game.

So, in summary, Metroid II isn't bad at all. It definitely hasn't aged well thanks mainly to the limitations of its host technology and how the designers chafed at those constraints. But despite the move to humbler hardware, this game does a lot to advance the design of the series, giving Samus more versatile moves (ducking, more mobility in morph ball form, a wider array of weapon types) and expanding the mythos of the metroids themselves. Just in time to annihilate them. The baby metroid at the end leaves the door open for a sequel in a surprisingly graceful way. All in all, an important step on the road to Super Metroid. Not quite as imaginative as the original Metroid, not quite a total improvement, it's still memorable in its own way and is pretty enjoyable... especially on Virtual Console, where you don't have to trudge back to a save point when you want to take a break.





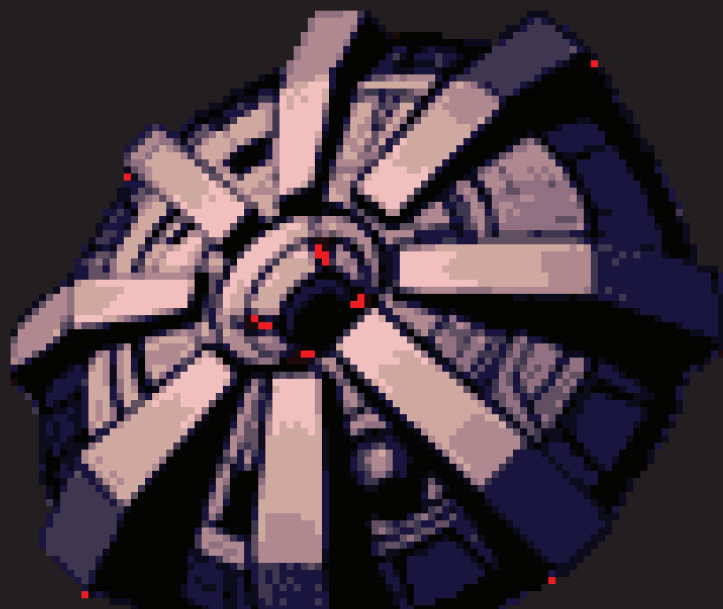
The famous bounty hunter remains nearly as much of a narrative cipher in her third adventure as she was in her first. Hired by the Galactic Federation to fight space pirates and... well, that's about all we know about her from the manual. We also know from her previous journeys that she is an efficient killer.

However, as we begin *Super Metroid*, we do take with us one additional bit of information from our previous time with Samus: She has a soft side, too. Despite her constant conflict with the deadly metroids of Zebes and SR-388, she couldn't bring herself to completely wipe out the species when its last surviving member was a helpless little baby. The last metroid imprinted on Samus, and she turned it over to science for noble ends. And, in doing so, justified a second *Metroid* sequel.

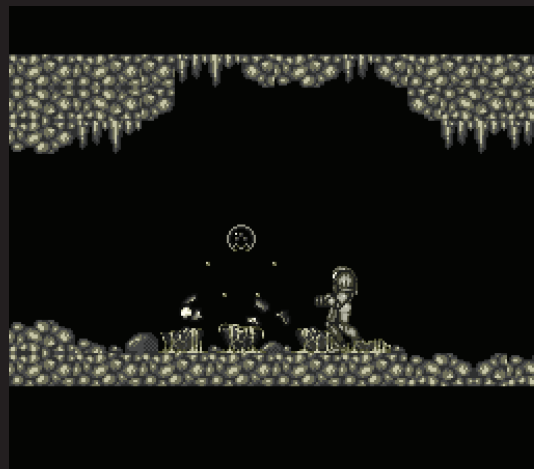
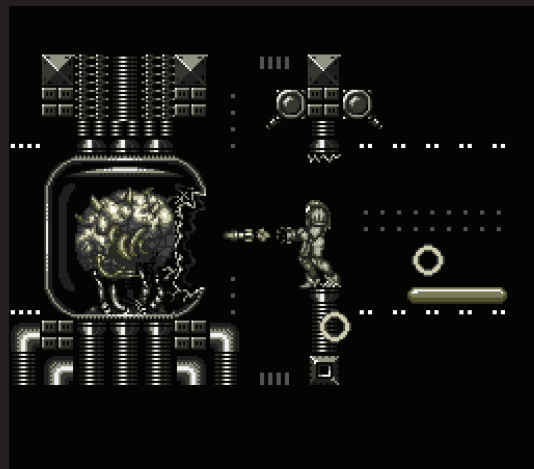
Befitting her newfound status as a more emotionally complex character, Samus also brings to the action an

expanded set of moves. Just as she can now cuddle a strange, life-draining alien cephalopod, so too can she fire at 45-degree angles, swing from a grappling hook, jump from walls, and fling herself through space like a human missile.

Samus also has far more upgrade potential in this episode than in either of her previous games. She can collect significantly more Energy Tanks (14 total versus six in *Metroid* and five in *Metroid II*), as well as the new Reserve Tanks that serve as an emergency health backup. She collects twice as many suit upgrades and has access to about as many weapon selections as in *Metroid II* – but this time, she can equip more than one weapon at a time. She also has the capacity to pick up extra-powerful bombs and missiles. In short, Samus Aran is a walking battery of destruction. You know, in addition to having an instinctive maternal compulsion.



CERES STATION & CRATERIA



THE LAST METROID IS IN
CAPTIVITY. THE GALAXY
IS AT PEACE...

Sometimes it seems a little hard to believe that Nintendo created Super Metroid. It's such an un-Nintendo-like game — so somber and moody, so straight-faced, so rich with narrative innovation that feels nothing at all like what we've come to expect from Nintendo. And yet, it's quint-essentially classic Nintendo in many ways: It leads you along with unspoken hints, gives you many tools without over-complicating things, rewards you both for being focused and for being curious, and like A Link to the Past represents such a perfect expression of a specific game concept that no one has managed to truly best it without building on its foundation.

Super Metroid represents not only the maturation of the Metroid franchise, but of game design and technology as well. It married top-notch visuals to highly refined gameplay; in fact, it was the biggest game Nintendo had ever created to that point, weighing in at 24Mb. The perfect marriage of quality and quantity.

Unusually for a Nintendo game, Super Metroid commits to telling a story from start to finish. Unlike their other action games, the plot isn't simply an excuse to kick things off; the tale unfolds throughout the adventure. Unlike non-Nintendo action games of the time, however, you never have to deal with non-interactive cut scenes breaking up the action. Once the introductory dialogue ends, you don't have to read a single scrap of dialogue until the finale; and yet, its conclusion is one of the most gripping and memorable story moments in gaming. With Super Metroid, Nintendo R&D1 mastered the art of subtlety, and the more closely you pay attention the more you get from the game.

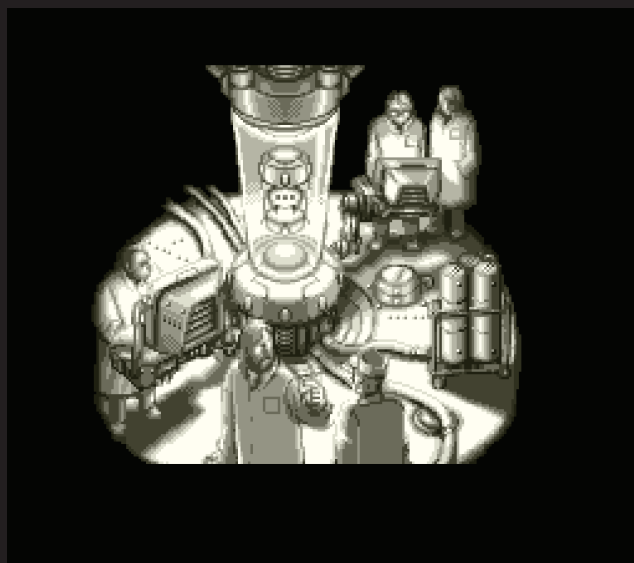
In this book, I'll obviously be focusing on how Super Metroid's game design unfolds and guides you through its non-linear world, but I'll also be taking the time to make note of how its story unfolds through action and environmental cues. The Anatomy of a Game started off talking about how Castlevania relayed a progressive narrative through its stage design, but Super Metroid elevates this from a neat extra detail to an essential motif.

Super Metroid begins telling its story before you even start playing. The title screen provides a cinematic opening, panning across disjointed scenes from a darkened laboratory where bodies lay dead on the floor before pulling back to reveal a metroid larva at the center of the chaos, chittering away to itself. It's an intriguing introduction, even if you don't know the series at all. What is this creature, and how could it have caused these deaths while sealed away inside a double-walled capsule? Or is something else at work here?

This scene does more than simply set up the premise, though. The sounds you hear here are important to the plot, and by integrating them into the title screen the game's creators ensure you're given a reminder of what the baby metroid sounds like every time you play. If you

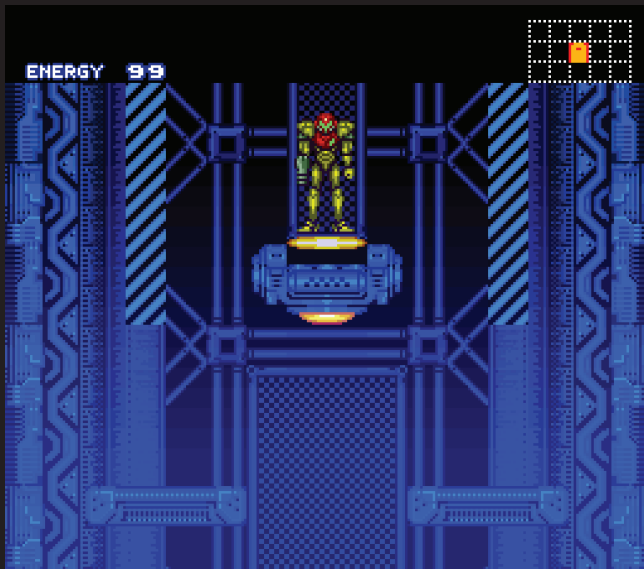
skip past the opening pans, the game immediately leaps to the title screen. You won't think anything of the sound effects, but by making those chirps a part of the process of jumping into the game, Super Metroid guarantees that when they become relevant again, hours down the road, you'll immediately understand the nature of what has transpired without the need to explain it with immersion-breaking dialogue.

Once you begin the game proper, you're treated to a narrative flashback. The last metroid is in captivity, and here's how we got to this point. Narration overlaid atop heroine Samus Aran's visor alternates with monochrome images of the climactic scenes of Metroid and Metroid II. Like the title screen, these moments serve a dual purpose: Not only do they bring new players up to speed on the plot, they also redraw those 8-bit adventures in Super Metroid style to make the in-game references to those moment more recognizable. When these flashbacks become relevant, you'll have the context necessary to understand the references thanks to this introduction.

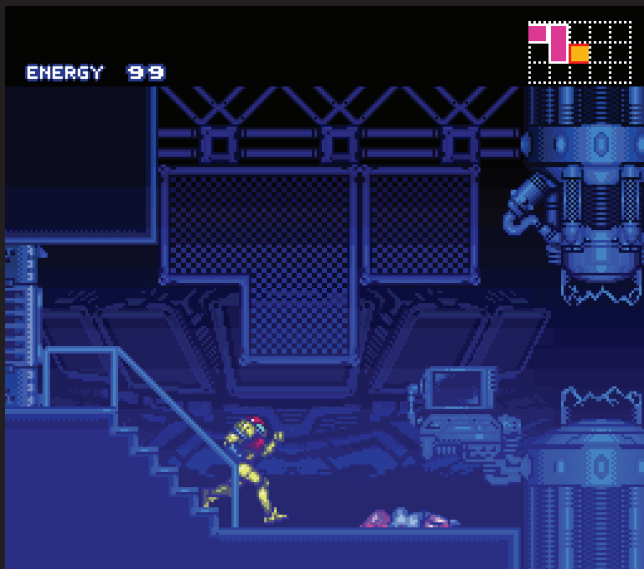


The introduction culminates in an image that ties it all to the title screen: The double-walled tube surrounded by scientists, though here they're alive. Back to Samus discussing how she handed over the metroid larva to the scientists, who discovered the species' previously unknown capacity for creating energy, not just absorbing it — another important plot point — when the music cuts out dramatically. No sooner had Samus left the station than it came under attack. And so begins the game as Samus returns to Space Colony Ceres to investigate the attack.

The place is entirely quiet save for the background hum of machinery. There are no visible threats in sight, and the station seems to be operating peacefully. In a nice touch, the doors open automatically; unlike the



doors from the first two games, which you had to shoot open, here you simply walk up to them to make them open. It helps distinguish peaceful Ceres Station from the conflict zones of the previous games.



A few rooms from the entrance, you'll find the lab from the title screen and intro. As before, the corpses of scientists are strewn about the ground, but this time there's a significant difference: The glass tube has been shattered, and the metroid larva is nowhere to be seen.

Instead, you'll find the metroid's capsule in a small room nearby, sitting alone and untended in the darkness, chittering away as usual. Samus can't pick it up, though, and when you turn to leave the room you find the door has locked behind you. Then you see a pair of eyes glowing in the dark, which quickly resolves (in a sort of reverse Cheshire Cat move) into a barely recognizable rendition of Ridley, who immediately attacks.



This, of course, is a danger-free demo battle. You can't lose here, because Ridley flies off as soon as he reduces you to critical health. (Inexplicably, Samus seems not to have learned the lessons of *Metroid II* and begins this adventure without either the Maru Mari or any missiles.) It's a chance for you to get a handle on Super Metroid's combat, learning to evade Ridley's attacks while getting the hang of Samus' new ability to shoot at a 45-degree angle. But even if you totally biff it, you'll be just fine.



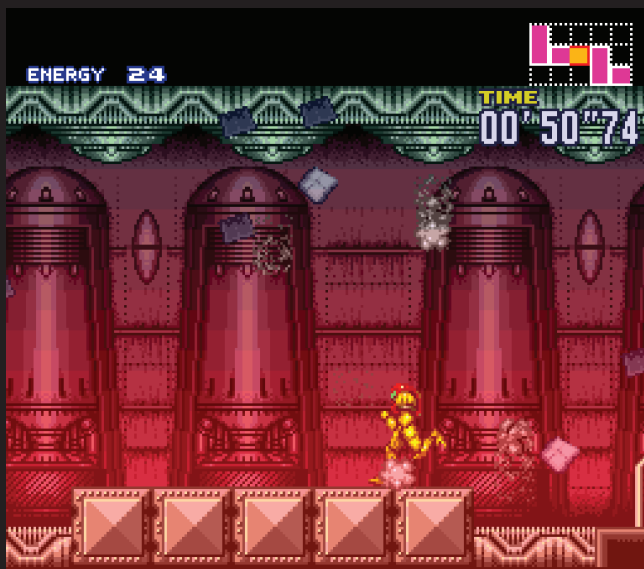
On the other hand, if you're really awesome, you can actually do enough damage to Ridley that he'll drop the capsule and take off to protect his own hide rather than waiting until he's whittled Samus' health down to critical. Whatever the outcome here, Ridley takes the metroid with him, setting the plot into motion.

Metroid II ended without the trademark Metroid



escape sequence, so R&D1 makes up for it here by beginning Super Metroid with one. You're given a minute to escape Ceres, retracing your footsteps to the beginning, and if you fail to make it the place goes up with you inside for a nonstandard game over.

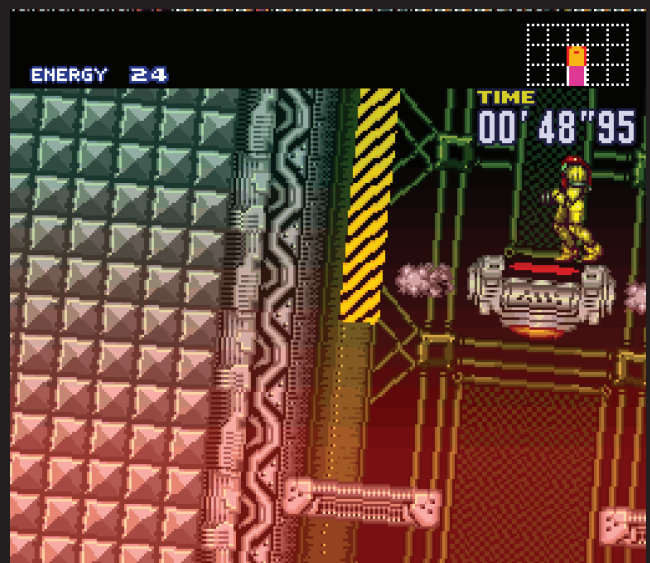
You do have to wonder what sort of jerk builds a self-destruct into a civilian space colony, though. People live there!



This sequence is far easier than the one at Metroid's end. You've already been through this route, and it's pretty short. However, the game does throw in some new wrinkles. Where the Metroid escape scene was entirely based in a tall vertical shaft, the run through Ceres largely happens along horizontal corridors. To add a little difficulty to these portions, you have to contend with ceramic tiles falling loose as the station begins to shake

itself to death. A tile won't hurt Samus if it hits her, but it will stop her forward momentum and cost you a precious split-second.

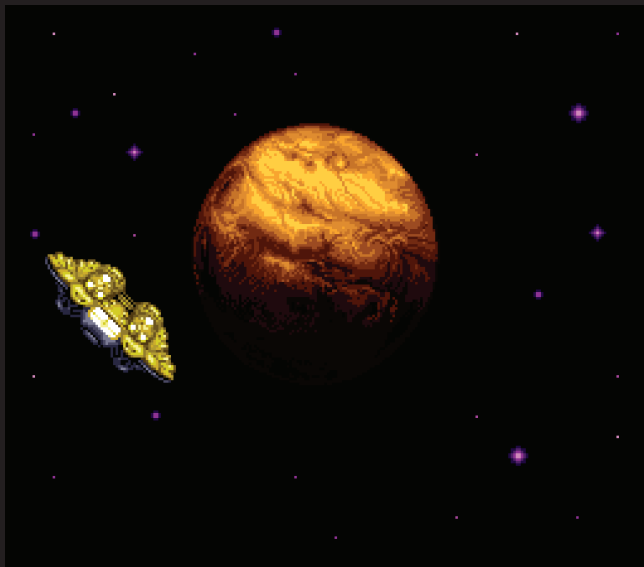
The ascent up the vertical shaft at the entrance to the station is much easier than the one in Metroid was — your footholds are considerably wider, and the shaft is far shorter — but technology is your enemy here. The power of Mode 7 causes the screen to pitch left and right, forcing you to angle your jumps around constantly shifting platforms. This is no real challenge for Samus, who can steer her leaps in mid-air, and it's a great opportunity to become acquainted with that particular quirk of her repertoire.



As the screen rotates, the platforms also bellow steam in short, timed bursts. Like the tiles of the adjacent corridor, the steam won't hurt Samus, but it will halt her momentum. In this case, though, that represents more of a threat: If you lose your momentum in mid-air, you'll fall to the platform below — or, if the pitch of the shaft isn't tilted in your favor at the moment, even further.

You can deal with this easily enough; the bursts of steam fire off at regular intervals. It's not hard to gauge and predict their timing. But if you try to simply rush through the shaft at top speed and escape right away, Samus will have a rough time of things. The first lesson to players appears here: Super Metroid is a game of precision and patience, not bull-headed action. With the help of your steady hand, Samus can reach the top of the entry tube and escape Ceres safely before it explodes.

After Ceres explodes (because, as we'll find out, that what happens to every place Samus Aran ever visits), the scene moves to planet Zebes, setting of the original Metroid. This makes sense, given that Samus just faced down Space Pirate commander Ridley and would naturally think to track him back to his hideout... or at least it



made sense back in 1994, before Nintendo had crammed a bunch of other games featuring Ridley on all sorts of other planets into the timeline between the first and third chapters of the series.

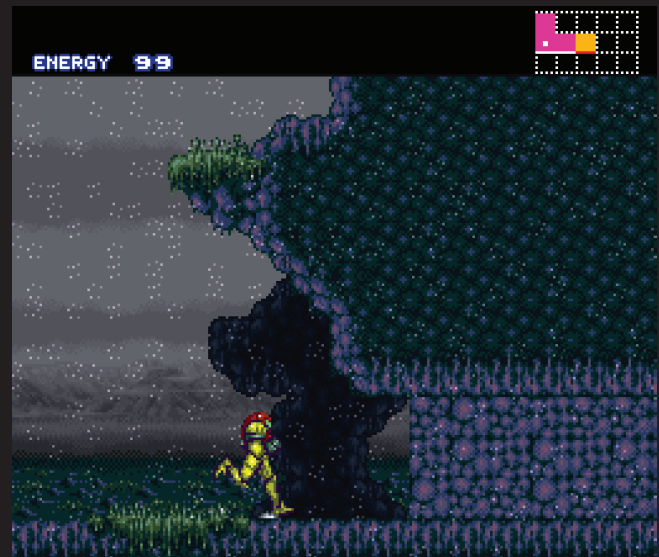
The tragedy of retcons notwithstanding, Samus' arrival on Zebes heralds the beginning of one of the most subtle, most atmospheric pieces of storytelling-through-game-design ever. We land on the surface of Zebes, with Samus' gunship in "park" much as we saw at the beginning of Metroid II.



This setup will prove to be very different in nature than Metroid II, however. Samus will return to the surface (and thus her ship) several times over the course of the adventure, making this area a sort of safe haven. The landing zone itself is a sort of densely packed puzzle full of secrets and alternate passages that can be unravelled as you progress through her power-up regimen — a

sort of proving ground for skills and some very advanced techniques.

For now, however, the surface of Zebes is silent but for rain and distant, muffled thunder. There's no musical accompaniment here, only the sound of the bleak weather.



And there's not much you can do yet, either. If you head to the right (as you did in Metroid II), you'll quickly find Samus stymied by the presence of a barrier wall. It looks artificial and wholly destructible, but since all you have at the moment is the standard pea-shooter, there's nothing doing here. The wall overhead is deliberately curved inward into the landing site — something a first-time player wouldn't notice, but someone versed in Samus' secret innate skills would. There's no sequence-breaking to be had here. Not yet.



A door to the left takes you from the planet's surface to the interior. Because this isn't peaceable Ceres Station (R.I.P.), the door doesn't open automatically for you; you have to shoot the Metroid-style blue bubble to open the passage.



Inside the caverns, the sounds of rain fade away to be replaced by nothing save some atmospheric sounds. Despite ostensibly having entered the Space Pirates' base, nothing here threatens Samus. Some trilobite-looking arthropods clinging to the cavern walls skitter away when you come near, but otherwise this area is utterly empty and silent. The roach-like lifeform give an impression of abandonment. Decay.

There's only one path Samus can take for the moment — left and then down. Along the way you'll notice a number of offshoot passages and routes (including a



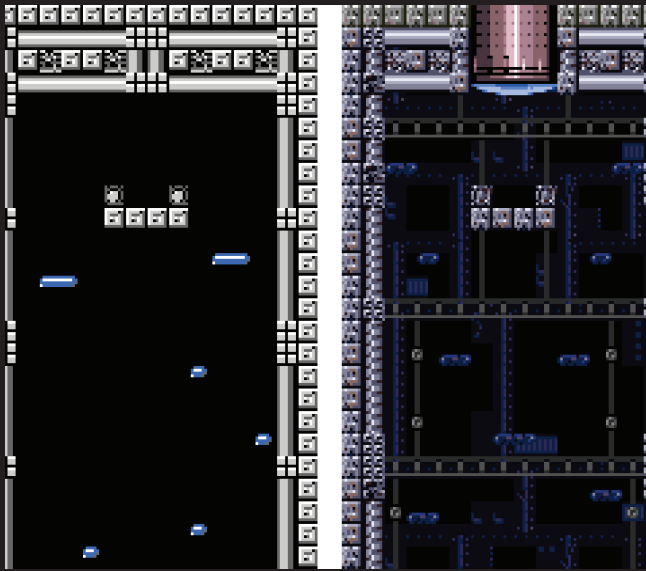
red missile door), but none of them are accessible for now. The one exception is a blue door in the left wall of this brief vertical shaft, but if you step through that you'll find yourself thwarted again: It quickly dead-ends into a narrow one-block passage block by oddly marked stones. The only way forward is down.

This is something that remains true even when you reach the bottom of the shaft. For the first time in a Metroid game, you find a door bubble inset into the floor. This is no accident; Samus now has the ability to shoot at 45-degree angles as well as straight down. This gives her eight-way fire — something new in Super Metroid. The door here at the bottom of the entry passage inspires you to figure out how you can shoot downward, quietly giving you the opportunity to discover a technique without being obtrusive about it.

It also leads to this.



Metroid veterans will quickly recognize this shattered ruin of a vertical shaft: It's the escape route from Metroid. The time bomb clearly exacted a toll on the fixtures here, as every surface appears crazed with cracks, and a miasma of smoke clouds fills the air (evidently the time bomb wasn't enough to break the airlock seal on the doors).

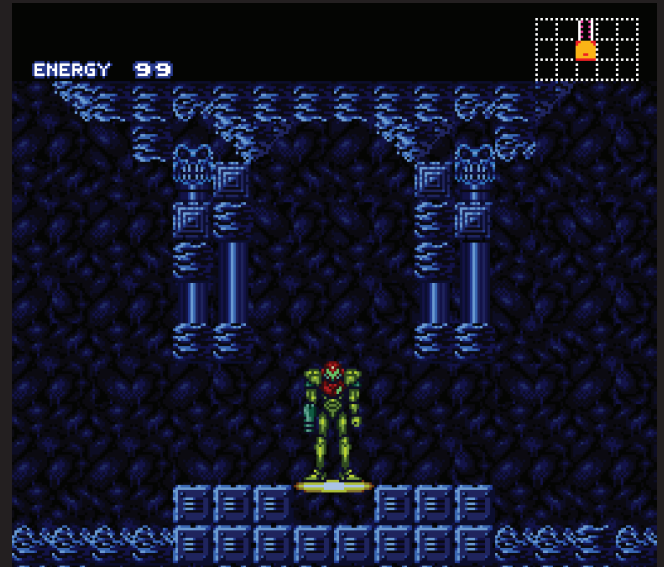


Yep, that's a match.

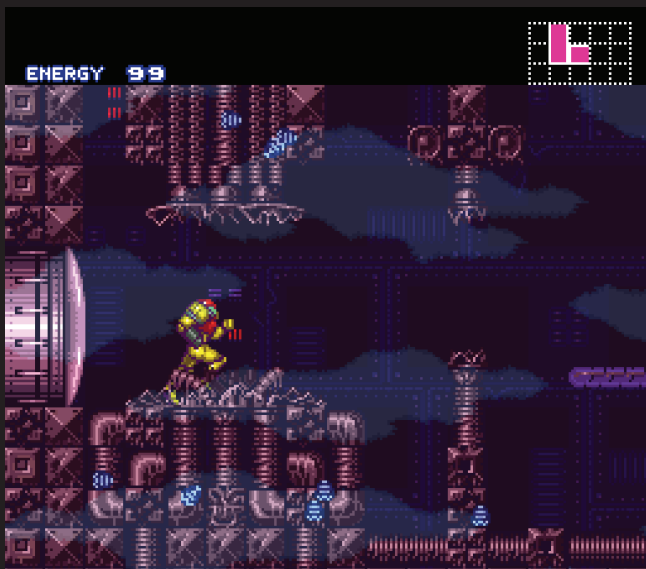
So, Super Metroid has you infiltrating the Space Pirates' lair through the bombed-out ruins of the escape route you took in the original game. It remains eerily silent here, and there are no signs of life larger than what you could kill by stepping on it with a good firm boot heel. We've seen this technique before in *The Anatomy of a Game*; not only did *Zelda II* have Link revisiting a tiny version of Hyrule, but *Castlevania II* used this precise trick for its finale in the ruins of Dracula's castle.

Super Metroid's application of this trick, however, is easily the best of the bunch. It's used as a prologue to set the tone of the game, and its eerie silence builds up to the eventual explosion of action. Plus, the sepia-tinted flashback sequence gave you the visual context you need to appreciate what you find in the room at the base of the dilapidated escape shaft: Namely, the shattered ruins

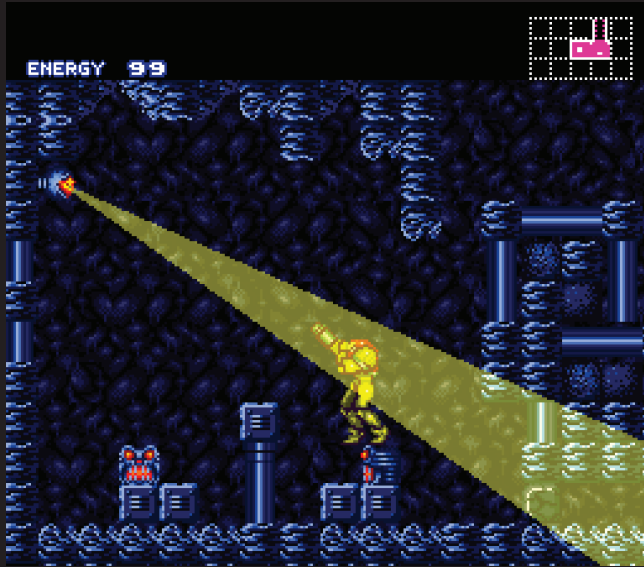
of Mother Brain's pedestal. Like the adjacent escape route, this room is a wreck, filled with a dense haze of old electrical smoke and populated with the broken fragments of the biomechanical super computer that used to occupy this chamber. Mother Brain's former lair doesn't lead back into the Tourian complex, though; the passage has been walled off, and now an elevator leads you down further into the planet.



Specifically, it leads you into Brinstar, where you began the first Metroid odyssey. Despite your arrival in familiar grounds, however, the real action still doesn't begin. Samus has yet to encounter any sort of threat or hazard despite descending ever further into the planet, through the ruins, into the well-preserved tunnels of the Space Pirates' old lair. The creatures inhabiting this section are nowhere to be seen.



And, as before, the Maru Mari — now the Morphing Ball, because the term “morph” entered popular parlance between 1987 and 1994 (thanks, Michael Jackson’s “Black or White” video and Terminator 2!) — rests on a pedestal waiting for Samus to collect it. Now you can roll into a ball and make your way through the small bottom passage to the right, as in the original Metroid.

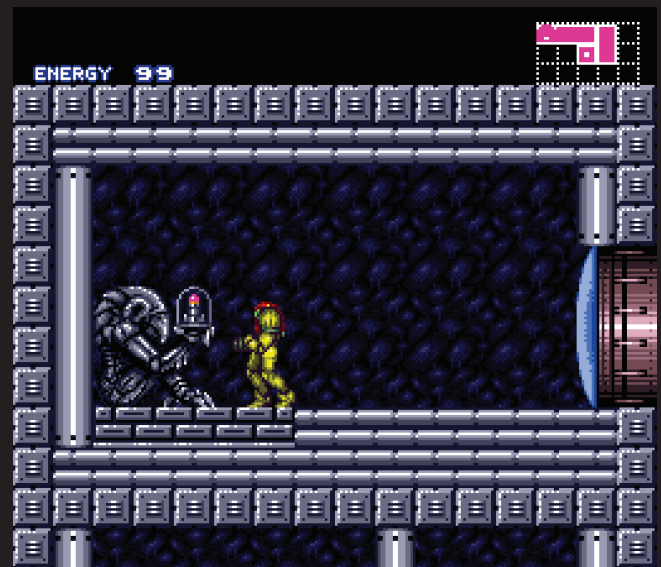
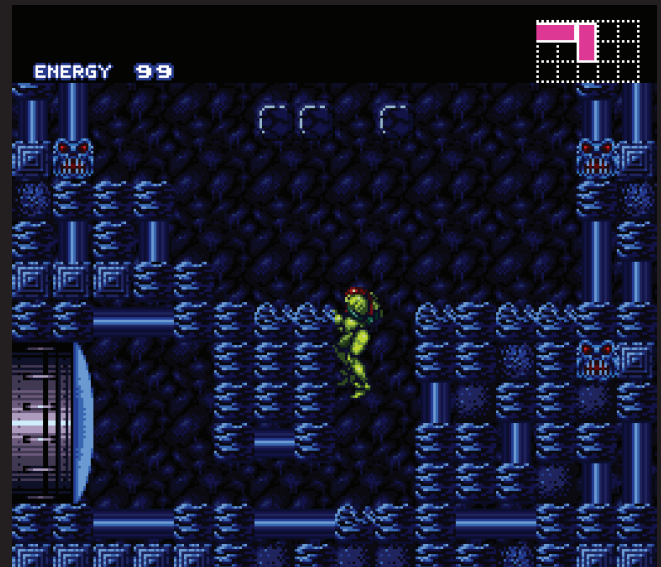


Unlike before, though, this time the Morphing Ball is rigged. As soon as Samus collects it, Brinstar begins to stir. Nothing attacks yet, but what happens is even more unnerving than mere combat. An eye-like spotlight flickers to life and fixes itself on Samus, tracking her motions. You can’t shoot the security monitor, though; all you can do is move away from it. Meanwhile, the stone faces inset in the base of the pedestal illuminate and rotate inward to face Samus, which might be even creepier.



The light will fade away if you move out of range, back to the right. Just like in the first game, you have to roll under the one-way obstacle to the right with your newfound power, but this time you also have to shoot out the fragile block obstructing the lower passage. Where this setup in Metroid taught you to use the ability to roll, here it also makes you realize you can fire at ground level by ducking but not tucking completely into Morph Ball form.

Continue to the right and you’ll find another familiar room, though here the far exit has been blocked off with a missile door. But that’s OK; unlike in Metroid, Samus can fire downward now, meaning that you no longer need the Bomb power-up to descend here. You can simply shoot the floor and drop down (top right, opposite page). It’s a very clever use of a previously existing game structure to teach you about new abilities — or rather, to reinforce the previous lesson.



A short drop down, you'll find your first missile, which you can then take back to the upper floor and use to break through that red door.

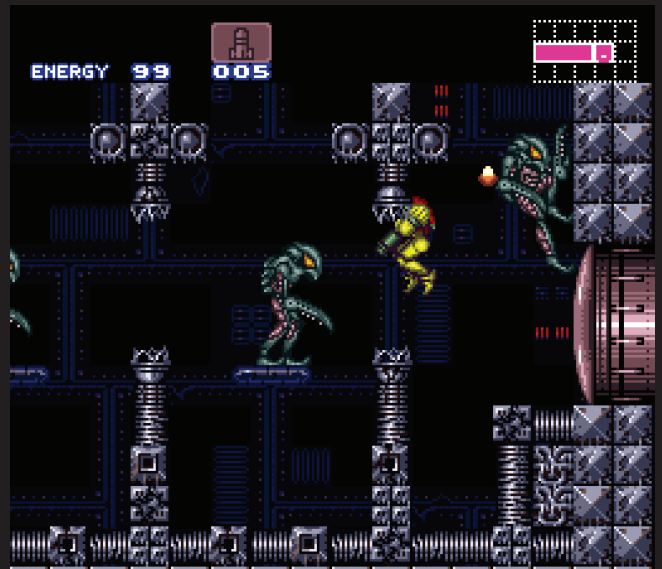


However, all you'll find over here is another missile and a seeming dead end. And, again, a spotlight tracks Samus' movements as she collects her power-up. At this point, there's nowhere else to go in Brinstar, so it's time to backtrack up to the surface of Zebes to apply these newly acquired skills to the beckoning passages you spotted on your way in. The spotlight's presence next to a second upgrade should make it clear that someone expected Samus to arrive, and they knew she'd make a beeline for the power-ups. In fact, it gives the unmistakable impression that these weapons were left out as a bait to lure Samus into some sort of trap. As a final grace note, as you take the elevator back out of Brinstar, a second pair of rock faces set on either side of the lift turn to face Samus as she ascends.

As you return to the ruins of the Tourian zone, something has changed: The power has come back on, the miasma is gone, and the series' ethereal "item room" tune plays.

And Mother Brain's old hangout is suddenly full of Space Pirates. The door locks behind you and an urgent but melancholic action theme begins to play. Surprise! Super Metroid has begun in earnest.

Honestly, words and images don't do justice to the impact of this sequence. Super Metroid excels at maximizing minimal assets, and this introductory sequence demonstrates that artistry magnificently. It places you in familiar environments presented in an unusual way to build intrigue and suspense; the longer you play through this portion of the game, the more uneasy you become. That Ridley demo battle aside, Samus makes it several steps into the power-up progression chain before ever facing



a single foe — but even as you work your way through desolation, it's clear that you're not alone on Zebes, nor unexpected. It's absolutely one of the greatest playable introductory sequences in gaming, neatly translating the uneasiness of a horror film (or of Metroid's obvious inspiration, *Aliens*) before the monsters finally jump out and the action commences in earnest.

And the rest of the game is just as good.

Now that Samus has walked directly into a deadly waiting trap, springing its cruel jaws into action around her, how will she ever survive? Oh, right... by shooting everything in sight. The Space Pirates are an interesting bunch; they're agile, capable of climbing walls and leaping around, and they can emit lasers from their bodies. But they're also not very durable. One shot takes them out. Though there'll be tougher pirates to deal with in due time.

The ambush room actually turns out to be a



pretty dumb place for the pirates to ambush Samus, since its unusually convoluted terrain — the entire chamber is effectively compartmentalized by the burnt-out sockets of the Zebetites — puts the pirates at a disadvantage. You can drop pretty easily into the channels between Zebetite plugs while the pirates muddle around above you. You have to take them all out before you can advance, which means practically the only thing missing is a close-cropped cut of Samus' visor as she rumbles, "Now you're locked in here with me." But this was the good ol' days before the series loaded itself down with stupid dialogue and cut scenes, so instead you just shoot all the bad guys and move along.

The pirates have infested the former Mother Brain escape shaft, which recontextualizes this piece of scenery for the second time. It's gone from being a nerve-wracking test of dexterity and jumping, to a haunted ruin, to a running fight. The lack of a time limit keeps this area from being as intense as it was in *Metroid*, but the addition of combat to the upward climb does add an interesting new element to it.

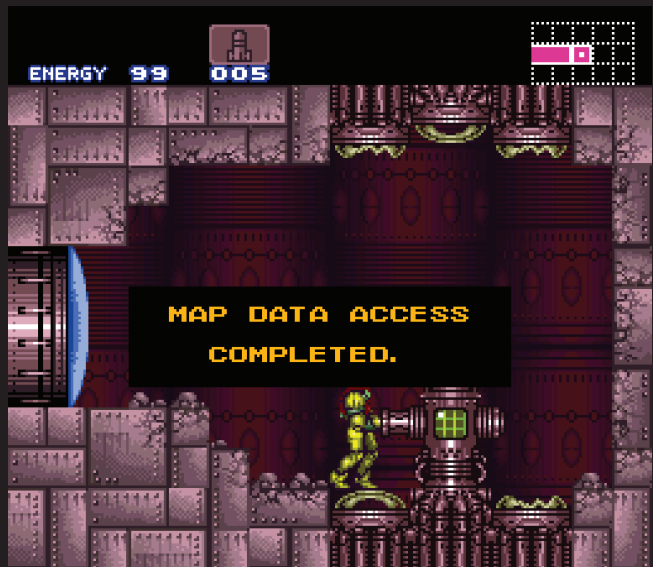
The pirates will shoot at Samus and then leap across the shaft to the other wall if Samus tries to face them on their own level. So this area really becomes an exercise in learning to make the most of Samus' new ability to aim at a 45-degree angle. You can't shoot the pirates from directly below because none of the shaft's platforms line up against the walls, and it's dangerous to tackle them on their own level. But you can easily stand below them at an angle and fire up to take them out before they're ever aware of her presence. This sequence goes from tricky to trouble-free once you sort that out.

Back on the surface of Zebes (Crateria), a number of enemies have appeared where it was all empty before. The tradeoff, however, is that now you have missiles



and the ability to roll into a ball.

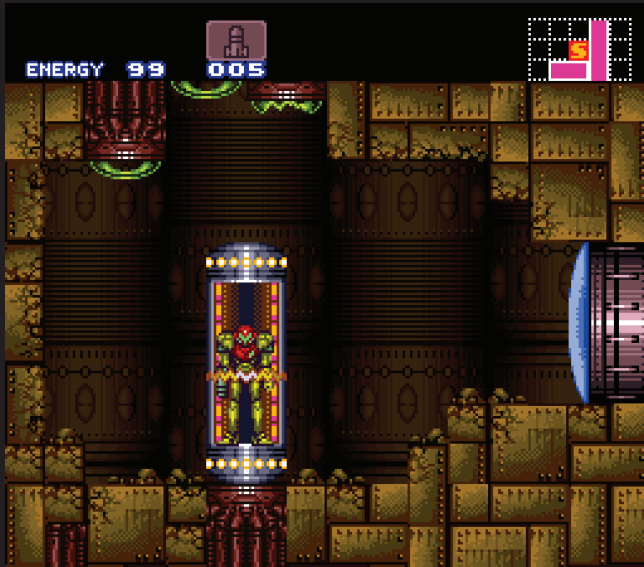
The missiles allow you to access a door you couldn't reach before. Technically, you could have opened this door the moment you collected your first missile, but I have trouble imagining anyone would deliberately backtrack from the ruins of Norfair right away. Between the eerie atmosphere of that area and that lengthy descent down the former escape shaft, the game really nudges you to poke around as much as possible in that area before forcing you to return to Crateria. So unless you're just deeply obsessive-compulsive about backtracking as soon as possible, you most likely won't open this door until your return trip to Crateria.



Inside the door is something new for the *Metroid* games: A map room. The game has been creating an abstracted mini-map as you've explored so far, one based almost entirely on the graph paper method I used to chart out the original *Metroid* back in the day (one room per grid square). The map room reveals some but not all of the current area's rooms — some main thoroughfares are deliberately left blank, while in other cases you'll see isolated rooms with a dot denoting an item but no obvious route to reach it.

By exposing some but not all of the game's ground to you, the map data gives you a rough sense of how much turf you need to cover while providing occasional nudges to explore. The fact that you'll naturally uncover rooms that aren't auto-charted in the course of the core adventure teaches you not to treat the map data as hard fact, and the dangling carrot of unconnected or seemingly inaccessible rooms coaxes you to search when it's important.

Opposite the map data is a room where you can now roll into a gap in the wall... but you still can't advance forward, because there's an obstruction in the way.



Above that, however, is the game's first save room. You will quickly come to realize that save rooms are located in close proximity to dangerous encounters.

With the Morphing Ball in hand, Samus can roll into a small gap that she had to pass up on her way in. Now, you can drop down and see what's below. If you choose to drop down, in fact, you have to see what's below, because the exit is blocked with obstructions you can't currently destroy. Thankfully this is easily remedied — the alcove below features a room where you can collect Samus' Bomb power-up, which proves effective at destroying blocks that bullets and missiles can't.



Well, this is a fine how-do-you-do.

Once you grab the bomb, the door locks and the Chozo statue that held the power-up comes to life and attacks. Is this some kind of security system that Samus missed her first time on Zebes? Was it rigged up by the

space pirates as a booby trap? It doesn't really matter; the important thing is that you really can't let your guard down at all in Super Metroid. This is a nasty sort of extension of the damaged Chozo near the end of Metroid II — power-up rooms as meaningful messages. But you'll find all kinds of interesting surprises with the Chozo in this game, and this is simply a start.

It can be a pretty tough start, too. The mad Chozo (technically, a Torizo) fires beams at Samus while marching toward her, swinging its arms. Once it's pushed her to the left edge of the room, it leaps back to the right and begins advancing again, often spewing projectiles that look like the orbs that contain power-ups. If you shoot these balls out of the air, you can usually score some valuable power-ups.

The Torizo takes pretty much a full battery of missiles to destroy, so you most likely need to collect the energy drops left behind by the orbs. If you haven't learned to quick-switch between cannon and missiles, this is where you should sort it out. There's a pretty good chance this battle will catch a newcomer unaware and bring their adventure to a swift halt, but since the save room was a short distance away, any loss of time will be minor and it's no real trouble to try again until you defeat the sentry.

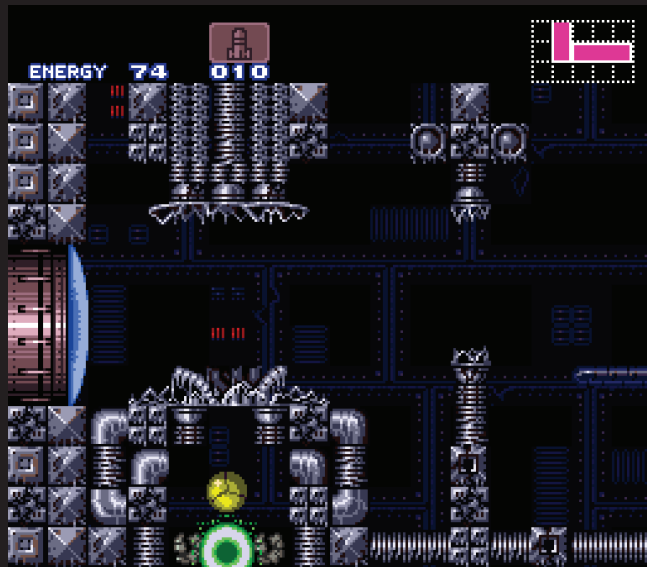
With the Bomb equipped, you can detonate your way back to the main area and roll to freedom. This is a trick you'll see used over and over again in Super Metroid: Just about every power-up is locked behind a point of no return which can only be bypassed by using that new skill. And so, you can't leave the area where the bomb is located without first collecting the bomb and figuring out how to use it.

You can return to spots that taunted you with their inaccessibility; in this case, the obstructed conduit opposite



the map data room leads you to a missile expansion.

You can return to the surface and try exploring what's on the other side of Samus' ship. Sadly, it turns out to be just a green missile door, which Samus currently lacks the ability to prise open.



If you're feeling really sassy, you can return to where Mother Brain used to reside and bomb beneath her pedestal for another missile expansion. Why was Mother Brain hiding a missile upgrade for Samus? I don't know, but I bet someone's written a fan fiction that contains a crackpot (and most likely erotic) theory about it.

The correct solution, however, is to head further to the left of Samus' ship. This also is the only solution. Super Metroid is actually quite linear in these opening areas, offering just enough lip service to freedom and choice to make you feel like you're exploring rather than



being funneled along a limited critical path. It's a deft trick of level design.

Though the developers sometimes tip their hand a bit when they do things like leave a precious Energy Tank sitting on the ground right in your path. Where's the sport in having it handed to you?

The forward path takes you down again, this time winding through a convoluted shaft that forces you to run constantly left and right along pathways patrolled by space pirates. These are the game's first space pirate variants, actually — they're a slightly brighter green than the ones that ambushed you, and they're trickier to defeat. They don't jump around as much, but they have the ability to block Samus' arm cannon. Standard shots won't hurt them, even if you attack from behind; they'll pivot quickly and defend. You can destroy them slowly with bombs, or you can just switch to missiles and blast them in the face. Simple, but effective.



Still, the fact that these enemies have proven to be recurring, and the fact that they have different capabilities and defenses than the pirates you've already faced, leads you on your first step to facing the dreaded golden pirates quite some ways down the road.

At the bottom of the pirate's twisted path is a red missile door that proves to be your first map anomaly: The room behind this door doesn't show up on your map data. Yet there's no missing this door and the fact that something is here. Not only should this be your first major tip-off to the incomplete nature of the map room info, it should also pique your explorer's curiosity. What lurks here, anyway?

The answer, it turns out, is an empty corridor wreathed in the same haze that the ruins of Tourian were before the space pirate ambush. That could be mere atmosphere-building, but it should be growing appar-

ent already that nothing in Super Metroid is accidental or unimportant.

But the actual significance of what lies at the other end of the corridor may elude you for now. Some kind of weird chthonic abomination, a golden statue of grotesque monsters. Metroid veterans may have a clue when they spot Ridley perched atop the other monstrosities — this harkens back to the statues that led to Tourian in the original game. Except there were only two of those guys....



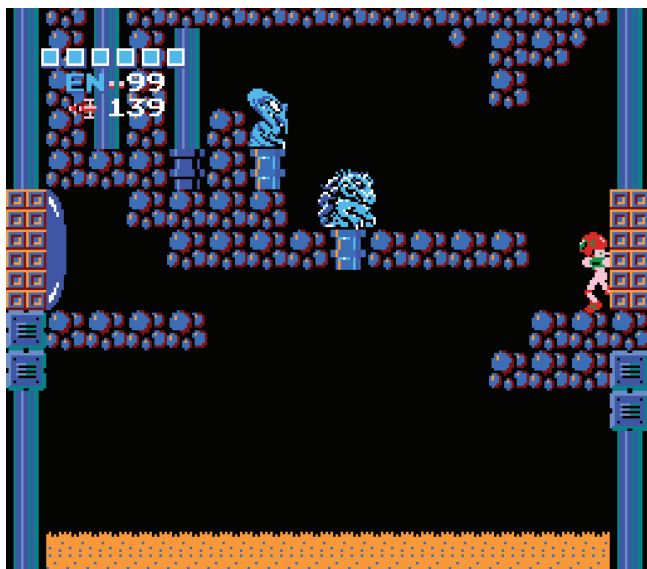
BRINSTAR

While Brinstar has become much larger in Super Metroid than it appeared in the first game — in large part because Kraid's Lair is no longer a discrete area but rather a boxed-off portion of Brinstar — its overall structure is much the same as before. Three lengthy vertical shafts descend from passages a relatively short distance beneath the planet's surface, linking the aboveground regions to the molten magma chambers of Norfair below.

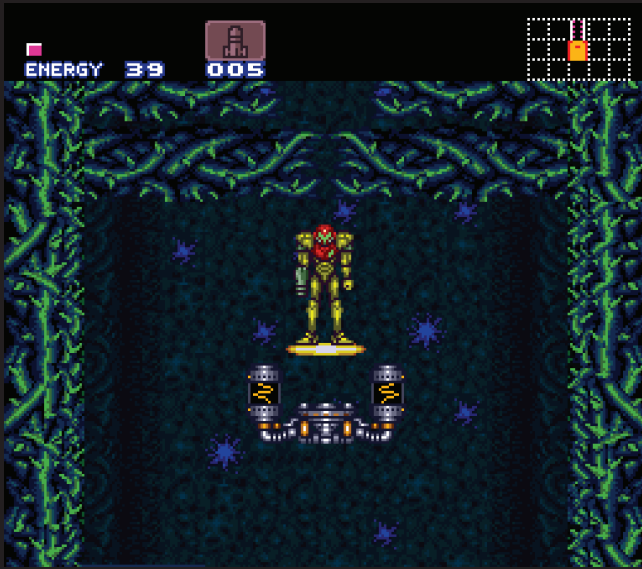
Unlike in Metroid, though, this rendition of Brinstar has a much more complex overall structure. Passages branch off and contain hidden lairs and even sub-bosses. Because it serves as a conduit between Crateria and Norfair (and, it turns out, Maridia), Brinstar sees you traversing its corridors back and forth multiple times as you proceed further into the game.

As a nod to the original, Brinstar contains areas that directly reference the NES game — a cluster of screens that includes oblique secrets and requires some advanced techniques. At the same time, though, this incarnation of Brinstar is much more than just the "rocky zone" — as you advance deeper into the labyrinth, the rocks give way to verdant plant life, massive insects, and flooded pools. A familiar callback and a fresh adventure all at once, Brinstar establishes a baseline for Super Metroid.

THE GUARDIAN STATUES



Much of Super Metroid reprises and plays off of elements that many players will find familiar from the original Metroid. The entirety of the introductory sequences up to the activation of the space pirates in Mother Brain's old chamber embodies that philosophy, of course, but the Guardian Statues you stumble across in Crateria offer a much more concise incarnation. Here in a single room you come across a direct reference to Metroid that shares a common purpose with its predecessor's content, but at the same time it greatly expands on how Metroid worked. Where the original game stationed two statues outside of Mother Brain's lair, forcing you to battle and destroy the mini-bosses before you could advance to the final area, here you have a complex grotesque featuring four bosses. It's also more smartly designed; in the first game, you could cheat the game mechanics to slip past the statues without ever facing the bosses. In Super Metroid, however, the statues physically block the passage forward. There's no going forward until you've defeated all four mini-bosses. But why would you want to?



The freaky statuary room proves to be a dead end, so there's no way forward but down. Samus takes the back door into Brinstar, and the linear tutorial phase of the game effectively comes to an end.

The elevator from Crateria to Brinstar leads to a tall vertical shaft, a classic Metroid trademark. In this game, however, shafts serve a different purpose than in the original. The quirks of Metroid's technology and level design resulted in a map that alternated between horizontal and vertical rooms, while Super Metroid operates under no such constraints. Its chambers vary wildly in size, layout, purpose, and mechanics.

As such, shafts are no longer interminable padding. Instead, they work as hubs, central areas from which multiple paths branch away. In most cases, certain rooms leading from a hub can't be fully explored or passed through at first encounter, so as you gather the ability to navigate the world the shafts offer a convenient central point to return to. This branching hub-and-spoke approach helps Super Metroid work as a backtracking-heavy action game far more effectively than countless games that followed in its footsteps without really stopping to consider why Super Metroid works so well.

As an example of this, the first room to the right in Brinstar's entry shaft contains a mechanism that can't be cleared right away — the ground crumbles beneath Samus, and even if she runs faster than the ground breaks away, a series of doors descend to block her progress so that she'll eventually fall through. It's a tantalizing teaser that you'll need to return to later once Samus has upgraded her skills... but it's not a total loss even now. Once you fail and fall, you can collect a missile expansion as a sort of consolation prize.

To the left is another map room hidden behind a secret passage. "Secret" passage, I mean. Super Metroid is really quite scrupulous about providing hints for where

you should bomb and shoot to reveal passages and pathways. In this case, the design of the room leads you to a conspicuous dead end that simply begs for you to search for some kind of trick.

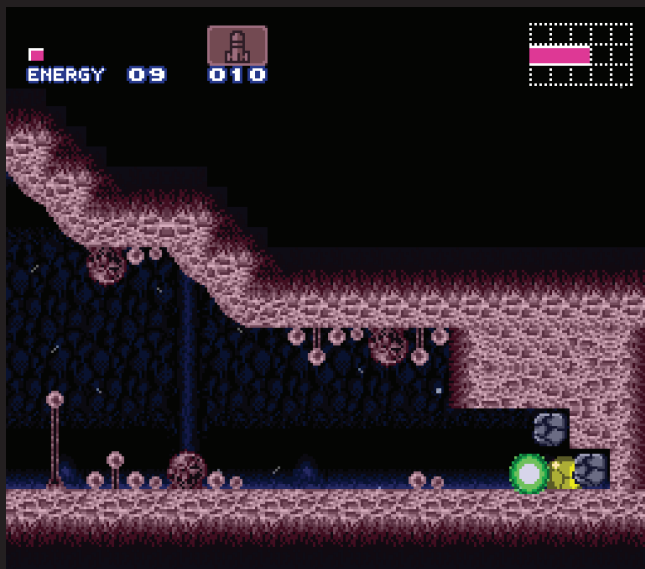


Even more helpfully, destructible walls and floors are marked with icons that you can reveal by hitting them with the wrong weapon. In this case, the floor can be shattered with a Super Bomb (which won't be acquired until much later in the adventure), but hitting it with a missile or regular bomb will strip away its camouflage and reveal an icon appropriate to the weapon you need. And this discovery isn't left to chance, as you can see a creature moving around beneath the floor. Naturally, you'll be enticed to break through the floor to see what else is down there, and though you can't get down there just yet the icon shows you what you'll need to advance. That



icon may not mean much now, but eventually you'll learn what it represents and can use that knowledge to break through to a new area.

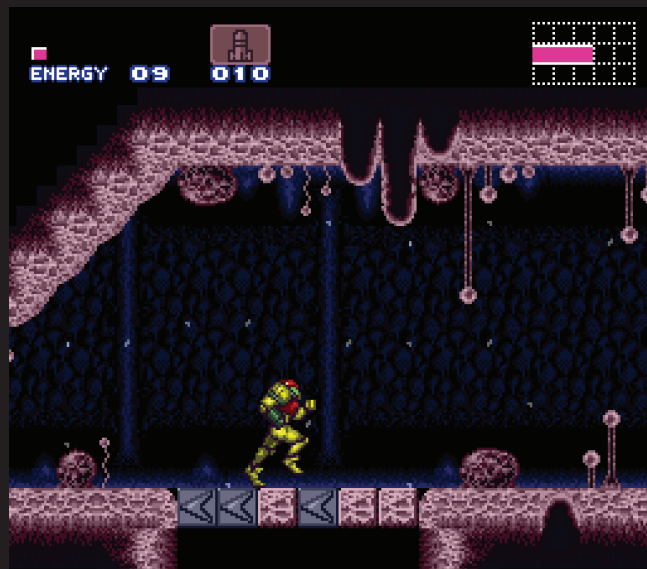
To the lower left, you'll find a room populated with small firefly-like creatures. As you shoot them, the room grows darker, eventually reaching a point where you can only see the barest edges of platforms and run the risk of missing a jump and falling into the spikes below. The fireflies are inconveniently placed, but they don't represent a threat to speak of — they don't attack you and, unlike pretty much any other creature in the game, will actually be destroyed if you bump into them. So they're more of a danger if you shoot them than if you just leave them be — your first taste of the fact that not every creature you encounter in Super Metroid is necessarily dangerous, and that sometimes the optimal way through the game isn't to shoot everything in sight.



Ultimately, though, only one of the rooms connected to the opening shaft leads to the bulk of Brinstar. It, too, appears to be a dead end, but as ever the game provides a subtle but effective hint for the route forward: The wall at the dead end has a rounded appearance at its front edge which is mirrored at the back edge. So even though your forward progress seems to be at an end here, an attentive player will pick up the hint that there's a second portion to this room and bomb through the wall, which crumbles away.

Past the brittle wall is another obvious "secret" path: A hole in the ground covered by tiles that don't match up to the surrounding ground. But you don't have the ability to break through whatever this tile is, so it's another thing to file away for future reference.

Ahead is large vertical room that functions somewhat like a shaft, though its design is more convoluted. You enter towards the middle and can either head to the



top or bottom. Going down is the smarter move, since it allows you collect the Charge Beam (which makes the path at the top much easier), but it's really up to you. Super Metroid is slowly unreeling its level design, moving away from the opening area's gentle linearity in favor of allowing players to make more concrete choices. This section of Brinstar offers a binary choice, though the extent of where you can go from here is limited enough that there's not quite enough rope being offered to allow you to hang yourself.

You'll encounter two oddly colored doors in this large room, one green and one yellow. Like the mystery icons, you can't break them open yet; they're details to take note of for that far-flung day when you'll be able to smash your way through Zebes however you like.

At the top, a save room has been hidden away — but, again, conspicuously so, with the "secret" tucked



away behind a conspicuous block in a small tunnel you can roll a short ways into. The hidden elements will become progressively less obvious throughout the course of the adventure, but as with the exploration you're being eased into things.

At the top of the large chamber, opposite the save room, you'll encounter a new foe called Kihunters. These guys are reminiscent of Space Pirates, and they soak up a bunch of damage while hitting pretty hard. Using the Charge Beam makes these guys much less difficult, though you can also fall back on missiles.



The Charge Beam is a quintessential piece of Super Metroid design, incidentally. On its most basic level it functions much like Mega Man's Mega Buster charge attack — you hold down the fire button to charge up an attack that's several times stronger than a basic shot. The charged beam can damage enemies that resist Samus' basic cannon but without expending resources like the missiles do.

However, there's more to the Charge Beam than that. Super Metroid's hallmark is subtle, complex design that also manages to not to be too esoteric to be of use, and the Charge Beam fits that definition perfectly. If you jump with a shot charged up, Samus' armor acts as a sort of conduit, giving you an ersatz Screw Attack — though without the all-purpose invincibility of the proper Screw Attack. You'll take damage from any enemy that the pseudo-screw jump doesn't destroy (it's only as strong as a Charge Shot, so tough foes like Kihunters are trouble), and the effect wears off once you hit an enemy. And if you duck into a morph ball while your beam is charged up, the charge is negated as you drop a spread of five bombs. This is situationally useful only on rare occasions, but it's an interesting ability nevertheless.

Beyond the Kihunters is Super Metroid's second

boss. Actually, Kraid and Ridley were originally known as mini-bosses, and Spore Spawn here isn't even at their rank (it doesn't appear in the boss pantheon statue setup). So... mini-mini-boss?



Spore Spawn isn't tough at all; it moves in a simple pattern and its only direct attack is the movement of its pendulous lower body. It does rain spores down from above, but they drift gently and if you shoot them they usually drop item pick-ups with which to replenish Samus' energy. Really, this battle serves as a quiet tutorial for using the shoulder buttons to aim at an upward angle while ducking — if you duck in the corners of the room and tuck into a Morph Ball when it swings near, Spore Spawn can't hit you. The spores it releases can, but they drift by moving at 45-degree-angle zig-zags, so as long as you return to a ducking position and aim at an upward angle, you'll be able to take them out.



Spore Spawn is invulnerable except when it stops and opens its “maw,” exposing a vulnerable core inside. You can blast it with missiles to damage it, and if you happen to run out of missiles you can also use charged shots. The one tricky component of this battle is that Spore Spawn (but not its spores) moves faster the more damage it takes, so near the end of the fight — when you’re probably about out of missiles — you run the risk of running out of ammo and taking damage when trying to collect missile refills from the spores.

Once Spore Spawn is defeated, it withers and dies. This causes the entire room and several surrounding chambers to turn brown as well. Congratulations, you’ve just annihilated a portion of Zebes’ ecosystem. (This will become a running theme in the game.)

Up until this area with the battle against Spore Spawn, none of Samus’ new collectibles have diverged from the powers she acquired in *Metroid* and *Metroid II*. The Charge Beam offers the first new touch of variety, but it’s not until after you’ve devastated Zebes’ underground ecosystem by murdering Spore Spawn that you really get to the good stuff. Namely, the Super Missile.



As its name would indicate, the Super Missile works an awful lot like the standard Missile, except that it’s far more powerful. It’s capable of opening a red door in a single shot, and it can also crack the mysterious green doors you’ve encountered (such as the one at the bottom right of the large chamber leading to Spore Spawn). In combat, the Super Missile can destroy a good many enemies that take multiple standard Missiles in a single shot, and they move somewhat faster than their weaker counterparts. That power comes with a trade-off, though; not only do fewer Super Missile expansions exist in the game, but the refills enemies drop only replenish two of them at a time.

The Super Missile also has some interesting side effects, one of which you discover in the room adjacent to the pick-up. The only way to leave the rooms beyond Spore Spawn is to apply a Super Missile to a green door leading back to the main chamber, and when you strike the door the entire room shakes. This causes a couple of creatures that had been crawling around on the ceiling (hidden behind scenery) to become dislodged from their perches and drop to the ground. The Super Missile’s seismic effect is something you’ll rarely need to make use of, but it can come in handy at times. And, once again, the game subtly and silently gives you a tutorial for the effect by building a demonstration right into the area where you first use your newfound ability.

With a Super Missile or five in hand, you can now move beyond the Spore Spawn area. Now, in theory, you could retrace your steps all the way to the beginning of the game at this point; if you bothered to explore to the right of your ship’s landing area, you would have found a green door on Zebes’ surface. This would be a tremendous waste of time, though. You can advance past that green door and enter the Zebes underground’s eastern portion now... but you can only move a room forward or down, because both paths are blocked by yellow doors that Samus can’t currently crack. Realistically, though, few players would bother to retrace their steps that far when a newly accessible green door sits in wait so much closer to the Super Missile pickup location.

The green door south of Spore Spawn’s chamber takes you into the verdant heart of Brinstar, where flowers bloom and large bees make (yes) a beeline for Samus. The room descends down and to the right. In classic metroidvania style, you can see a ledge opposite the entryway immediately upon stepping into the room, but it’s inaccessible with Samus’ current skill set. You’ll be able to



get there eventually, but for now it's just there to tantalize you.

At the lowest point of the green cavern, you'll encounter a one-way door — well, effectively one-way. It can be opened with a blast of Samus' arm cannon, but the switch exists on one side only — in this case, the side facing you. Once you've moved beyond this door, there's no going back until you acquire a weapon capable of passing through walls (say, a Wave Beam or something). This isn't a trap, though; it's a deliberate design choice that ensures you won't give up in the room beyond, turn around, and find yourself unable to progress any further into the game.



The room past the one-way switch is another raised stretch of ground that collapses as Samus walks over it. You saw one of these before, near the entrance to Brinstar, and there was simply no way to get past it. That's not the case here. Samus' innate ability to dash (by holding A, or whatever you've assigned as the run button) proves sufficient to clear the ground. However, you might not think to try it if you've encountered the previous area (where simply running won't get you past the descending gates in time). By essentially locking you in here, the game forces you to crack the puzzle and keeps you from wandering off in search of other means of advancement and wasting your time being lost. To ensure you complete the area correctly — that is, by learning to use the dash technique — the designers built a low spiked ceiling over the collapsing bricks to discourage you from trying to clear the section by jumping. You must run here.

Once you've sorted that out, you reach the eastern bookend to Brinstar: A tall shaft that works as the initial shaft's opposite number. It rises out of sight above you, but at this point there's no way to get up there; the ledges above are too high to reach with a normal jump, and even

if you know about wall-jumping the shaft is too wide (and choked with drifting Rippers that get in your way) to bridge that way. You can't even bomb-jump yourself up (not without serious effort), because the platform breaks away when bombed. There's nowhere to go but down, which you accomplish by bombing some very obvious cracked bricks that simply beg to be shattered.



Inside the bricks, you encounter a katydid-like creature that latches onto Samus and immediately begins sapping her energy. Though the drain is slower, it's an awful lot like a metroid... and it can only be defeated the way a metroid can: By bombing it off you. If ever you needed proof that the Super Metroid team put a lot more consideration into the design of their game than was invested into Metroid or Metroid II, this is it. In the first two games, metroid-evasion strategies were never hinted at in advance, meaning if you got caught toward the end of the game you could easily die simply trying to figure out how to detach a metroid. Not so this time around; here you face an enemy that uses the same parasitic action and features the same weakness as a metroid but poses a much smaller threat. Not only that, but because you have to bomb the blocks that the parasite hides in, you're already in Morph Ball form and therefore primed to retaliate correctly.

This is, quite simply, one of the smartest incidental details of the game — a seemingly random throwaway encounter that secretly trains you to deal with the deadly threats you'll face during the endgame. And you thought it was just a stupid little trick encounter.

Continuing this sequence's trend of advancing downward and to the right, you'll reach a partially flooded area where you discover the dismaying physics of water in Super Metroid: It seriously bogs down Samus' jumps, reducing the height to which she can leap considerably.

Basically, Samus can barely break the surface of the water; so, this area, which looks simple and straightforward, becomes fairly difficult.



Complicating matters are these creatures that dart from the water to grab Samus and pull her into the submerged spikes the instant she comes into range. It's not enough to simply deal with the limitations imposed by water physics; you also have to avoid these things.

If you manage to pay attention to Samus' surroundings while navigating this area's frustrations, though, you may notice what appears to be a ledge above. This doesn't lead to another room, but once you jump up there you'll catch sight of a hidden door above the one at the water's surface.



A small amount of experimentation will reveal a hidden passage above the entrance to this room. It's

too high for Samus to reach with her standard jump, but you can make it up there nevertheless. If you really grok the timing of bomb jumping, you can propel yourself that way, with the caveat that the floor here disintegrates when bombed (similar to the floor of the shaft a short ways back). You can also employ a wall jump to reach the upper area.

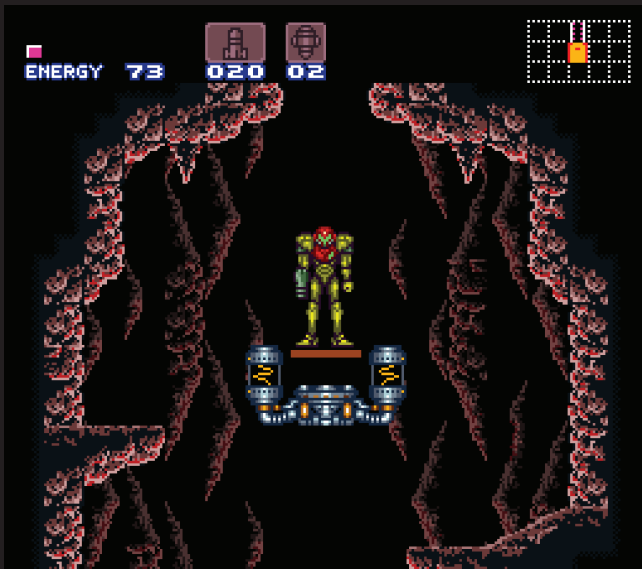
However you get there, you'll be rewarded with a Spazer upgrade for Samus' arm cannon. This works much like the weapon in *Metroid II*: It fans out into a small three-shot spread that offers slightly more power and considerably more coverage for your basic attack. And if you can't reach it now, it'll be there once you snag the High Jump Boots.



The road forward takes you briefly through this odd glass tube, which gives you a glimpse of what appears to be an underwater cavern. Interestingly, the auto-map (both the mini-map and the full one on the pause screen) depict this as existing in a completely separate zone of Zebes than Brinstar, though you're only in "Maridia" for three screens before switching back to Brinstar. It's just a teaser of things to come, but an interesting one; it shows a glimpse of an area that wasn't in the original *Metroid*, hinting quite clearly that this really will be a much larger game.

Your return to Brinstar is quite brief, though, as only one screen later you'll arrive at an elevator that leads you down into Norfair. There's some potential for sequence-breaking here, but it's much easier — and better — to take the platform down into the fire zone.

Super *Metroid* makes the fire zone Norfair a much more elaborate and varied locale than it was in the original *Metroid*. The trick to Norfair in the previous game was that it was crammed full of hidden breakable blocks the required obsessive searching in order to advance



further into the sequence — a dense and unintuitive approach to design. Here, Norfair impedes progress in a less oblique fashion. Rather than obfuscating the path forward, it instead makes use of the area's proximity to the molten areas of the planet to put the concept of heat to work against Samus.

There are different intensity levels for the heat and magma in Super Metroid. At the basic level, you have magma that drains Samus' health when she steps into it. This time around, that can be counteracted by acquiring the Varia suit. There are more intense pools of magma deeper into the planet, however — semi-transparent liquid rock that no defense can counteract. But sometimes heat affects the air as well, and a number of rooms in Norfair are filled with a shimmering heat that saps Samus' health even if she steers clear of magma.

You'll find the first of these rooms immediately upon entering Norfair. The large cavern through the first door on the right begins draining your health as soon as you step into the chamber. The health loss doesn't happen so fast that you can't immediately turn around and shrug it off, but it is rapid enough that you can't realistically make it through the area before your health reserves run out. And the room opposite this cavern within the central entry shaft of Norfair features a series of descending gates that, as in the first crumbling platform room in Brinstar, you can't simply dash past.

Don't worry, though, Norfair isn't quite the dead end that first impressions might suggest. You can collect an energy tank at the bottom of the shaft; you still won't have enough health to get past the inferno room, but it never hurts to improve your survivability. There's a second valuable item in here as well, hidden away — but since the door locks behind you, you're goaded into finding it. You can't unlock the door until you kill all the enemies in this room, but those enemies are tucked away on the

other side of the floor. You can even see one crawling around down there, to coax you into bombing the floor and accessing the hidden passage.

Now, you can simply kill all the creatures here by making a circuit of the secret passages and return to the central shaft, but that would be dumb. After all, once you get into the hidden areas, you'll find a hole in the wall leading further away from the main shaft. What explorer worth her salt wouldn't check that out?

And at the bottom of the shaft is this handy little gem, which enables Samus to jump much higher than usual. Once again, once you drop down into the left area here, you can't actually leave this room without collecting the boots as the dividing wall is too high to be leapt from the left side under Samus' normal steam.



Unfortunately, the High Jump Boots don't help you bypass any of the obstacles blocking off the side passages here in Norfair, so there's nothing to be done but retreat meekly from this area and return to Brinstar. Your options in Brinstar prove to be rather limited, however. If you head back the way you came, you'll find yourself at the bottom of the eastern shaft, which is essentially a dead end unless you're really amazing with bomb jumps — it lacks a single platform for several screens up, dotted only with drifting Rippers. That free fall you took to get to where you are now was essentially a one-way fall.

This gives you a tiny handful of screens to pick through in search of a way forward. If you missed the Spazer on the way down, you'll quite likely uncover it here (possibly, and mistakenly, thinking it's a path forward). You still can't do anything to the glass tube through Maridia. Eventually, you'll have to uncover the hidden passage in the elevator room to Norfair, a single block that can be cleared away with a Super Missile. Rolling through that gap brings you to a room in which a grotesque face con-



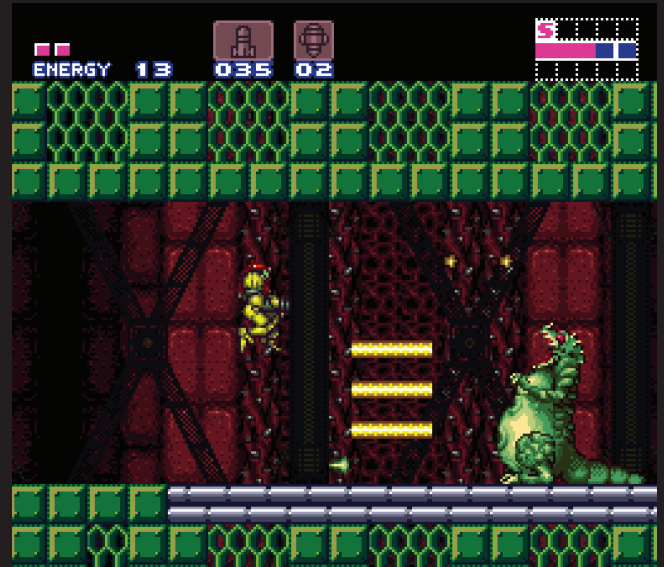
tains a door forward, which you can now reach with ease thanks to the High Jump Boots.

Though not separated out discretely on the map or sealed away by an elevator, this area is in fact Kraid's lair. The first of Super Metroid's minibosses lives here — and, unlike in the original Metroid, his difficulty level seems scaled appropriately to his location in the game. This turns out to be a fairly straightforward sequence, though it definitely takes pleasure in messing with your mind.



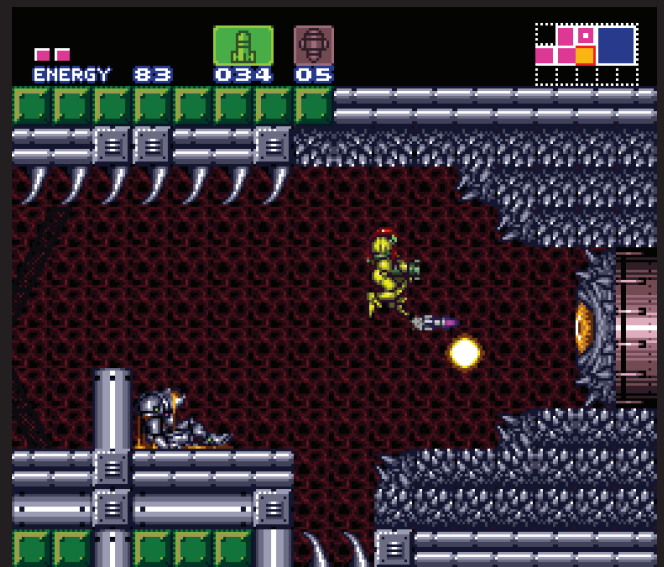
The main thrust of Kraid's hideout is a lengthy horizontal room decorated with the green honeycomb blocks and monster-face spikes of his lair in Metroid, which you have to run through while avoiding a gauntlet of spikes flying through the air from off-screen. It feels remarkably similar to the final stretch of a fortress world in Super Mario Bros., advancing toward Bowser while dodging a fusillade of flames — probably not a coincidence.

And, at the end of the barrage, there's Kraid!

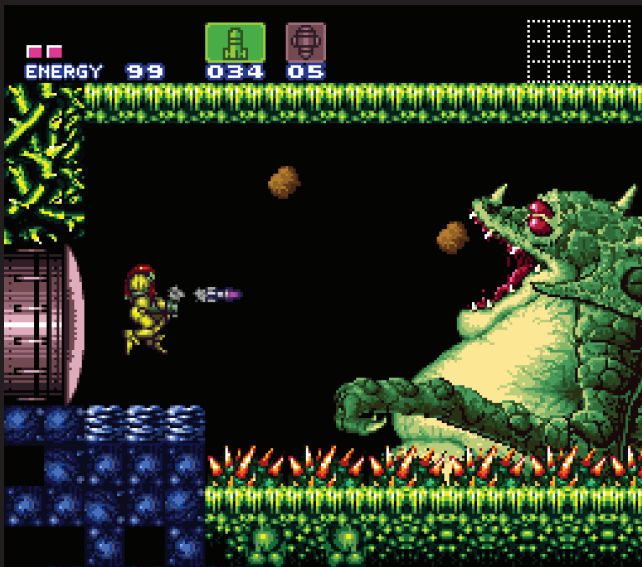


Whom you defeat in a single shot. What?

Nope, that wasn't the real Kraid. As in Metroid, this was simply a fake version of the monster designed to trick you. And it really is quite disorienting. Destroy "Kraid" and there's still more to see this way; the next room eerily contains the body of a dead human explorer. Those crustacean bug things from the destroyed escape shaft scatter from his corpse as you draw near. The body is slumped against a wall facing a bizarre new kind of door — a missile door that take five hits to open, somewhat like a red door. The difference here is that the door exists in the form of a monstrous fanged eyeball, and to open it you have to pop it with missiles while the eye is open. There's some serious chthonic horror going on here.



And, once you blast open the eye-door, you see



why: The real Kraid resides here, and he's huge. Once you enter his chamber, Kraid emerges from the ground... and keeps right on emerging until he towers over you, two screens high. While he bears a superficial resemblance to the Kraid you battled in Metroid, he's absolutely enormous, and you can only damage him by blasting his open maw, way up there, two screens up.

Because Kraid has become so enormous and bloated, he can't really do much in the way of attacking. But he kind of doesn't need to, because he's so huge that his simply walking around poses a credible threat. He can easily push Samus off the few safe footholds in the room, knocking her into spikes just by brushing against her. His spindly little T-rex arms would be laughably pathetic if they weren't so huge relative to Samus. And while he possesses only the same attacks he used in Metroid, the change in his physical scale also changes the nature of those attacks.

The arcing spikes he launches from his back now follow a boomerang pattern, circling back around to hit Samus from behind while she's drawing a bead on his head. (They also originate from near his head, making it difficult to get a clear shot at his weak point.) Meanwhile, the spikes he launches from his belly are so enormous that they essentially serve as makeshift platforms; while they hurt quite a bit if they hit you with their leading edge, you can safely jump on top of them to use as a stepping stone to his vulnerable face.

Only Kraid's inner mouth meat can be damaged by Samus' attacks, but it's not like he walks around with his jaw hanging open for easy access. To convince Kraid to open his mouth, you need to fire on his eyeballs. There's kind of a Punch-Out!! reflexology to this: Shoot one spot, another target becomes available. Due to the way your weapon selections cycle in Super Metroid, it's pretty easy to use a Missile to hit Kraid's eyes, then switch



over to a Super Missile as his mouth opens to ensure maximum damage.

Kraid can't actually absorb much damage before going down in flames. It's a very well-balanced battle, in fact. There's a lot happening on screen at any given moment, and reaching Kraid's vulnerable point takes some doing, but once you figure out what to do and how to do it he goes down in just a few shots. But even when you know his weak point, you need to navigate the precarious footholds and be sure your attacks on his weak point aren't mooted by his boomerang spike attacks. There's a minimum of tedium and unfairness at play here, but you still need to work for your victory.

KRAID

Kraid has radically changed from his earlier incarnation. Formerly a squat, fat little dude with a crazy mane of hair, now Kraid is a massive lizard that towers over Samus. He's literally two screens tall, so large he has to shatter his room in order to stand. He's also totally bald now, with draconic spikes and fins replacing his mop of unruly hair.

Fundamentally, though, his behavior hasn't changed much from the first time you fought him. His belly extrudes a trio of spikes, which fly across the screen toward Samus, while claws emerge from his back and fly toward Samus in a looping arc. The scale of the beast changes the nature of these actions, though; rather than being a threat, the spikes become more of an opportunity, giving you a foothold upon which to climb toward his only vulnerable point, his head. Because Kraid can only be injured by firing a high-damage projectile into his open maw, the fight with him becomes a matter of managing space and staying within range of his head when the opportunity to fire arises.

Kraid turns out to be considerably easier to destroy than his massive size would suggest. While frenetic, the battle isn't hard. Still, his appearance offers Super Metroid a memorable "oh crap" moment – right as you start to get comfortable with the game, it goes and pits you against a hulking monstrosity.

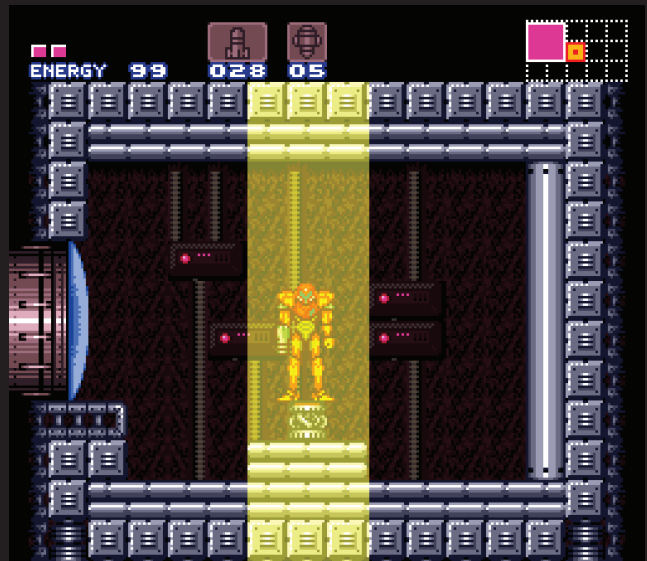
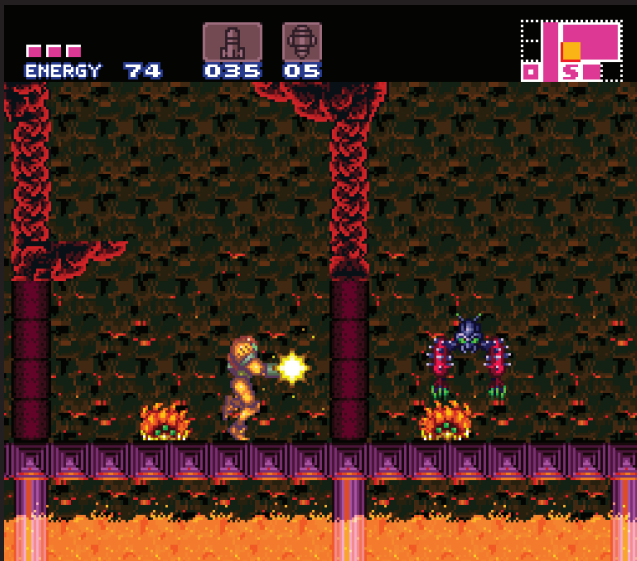


NORFAIR

In the original *Metroid*, you journey into Norfair pretty early into the adventure. That's true here, too, to a point – but each time you set foot into this region, you quickly find yourself stymied by a new obstacle or challenge. You're constantly venturing into the fire zone in order to push ahead and make a little more progress, then hitting a wall and turning back to find the key to overcoming it.

In many ways, this area embodies the true essence of *Super Metroid*'s interlocking world design and organic progression. Samus can experience more and more of this region as she explores and gains new powers, and Norfair's thoughtful design creates a real sense of satisfaction as you reveal some new path or overcome some new challenge. This is *Super Metroid* at its purest, placing an insurmountable blast of heat in Samus' way to frustrate her progress, forcing players to look for solutions elsewhere, then making their way back to see what lies on the other side of those tantalizing obstacles.

Aesthetically, Norfair lacks the variety of Brinstar; it's pretty much pools of magma and dull stone. Still, it does switch things up at times, incorporating some callbacks to the original *Metroid*'s tile sets – though unlike Brinstar, none of the caverns here resemble those of *Metroid*'s Norfair in the least. Despite its familiar location and similar purpose and obstacles, Norfair marks the first zone of *Super Metroid* to consist entirely of new material and layouts.



Defeating Kraid earns you the Varia. Unlike the Varia you may have collected in the previous *Metroid* games, this version isn't optional; it's a mandatory upgrade, required for navigating certain hazards. Yes, it cuts damage to Samus in half, and the value of that can't be overstated. It also gives her nifty shoulder pads, as it did in *Metroid II*, making the character appear bulkier and more imposing in combat.

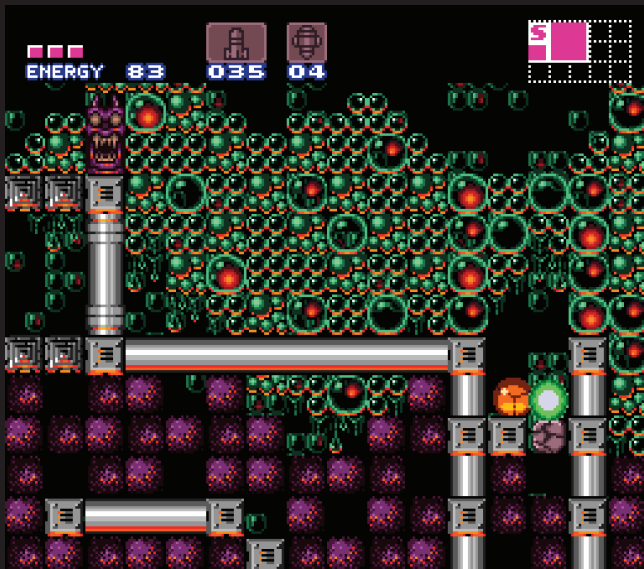
More essentially, however, the Varia reduces heat damage to Samus. In practice, this means that she's no longer forced to shy away from the burning hot air of certain portions of Norfair. Those rooms with the backgrounds that shimmer in heat haze previously posed a barrier to progress for Samus, but now they no longer impede her mission. It's an extra shade of complexity for the mechanics of this game over its predecessors, yes, but it also creates a greater sense of mechanical purity.

The essence of *Metroid*'s uniqueness was that the tools you collected weren't segregated into weapons and keys; Samus' weapons worked as keys. That wasn't true for the Varia, though, hence its optional nature in previous outings. Not so here. Now the Varia also doubles as a tool, pulling its weight through expanded functionality. It's stylish, practical, and functional all at once. How fashionable she looks!

While this leaves Samus a long way from being the nigh-invincible destructo-beast she ultimately will become, the Varia greatly increases her survivability. And it renders both this room and its adjacent chamber trivial.

The heated room leads to a room whose appearance is reminiscent of *Metroid*'s Norfair, but it works differently. Where the hidden routes there were hidden away in unintuitive ways, this room is more like a puzzle.

So while it sees you bombing and shooting in search of destructible blocks and hidden passages, it's not a blind hunt. Not including the door through which



you enter this room, it contains five exits. You can't reach all of them right away, though, and the obvious exits are inaccessible — too high to jump to at the moment, even with the High Jump Boots. Meanwhile, the exits in the lower half of the chamber are hidden away behind a complex maze of pipes and passages. The obvious, inviting area to crack open leads to a dead end, but rolling to its bottom-most point gives you a glimpse of where you need to go.

The doors at the bottom of the chamber initially seem to give you a lot of options, but as has been the case in every area of the game to this point, they sit somewhere between an illusion and a hint of things to come. There's really only one way forward from here, but you can follow the false paths to discover obstructed routes that you will, at some point, be exploring.

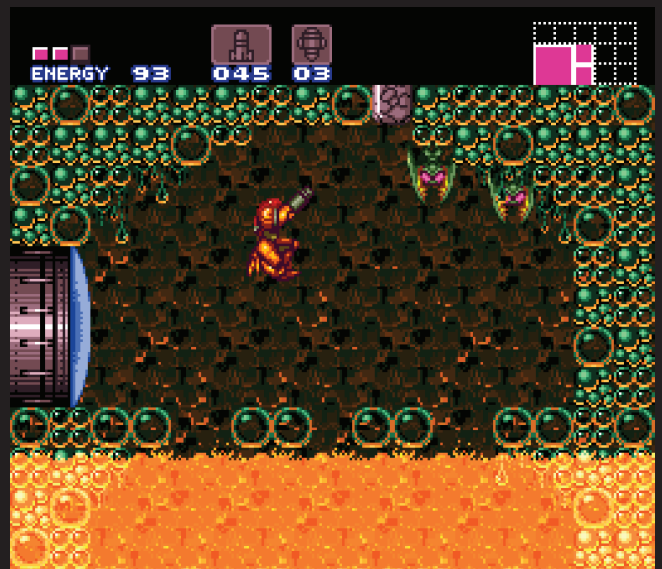
Your next move is blocked off by a slightly hidden obstruction beneath a wall-mounted monster, but once again the level design does a good job of dropping hints for the direction you should take. After all, the other potential routes here are blocked off with clearly insurmountable obstacles: A one-way door switch on the wrong side of the door, a too-high jump to complete, a pile of blocks that can only be shattered with a tool you don't currently possess.

So you roll under here and enter a tall room, at which point lava begins to rise. It climbs slowly, giving you plenty of time to race ahead of it.

This leads to an interesting trap room full of gizmos that attempt to harm you: Rising spikes, descending doors, moving platforms that slowly descend into the magma as you ride them along. Like the flooding magma in the previous room, they're pretty easy to bypass — and like the magma trap, these elements will be repeated in more difficult scenarios in the near future. These low-challenge sequences give you a taste of things to come.



This sequence of traps leads you back to the chamber with all the exits, but now you're up in an area that you couldn't reach before. This leads to a room that appears empty, but which actually contains a hidden passage in the ceiling. How would you luck into locating such an obscure route? Well, handily, there's a trio of Skrees mounted to the ceiling, and you're going to want to shoot them away before you enter the room so they don't drop on you. In the process — especially if you grabbed the Spazer before — you'll almost certainly reveal the destructible block with a stray shot. The game doesn't actually give you the answer, but it makes sure you'll find it in a way that makes you feel like you cleverly stumbled upon it yourself. It's a microcosmic example of sharp game design.

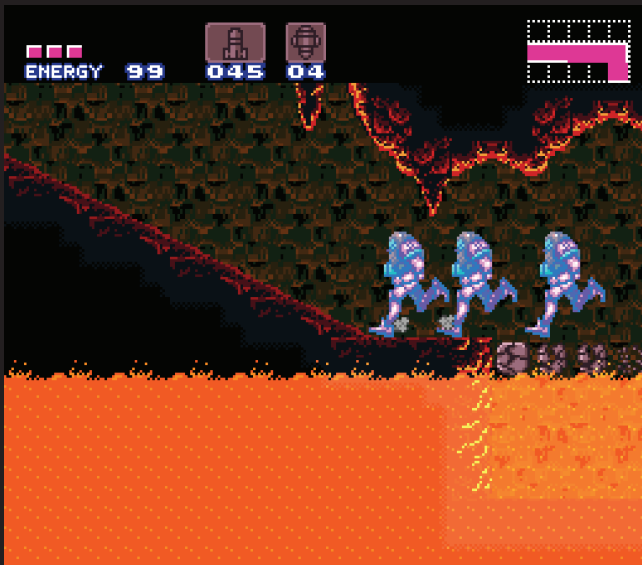


And that continues right into the next room with a series of collapsing bridges made of blocks that vanish



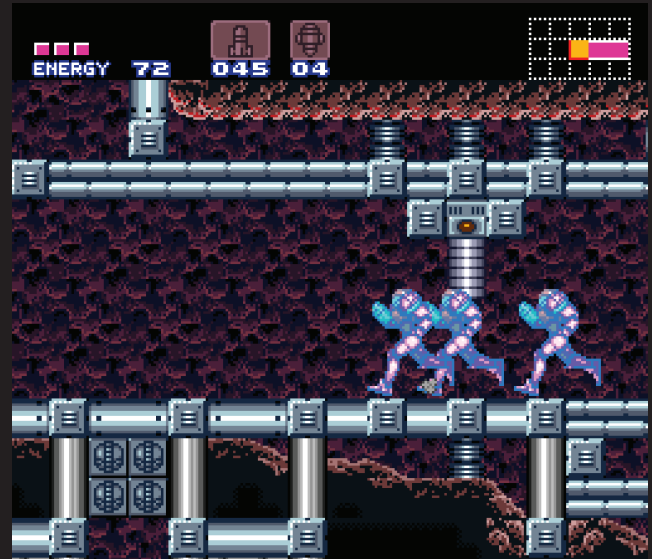
as you walk across them. You've seen this sort of thing before — the blocks crumble away as you pass. If you're walking, they'll drop you right through the bridge into the little pits below. There's nothing dangerous about this; it's just a little inconvenient. But if you dash, well, you can run right over the pits with no trouble — and you'll streak right past the bad guys, too.

But if you haven't figured out the secret to dashing by now, you're given explicit instructions at the end of the series of bridges, which is where the Speed Booster waits for you. The Speed Booster is one of the most subtle power-ups in the game; all it does is slightly boost the speed at which Samus runs. But this is just enough of a boost to slip past certain timed obstacles — and, as with all weapons and tools in Super Metroid, the boots work as both weapons and tools. Once you hit peak speed, Samus begins shining with power, and her body becomes



deadly to the touch. Samus can smash through both "speed blocks" and enemies alike.

You're forced to run here this time around, since magma begins to rise as soon as you exit the Speed Booster room — and much faster than it did in the previous instance. You have to retrace your steps across the falling bridges, and if you don't run here you'll never make it out alive.



And now it's possible to backtrack to some of those areas where descending gates blocked your path — now you're fast enough to streak past them to the areas below. There's one high up in Brinstar, but you can't get back there yet. The one near the entrance to Norfair, on the other hand, is totally within reach.

The far side of the gated chamber takes you to another winding shaft with those mounted alien heads on



the walls, though this time there's no magma to outrace. Instead, you'll reach a room where you can't possibly hope to proceed; the only way forward is through a small slot halfway up the wall. But since magma lines the floor and there's this weird jumping thing next to the wall, you can't bomb jump your way up.

Instead, you have to double back and drop down the narrow pipe along the right side of the monster room — a pipe that, handily, contains a small hole leading into another room. In case you miss it, a trio of little wall-walking critters wanders out of it right around the time you get there.

Remember how Metroid II caused the world to cease existing as soon as you scrolled it off the screen? Not only does Super Metroid retain persistence when something wanders off-screen, in some cases it even maintains continuity between discrete rooms of the world. The scuttlers here actually spawn in a separate room when you enter this shaft and are timed to walk into the main chamber right around the time you get close enough to see them appear. This happens in a few spots throughout the game — a bit of next-gen advancement harnessed in the employ of subtle hints.



The hidden chamber where the fire guys come from contains a door leading to the Ice Beam, which works much the same as in previous Metroids. What makes it different here — and great — is that the Ice Beam no longer need be an either/or proposition. Once you pick up this weapon, it doesn't overwrite the Spazer... it supplements it. So now you have a beam as powerful and wide as the Spazer, but also capable of freezing foes. Super Metroid updates the Ice Beam's mechanics so that you don't freeze an enemy immediately upon shooting it; instead, the Ice Beam simply damages enemies until what would be the killing shot, at which point it does freeze

your target. This is a far more sensible and effective way of destroying bad guys than the old way, and it's a great revision.

If you still find the freeze effect annoying, you can turn it off in the powers menu screen. You can also turn off the Spazer, if for some reason you find increased power and a wider spread of beams detrimental to your play style. The Ice Beam allows you to pass through the magma chamber above: You can freeze the jumpers and roll across them through the gap above the lava, returning to Norfair's entry shaft.



Finally, finally, you can leave Norfair again. The Ice Beam lets you freeze the Rippers drifting through the shaft you fell through down in the eastern portion of Brinstar. You have your basic tools now. Slowly, the game is beginning to open wide.

Because Super Metroid hails from the mid-'90s rather than the mid-'80s like most of the games that have gone under the Anatomy of a Game microscope, it follows slightly different rules. Games like Super Mario Bros. and Castlevania and even the original Metroid were, on some level, compensating for the fact that many people who picked up those adventures had little to no experience with video games in general and those specific genres in particular. By 1994, Nintendo could rest secure in the knowledge that the vocabulary of video games had become somewhat common parlance, especially for the sort of people who were going to buy Super Metroid. So it doesn't have to be quite as instructional, and after the first hour or so it stops guiding you in the right direction and leaves you to your own devices.

Your next major goal in the game is to reach the enticing submerged cavern you saw through the glass tube in Brinstar, but before you can reach that point you need to accomplish quite a few things. The sub-goals you

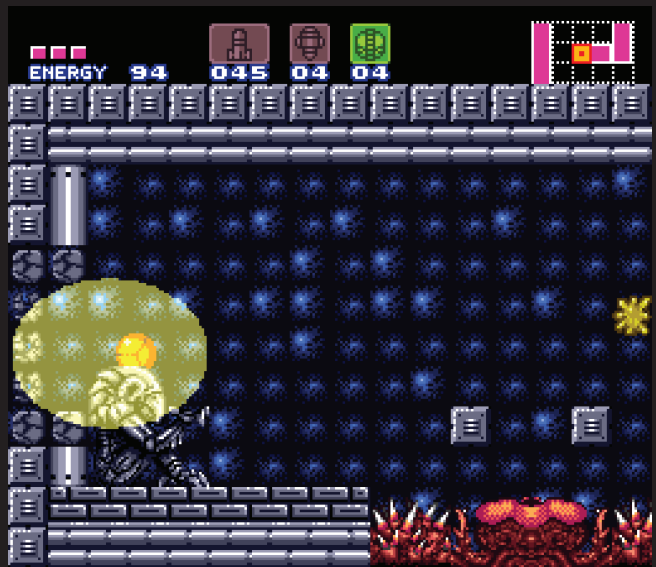
specifically need to complete in order to enter the Maridia zone are not stated explicitly. Nor are you nudged toward your next goal, at least not overtly. Once you have the Ice Beam, Super Metroid sort of steps back and lets you work it out for yourself.



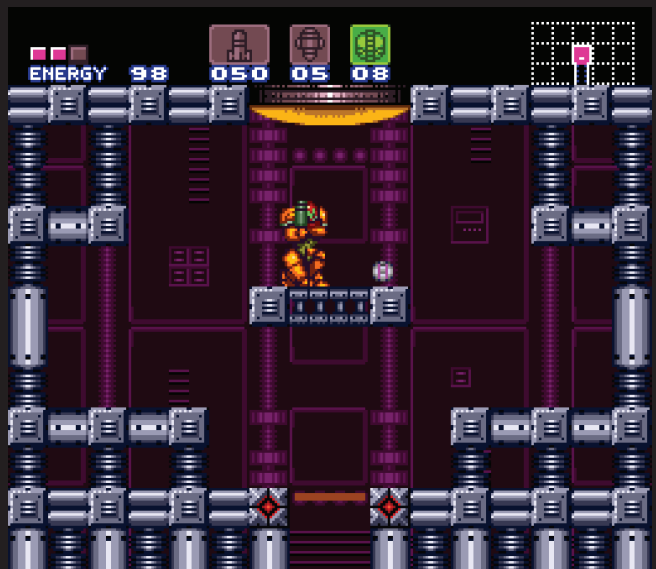
At this point you'll have encountered a number of points of interest that you couldn't activate or explore with the gear you have at the time, but with the ability to climb back up that long drop in the central Brinstar shaft you can begin revisiting them and harvesting the goods that were just out of reach before. Still, there's one key tool missing from your inventory at this point, and the game gives you one final push in the right direction: You can find the Power Bombs at the top end of the tall Brinstar shaft. You don't have to climb that high, of course; you can duck left and retrace your steps. But there's this new area you couldn't quite get to before just a screen away from the door to the westward territory you've already explored. Why wouldn't you want to see what's there?

This annex repeats the melancholic motif of the tall shaft, with subdued music, earthy colors, and a dim light in the background that slowly pulses on and off. And a few rooms later, you suddenly find yourself boxed into another shorter shaft, unable to advance or retreat due to the fact that both the upper and lower doors are sealed over with yellow barriers — a door shield you don't have the ability to break through just yet.

How fortuitous, then, that within this boxed-in area you can find the solution to your troubles: The aforementioned Power Bomb. The Power Bomb breaks yellow doors, clears away "power bomb" blocks, and wipes out almost every enemy on screen (save some of the really heavy-hitters). If you drop a Power Bomb as soon as you collect the first one, you'll blast through a wall that leads to a second pick-up.



And you can also open the door above, completing the loop back into Crateria and the initial landing zone. Follow that around and you'll be able to complete a circuit of the ground you've explored so far, uncovering a number of those power-ups you had to forego the first time around. Isn't that so much better than if you had gone left from the tall shaft only to reach the yellow door on the surface and being forced to double back?



Alternately, with the Power Bomb in hand, you can also return to that glass tube from before and shatter it with a room-filling explosion...



...but sadly, this area is submerged in water, which greatly hampers Samus' movement at the moment. There's not much to do here in the water but feel frustrated at how poorly you jump in this environment before heading back to dry land.

The destructible glass tube that serves as a conduit through Maridia is a wonderful piece of design! The first time you encounter it, you can't break it; you can only run through it. But that short jog is enough to entice you with the existence of a never-before-heard-of zone of Zebes: You pass out of Brinstar on the map, then back in again, just long enough to get a glimpse of an underwater region through a window surrounded by caverns damp with a trickle of leakage through porous rock.

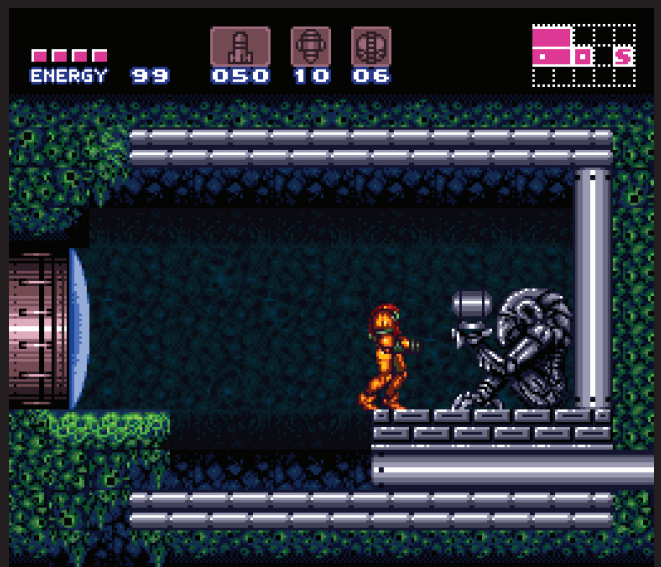
When you return with Power Bombs, you can destroy the tube. You may not realize it your first time through, but later in the game you'll encounter a similar tube that's been destroyed as a hint that yes, this thing is fragile. If you do choose to break it at this point, you can (with a moderate amount of effort) explore a small piece of Maridia. Samus moves in a slippery, frustrating fashion underwater, but it is possible to climb up the shaft into which the broken tube opens and explore some of the surrounding rooms. Eventually, you'll reach an effective dead end — a room where the weight of water combined with a downward flow of sand presses down on Samus to prevent her from making a crucial jump. Eventually, you have to backtrack... and if you drop down a masked pit whose presence is hinted at by all the crabs emerging from it, you'll find a Map Room for Maridia. Here, you'll get a glimpse of just how much of the region there is to explore. If you happen to luck into this while trying to figure out where to go now that the game has loosened the reins, you'll understand quite clearly that this is where you're to go next.

But first, it's back to Norfair via Brinstar. For now,



you'll find more satisfaction in areas for which you're better prepared this time around, such as the room with the rapidly descending gates over crumbling ground. With the Speed Booster equipped, Samus can outrace the gates and reach the other side.

Where a new item awaits: The reserve tank. A reserve tank works more or less like a basic Energy Tank, except that its juice isn't counted toward Samus' health. And to fill it, you need to top off your primary health first; once you're maxed out, then you'll begin filling your reserve. When you take damage, however, it comes off your primary health. The reserve doesn't kick in unless your energy is whittled down to zero, at which point the extra tank will recharge your main energy battery for the current amount in reserve. It's basically a second wind in case of disaster.

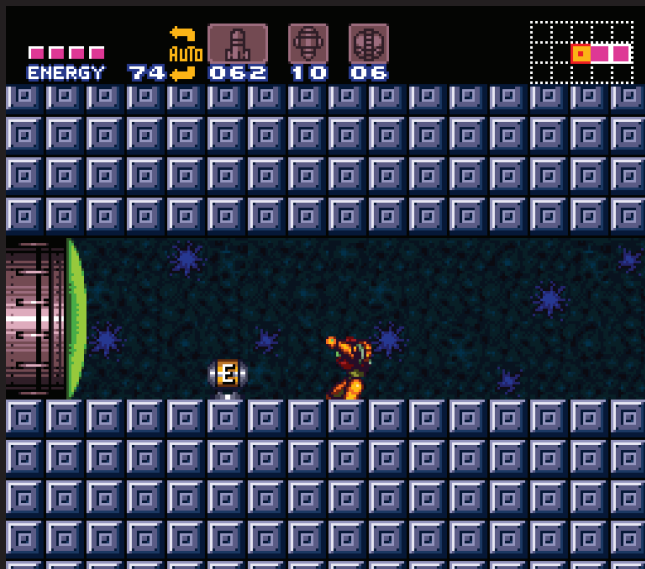


However, the reserve tank chamber also contains

one of my favorite Super Metroid secrets. Hidden behind the reserve tank through the somewhat obvious silver pipe leading off-screen is a secret room where you can collect a missile.



But behind that secret is a second secret: Another missile tank hidden inside the wall. Since you've just collected one obscure power-up, it might not occur to you to look for another so close. Super Metroid rewards the thorough.



Among other fun things you can encounter is another direct reference to Kraid's lair in the NES game: An Energy Tank just sitting out in the middle of a corridor... right next to a hidden pit that causes you to plummet into an out-of-the-way room. You get greedy, you get careless. It's possible to snag this tank if you know about the pitfall. If you remember the original Metroid, it's definitely a

fool-me-twice moment of shame — another clever call-back, but this time less “Oh cool” than “Oh man, I'm an idiot.”

And yet, there's wisdom to be gained in folly, as the hidden passage below is home to a trio of friendly aliens who teach Samus about one of her hidden powers: The wall jump. This skill isn't something you're likely to stumble into on your own — on the off chance you accidentally activate it, you'll probably think it's some kind of fluke. But here, these helpful little fellows give you an overt tutorial on how to execute a triangle jump. The timing takes practice, but there's no threat here...



...and if the timing proves too difficult for you to master, that's OK, too. As long as you're able to pull off a single wall jump, there's a ledge directly above that contains a passage back to the entrance. On the other hand, if you ace it, you can really show off by making an almost impossible jump to a small room at the top of the shaft here where another Power Bomb awaits.

On the other hand, you can complete the game without ever seeing this tutorial or learning about Samus' ability to climb walls. This area is hidden away in a fairly obscure area that's only likely to be found by someone making a comprehensive effort to comb the caverns for every possible upgrade: A power move for power players.

Likewise, a second tutorial appears nearby in another totally optional area. You need to break through a chunk of floor with a Speed Booster dash to find a bird who teaches you to use the advanced “shine spark” technique, which allows Samus to store up a Speed Boost charge for a moment and redirect it in order to “fly.”

If you're really awesome, you can even pull it off at a 45-degree angle and crack open a hidden passage up above the landing area at the beginning of the game long before you should be able to reach that secret area.



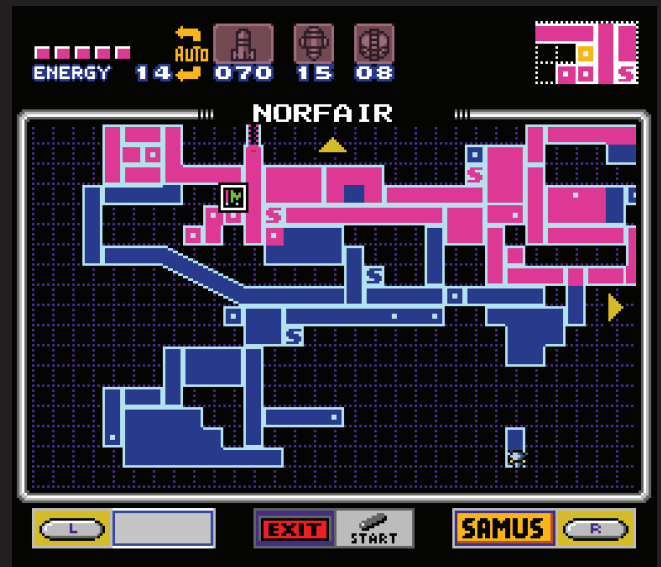
Again, this technique isn't essential to completing the game, and you can easily go your whole life without ever knowing it's even possible. But while the tutorial is hidden, it's tucked away in a manner that you can very easily luck into — the Speed Booster blocks you drop through sit next to an inconvenient chunk of bombable rock sitting in the midst of a long, flat, horizontal passage. You can just bomb it or even Power Bomb it, but why not just get a running start and dash through it? And when you do, you'll learn about a hidden feature of the game. Such elegant design.



And of course, all of this is a sideshow. Once you have the Power Bomb, you really should be dropping back into Norfair to find the Grapple Beam so that you can clear the passage to the east of the landing spot in Crateria. But finally, Super Metroid lets you figure that

out on your own. In exploring old ground, you'll eventually find the way forward, but you'll also uncover all this other cool stuff. Super Metroid is confident enough in your intelligence that it goes hands-off here. It believes in you.

While you can roam quite a bit through old ground and find some hidden items once you have Power Bombs and its prerequisite tools, there are still quite a few dead ends that you can't quite pass over because of large expanses with curious hooks in the ceiling. Eventually, you'll have to return to Norfair.



And once you're back in Norfair, the game applies the same Map Room trick as in Maridia. While you've explored a fair chunk of this region already, you can't help but notice a bright yellow Power Bomb door as soon as you descend back into the area. Inside is a Map Room, which reveals the surprising truth about Norfair:



You haven't seen the half of it.

Beneath the areas you've already cased, Norfair contains an extensive series of tunnels and chambers — and if you pay careful attention to the unexplored blue portion of the map, you'll notice a thinner portion of the outline to the upper left that beckons exploration. This turns out to be the gated chamber that led to the Ice Beam earlier, but now you can break through the Power Bomb blocks immediately after the gates.

Below, you'll find a fairly extensive network of rooms that you can explore quite quickly. In fact, you sort of have to, since you need the Speed Booster to break through some of the obstructions here.

Exploring the different doors here will eventually lead you to a heck of a surprise: An untelegraphed boss fight that you drop directly into the midst of.

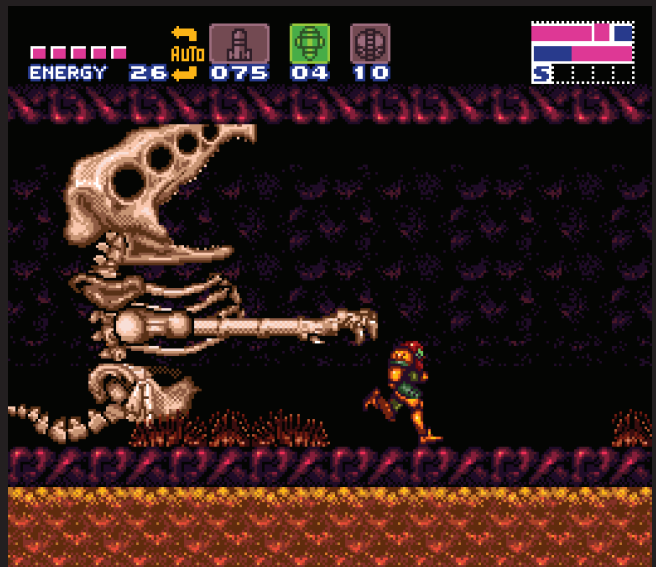


Crocomire isn't just a boss, he's an indestructible boss. At least through conventional means. His attacks consist entirely of windmilling his arms, stomping forward, and occasionally spitting blobs of whatever it is that giant melty lizards spit. That's enough, though. Crocomire probably won't kill you with direct attacks, but there's a good chance it'll shove you backward into the wall of spikes that lines the opposite side of its chamber.

You can't destroy Crocomire with your attacks, but blasting it in the open mouth with a missile (like you did to Kraid) will cause it to recoil and step backward. The battle becomes a sort of puzzle, a push-and-pull fight to knock it all the way backward before it does the same to you (or before you run out of ammo, though you can shoot those barf blobs to score missile refills). Eventually, you'll be able to push it back onto the fragile-looking blocks behind it...



...which collapse beneath its weight, plunging Crocomire into the magma, which burns away its flesh in a surprisingly gruesome sequence considering this is a Nintendo game. Its skeleton sinks into the magma... but you're stuck here, since you can't cross this pool of molten rock, the door through which you dropped is locked, and the spiked wall opposite remains in place. But if you look carefully you'll notice a series of magma bubbles moving away from where Crocomire fell, toward the spike wall — which suddenly explodes as Crocomire's skeleton burst through it to attack from beyond the grave.



Terrifying! For about five seconds, until the creature's mortal remains collapse. Apparently necromancy lacks real motive force in the Metroid universe. With Crocomire dead and the wall broken, you're free to advance.

This sequence doesn't make much logical sense, but it certainly is cool.



With Crocomire down, you need to uncover a hidden facet of one of Samus' powers: When you jump while accelerating with the Speed Booster, you jump like crazy. And if you jump while dashing up a slope, you gain both distance and height. You can clear a massive pool of magma in this fashion, ascending to a door on a high ledge above.



This takes you to a major addition to Samus' arsenal: The Grappling Beam. This new addition does not transform Super Metroid into Bionic Commando, but it does allow Samus to execute a decent Radd Spencer impersonation. Naturally, you need to use the beam to exit this area. Because that's how Super Metroid rolls.

You can now return to all those spots with the hooks in the ceiling to collect valuable resources. Including the Wave Beam, which now stacks with other weapons to allow your Ice Spazer attacks to pass through walls.

There are tons of goodies to find throughout the areas you've already explored, including more of those spots where secrets are hidden behind other items. For example, you can find a Reserve Tank by bombing an obscure tile in the lava next to a missile expansion, which causes a pillar to rise out of the magma to take you to a passage high in the wall leading to a secret room. And hidden in a block near the Reserve Tank is another missile expansion. Again, Super Metroid favors the thorough and enjoys hiding goodies in plain sight.

Thankfully, you can now collect an item to help with that process: The X-Ray Scope, which allows you to see hidden passages and items. This item sort of breaks the rules for Metroid power-ups, as the X-Ray scope is strictly a tool with no offensive capabilities that I am aware of. Using it pauses the action, though, so you're not vulnerable while it's active. It's an invaluable asset if you're going for a 100% completion run... and it can be a big help if you get stuck, too.

But the real purpose for your new Grappling Beam is to bypass the point in eastern Crateria depicted below, an obstacle which consists of a column rising in the water that proves too high for you to leap, and where the water prevents you from using sequence-break techniques like bomb- and wall-jumps. Every new tool you've collected so far has allowed you to forge your way ever-so-slowly into the caverns to the right of where the game began, but this is where you're going to break it wide open.



WRECKED SHIP

The first wholly new area of Zebes that never appeared in the original Metroid, the Wrecked Ship sits astride the two halves of Super Metroid and literally serves as the gateway between the familiar first portion of Samus' odyssey and the unknown regions to come in the back half of the game. Its decrepit bulk blocks the path to Maridia, and you can't complete Samus' quest until you reactivate its systems. Interestingly, that's not because you need to pass through the ship — though certainly that provides you with the most obvious route through the game — but rather because you need the power on in order to access the Gravity Suit, necessary for exploring Maridia.

Nowhere in the game are the origins and purpose of this vessel explained, but small hints are contained in the environment. Once powered up, the ship's monitors show glitchy, fragment impressions of metroids. Could this be the original conveyance that brought metroids from SR388, crashing here after the creatures escaped and killed the crew? If so, we can probably count this as another Alien reference, with Phantoon taking the part of the mysterious space jockey.

Interestingly, the space pirate mothership in Metroid Zero Mission clearly began life as the early incarnation of this zone, though that changed somewhere along the way. That's fine. The enigma of this vessel is more satisfying.



Super Metroid's mapping system is really quite brilliant. The auto-mapping feature is a godsend for keeping track of where you've been, but the map rooms deserve equal credit. They reveal most — but not all! — of the map for a given area. Certain rooms remain unshown, but the map programmers were really conscientious about placing a room or two of the critical path that can only be accessed once you've collected advanced tools and power-ups. As such, it's possible to get a bit lost when you're wandering around freely — but if you pay attention to the unexplored blue spots on the map, you'll eventually get where you're going.

Once you have the grapple hook, you can explore a lot of previously unreachable rooms, but many points remain inaccessible due to the debilitating effect of water physics. Since the biggest (potentially revealed) unexplored area of the map appears to be flooded, this could be problematic. Thankfully, the good Lord and map providers are alike in that they provide for the needy, which means that the key to advancing into Zebes' watery regions lies between the easternmost extent of Crateria that you've been able to access to this point and the entrance to Maridia.

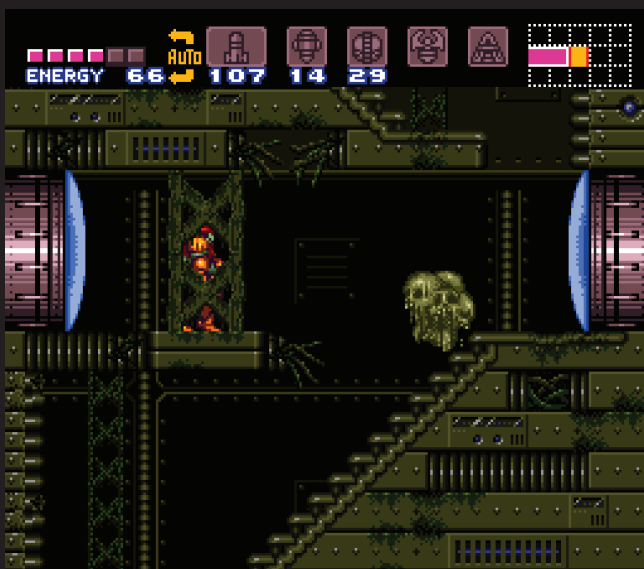
Of course, to get there, you need to grapple your way forward to stay above the water's surface. This involves, at one point, using a Ripper as a grapple pivot — an undocumented feature of the game, but one you actually had the opportunity to discover back in Norfair right after picking up the Grappling Beam. There are some interesting hidden effects with that particular tool, in fact; certain seemingly indestructible enemies go down in a single zap of the Grapple Beam.

This leads you into a small, self-contained region evocatively called the Wrecked Ship (because it's a wrecked ship). Despite being a brief diversion at best, it proves to be one of the more artfully crafted areas of the



game. When you first enter the vessel, it's a dead wreck — or rather, an undead wreck. Most of the electrical systems are out, including most doors, and also including the save station, which doesn't work. This trick of narrative through messing with the meta-gaming recording devices would later be exploited in games like Xenogears, Chrono Cross, and BioShock; in Super Metroid, it offers just as much punch without as a single word. Something is strange and ominous here, and the deactivated save feature raises the tension: You've spanned a fairly grueling grappling sequence, explored the decrepit passage of a literal ghost ship — weird skull-like wraiths keep materializing where Samus stands! — and now you can't save.

The dimly lit passages of the Wrecked Ship suggest the vessel has been rotting here for quite some time — and you keep disturbing those parasite bugs that you encountered in the ruins of Mother Brain's lair and outside



Kraid's chamber, giving the impression that you've stumbled into something that's been laying here untouched for a very long time. Aside from the bugs and ghosts, there's not much else going on here, though. This is definitely a derelict.

The only other sign of life comes in the form of another missile door eyeball thing, which you had previously encountered barring the entrance to the battle with Kraid. The way the grey protuberances spread away from the eyeball suggest this thing is some sort of parasite that's grown over the door, sealing something inside.

Aaaand that something, it turns out, is the next major boss: Phantoon.

It's a strange hybrid of ghost, cyclopean skull, and Japanese hitodama spirit. It's a ghost in that it fades in and out, spending most of its time immaterial. Cyclopean skull in that... well, look at it. And hitodama in that it spawns an array of what appear to be blue ghost eyeballs on fire, which is often used in Japanese media as visual shorthand for a departing soul — sort of their equivalent of an angel fluttering away from a dead body.

Phantoon's challenge comes from the fact that it spends most of its time spraying the room with deadly objects but remains invulnerable for the majority of the time it's on screen. Even in the brief moments it materializes, only its eye is vulnerable. Of course, the up side to all those hitodama is that shooting them causes health and weapon pickups to drop. The downside is that Phantoon creates more of them, and more quickly, as it suffers more damage.

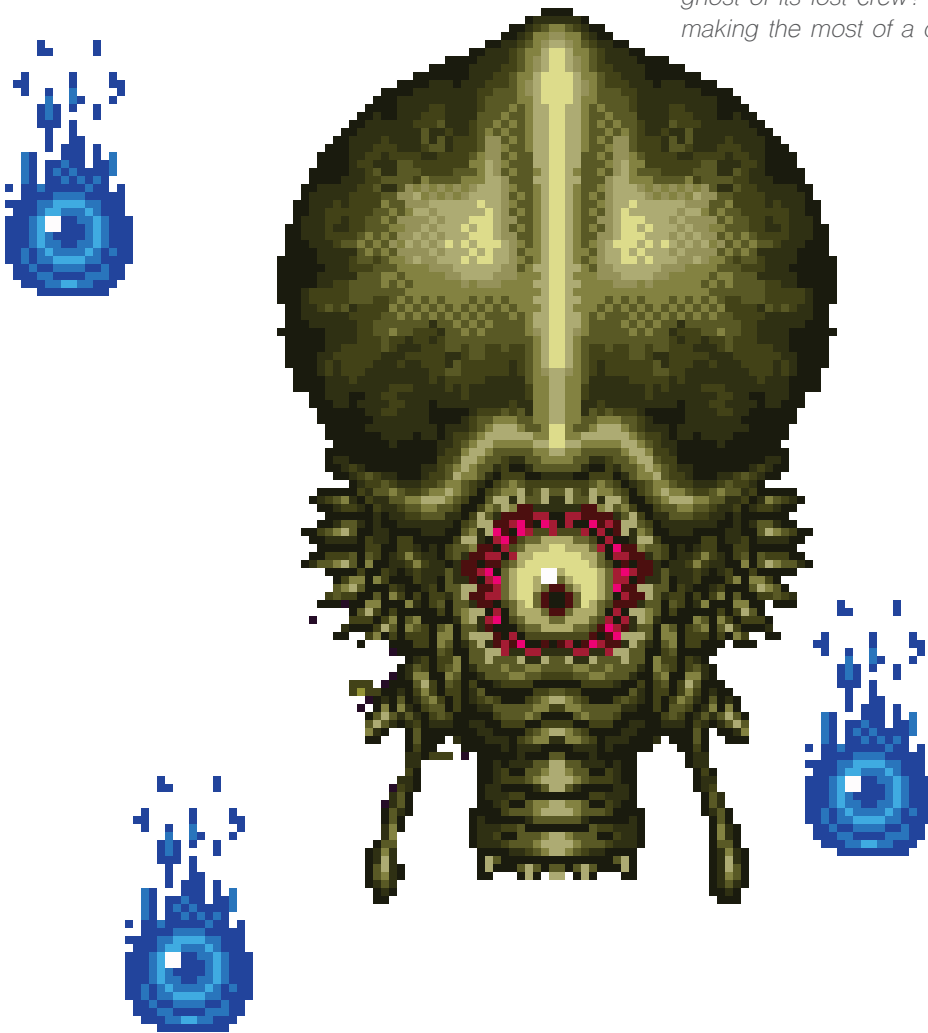
One interesting facet of Phantoon that may not appear immediately obvious is that it responds to your strategies by alternating its attack patterns. If you blast it with standard missiles, it basically sticks to a single basic pattern. But if you shoot it with a super missile, it goes utterly berserk, unleashing multiple, consecutive, sweeping streams of hitodama in wide arcs that are nearly impossible to avoid.

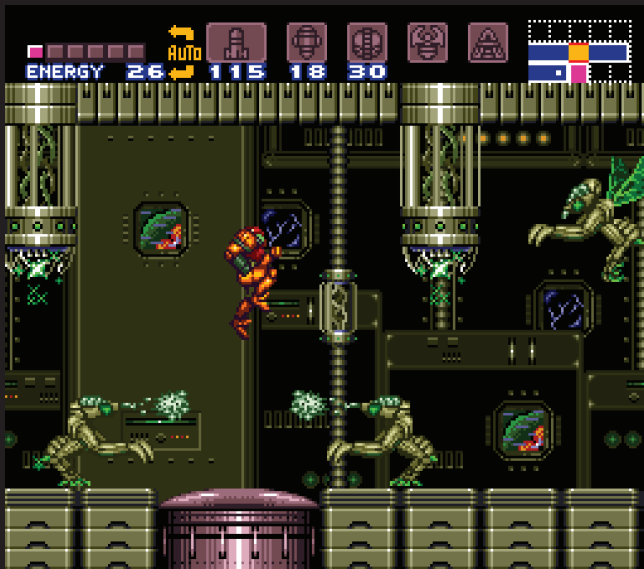
So the question becomes: Do you use super missiles and take out the boss in just a few hits but suffer a huge amount of damage from its amplified attacks in return? Or do you let the fight drag on longer with basic missile attacks and run the risk of losing a lengthy battle of attrition? The monster's screen-filling attacks and cramped quarters make for a pretty grueling conflict.

With Phantoon dead (un-undead? re-dead?), the power drain affecting the Wrecked Ship is alleviated. Energy returns to the systems, which gives you full access to its different chambers; unfortunately, it also activates a number of threats. The large cylinders scattered about the vessel turn out to be primitive bipedal robots (somewhere between R2-D2 and a Dalek) that stumble about aimlessly but occasionally fire energy blasts at no one in particular. Strange Sputnik-like objects patrol the corridors (seem-

PHANTOON

Phantoon marks something of a departure for the Metroid series in terms of its sci-fi sensibility. Every challenge Samus has faced until now has been wholly sci-fi in nature, abominations of biology and science. Phantoon, on the other hand, suggests more of a mythic sensibility. The glowing “eyeballs” that hover around it resemble hitodama, the Japanese depiction of lost souls, and it haunts the Wrecked Ship. On the other hand, it could simply be a creature feeding on the power generated by the ship’s reactor, too. Because Super Metroid doesn’t explain its world to players, it’s left to you to determine the exact nature of Phantoon, and indeed what role it plays in the presence of the Wrecked Ship. Is it the vessel’s original pilot? The ghost of its lost crew? Or merely an opportunistic creature making the most of a derelict vessel?





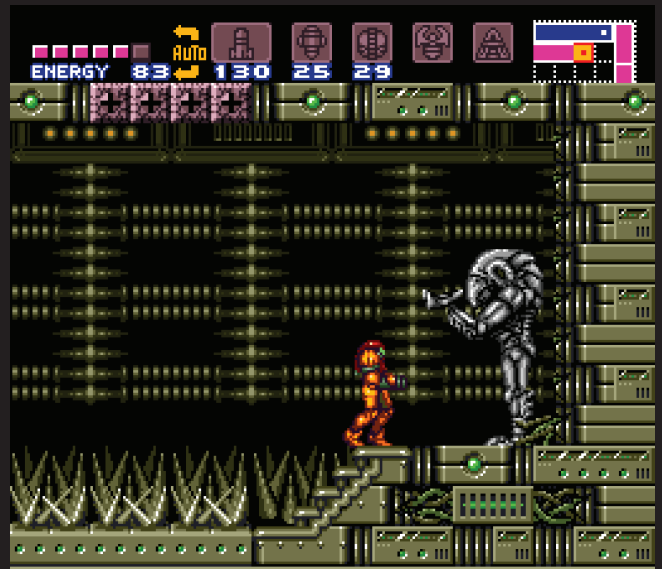
ingly indestructible, but vulnerable to Grappling Beams). The energy cores that occupied the glass domes in the floors and ceilings come free and hover toward Samus. Conveyor belts activate. Loose wiring creates an electrical shock hazard. And monitors in some of the room display staticky images of what appear to be metroids, making you wonder precisely what this ship was about and what caused its crash.

This uncertainty is reinforced by the presence of Kihunters, the only organic beings on the vessel, which appear in the upper (“command”) room, which incidentally is where you can spot metroids on the back monitors. Metroid Zero Mission would (maybe) provide insight into the nature of this ship, but for now there’s just enough going on to be evocative but keep you guessing.

Finding your way through the Wrecked Ship actually requires you to leave the ship and search around outside, reentering through different doors — which, cleverly, are treated as airlocks. Each door to the exterior is connected to the ship’s interior through an empty, hazard-free room. There’s plenty of exploration to be done outside the ship, with a complex maze of passages ultimately leading back around through a sealed-off chamber and an airlock hidden beneath some of the rocks into which the ship crashed and lodged.

The door in question leads you to... nothing? There’s a Chozo statue here, but unlike most statues it stands upright, and there’s nothing in its palms. You may recall the Chozo security robot at the very beginning of the adventure, but this one simply stands there. And there doesn’t appear to be any kind of hidden passage behind it.

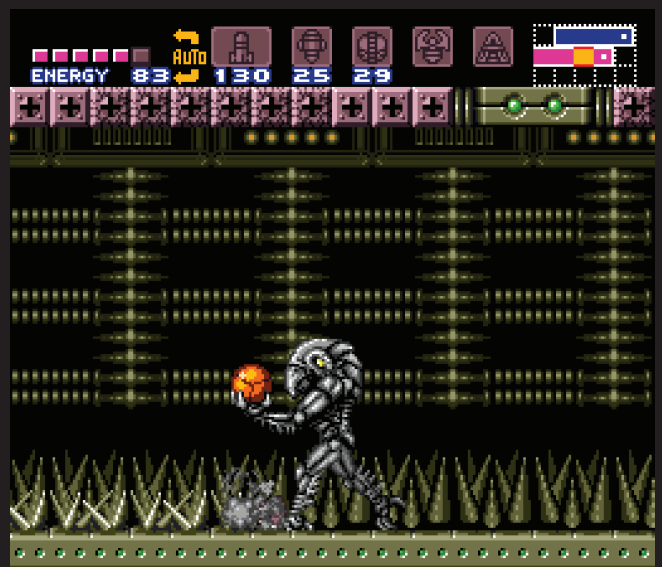
The solution to this puzzle calls back to Metroid II — specifically, the little armadillo dude who pretended to be a power-up ball but actually was a monster... but then happened to drop the Spring Ball anyway. The solu-

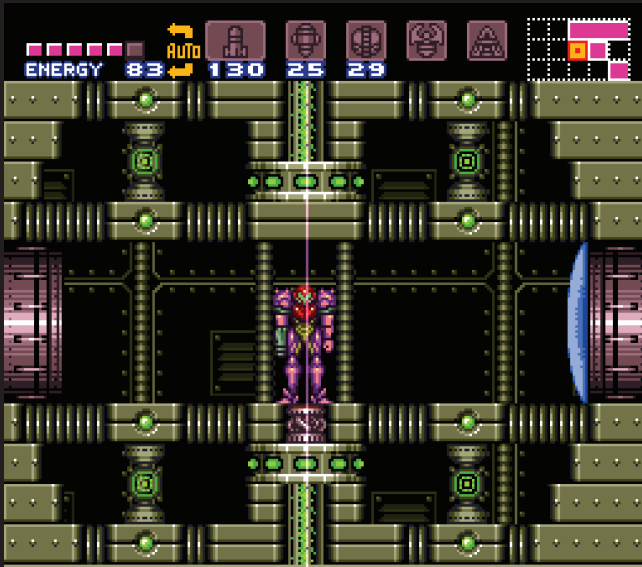


tion here isn’t exactly the same, but it comes from the same place. Namely, it plays on the fact that Samus in her Morph Ball form looks an awful lot like the power-up balls the Chozo statues hold. So hop into the statue’s hands and roll into a ball...

And it’s gonna take you for a ride. It smashes the spikes along the floor of its chamber, then descends along an unseen stairway into a hidden room. This is the second of the game’s four bizarre interactive Chozo statues, but it’s definitely the most benign.

Specifically, because it deposits you adjacent to the next power-up you need: The Gravity Suit. This upgrade doesn’t simply soak up more damage than the Varia, it counteracts the effects of water pressure. With this equipped, Samus can move normally through water, and, more importantly, won’t lose her momentum when she breaks the surface.





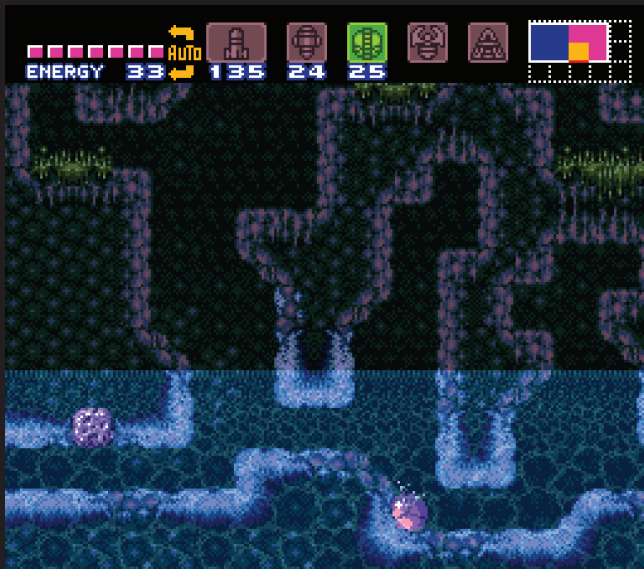
And you're given ample opportunity to put it to use right away, because the instant you step out the door to the left you plummet to the water below. Surprise!

MARIDIA

Taking up much of the second half of *Super Metroid*, the Maridia region marks a change in the way the game unfolds. Until this point, Samus' quest has consisted of a dense, interlocking Chinese puzzle of a map. But armed with both the Gravity Suit and the Grappling Beam, there are few places she can't go, and few advances Maridia can withhold from the player as a result.

Instead, the map design skews in a different direction: It becomes large, open, unwieldy. Now the difficulty lies in determining where to go, keeping track of where you've been, and making sure you've explored all the nooks and recesses of the caverns along the way. Fittingly, Maridia offers two different ingresses: The upper path, which you'll reach by continuing onward from the Wrecked Ship through the watery path at Crateria's eastern edge, or the lower path, which takes you through the destructible glass tube that crosses through Brinstar's eastern extremity, near Kraid's lair.

The lower path was likely intended as a short-cut back to the rest of the game once you've completed your tasks in Maridia, but as a testament to the designers' respect for the player, you're absolutely allowed to take the tube entrance the "wrong" direction. It surely wouldn't have been difficult for the programmers to make the tube breakable only from within, ensuring a one-way journey, but instead they allow you take either route in Maridia and solve the region's puzzles however you like. So in that sense, while Maridia doesn't much resemble what you've seen from *Super Metroid* until this point, it's still very much in keeping with the game's overall spirit.

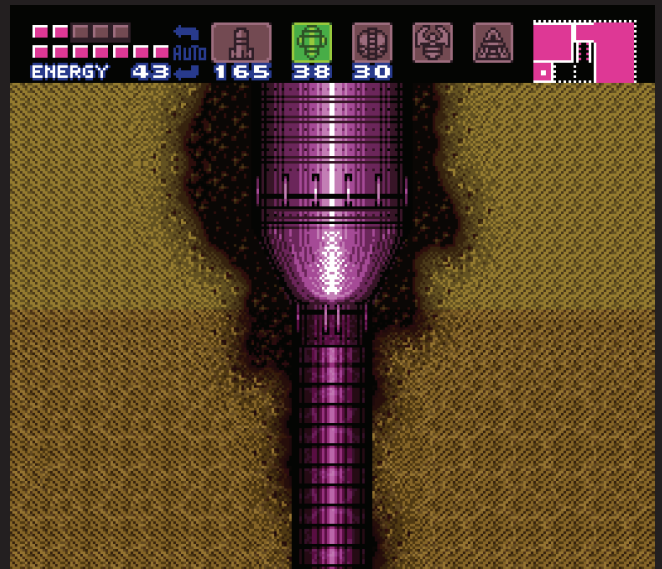


The journey into Maridia marks a turning point for Super Metroid. Until now, the game has been half-adventure, half-tutorial. The caverns of Brinstar and Norfair (and to a lesser degree, Crateria) comprise an intricate interlocking puzzle, designed to send you retracing your steps in search of new tools and pushing a little further against the limits you've previously encountered. With the acquisition of the Gravity Suit, though, Samus now has in her possession more or less the full extent of her capabilities. There are a few new weapons to acquire, yes, and a major tool for navigating Zebes not far on the horizon. But, realistically, you can do just about any and everything possible in Super Metroid.

So, the nature of the game changes. The second half of the journey tends to be far more straightforward than what's come before, with few gates remaining to impede progress. The critical path is locked down by the need for certain abilities, but for the most part Maridia's challenge lies more in its scope than its complexity.

A significant portion of Maridia involves the duality of water and air. Despite what you're seen (through that tube in Brinstar, and possibly the rooms immediately surrounding it) this zone is not strictly submerged. In fact, the barrier to completing this area comes not from the presence of water but rather the need to break the surface of the water in certain areas, which kills Samus' momentum and makes progress impossible. This semi-submerged rock maze containing the entrance to Maridia can't be navigated until you have the Gravity Suit, since the passages are too far above the surface of the water to reach, and bomb jumping doesn't work underwater.

You can actually enter Maridia two different ways once you have the Gravity Suit. There's the main entrance here, or you can go back to the shattered glass tube. Equipped with her new suit, Samus is much less limited in her ability to travel through those passages.



In reality, the main entrance is a much faster route, because it consists of only a handful of chambers before sending you through a huge conduit that rapidly drops you down to the area adjacent to the glass tube. This tunnel is similar to one you may have encountered in Metroid II, with one difference: Your movement through it is automated. You don't have any control over how quickly you move. So you pass by a handful of screens at high speed, catching only a glimpse of their contents which allows the game to tease you with a preview of sorts. Namely, you'll spot a room that you see for less than a second, which appears to contain a metroid. (I've simulated the motion blur in the image below, but it's a pretty accurate recreation of what this room looks like as you zip past at high speed).



Of course this isn't a metroid, but how could you possibly know that at a blurry glance? It's definitely no

mistake that the level designers made this room overlap with the single high-speed duct in the entire game — or that they even built a duct mechanic instead of using an elevator or something. This detail of the game actually does make sense structurally, as the conduit separates the upper, drier portion of Maridia from the flooded lower areas, but the real point is to make your heart race at the sight of a presumed metroid.

Could I be closing in on the game's finale, you inevitably wonder? And why not — you have most of the weapons, tons of energy and weapon pick-ups, and you've seen pretty much all there is to see in Norfair and Brinstar, the zones that appeared in the original Metroid. This could very well be the end game!



But you have to get there first. This room, which flummoxed Samus sans Gravity Suit, is much easier to navigate now. The shimmering curtains of sand no longer weigh her down. But it's still not a total gimme; while Samus' water physics are no longer infuriating, wet sand has much the same effect. Samus sinks into it partway, and (borrowing a note from Super Mario Bros. 2) she has to make quick, tiny hops to escape. Unfortunately this proves to be one of the more irritating parts of the game, as the sand's suction takes effect almost immediately, and leaping from the surface requires split-second timing. Meanwhile, these crustacean — evirs — burrow into the sand and barf little projectiles at you from off-screen.

As it turns out, you're not really meant to explore this room until later, when you can skip over the sand entirely. It's here, early on in Maridia, so you get annoyed with it right away and then return to it some time later and laugh at how stupidly simple it is when you're properly equipped.

Also hereabouts you'll begin to encounter enemies that Samus, even with all her amazing weaponry,



can't destroy. These Space Pirates are completely invincible until you find the Plasma Beam upgrade in Maridia, and they hit hard.

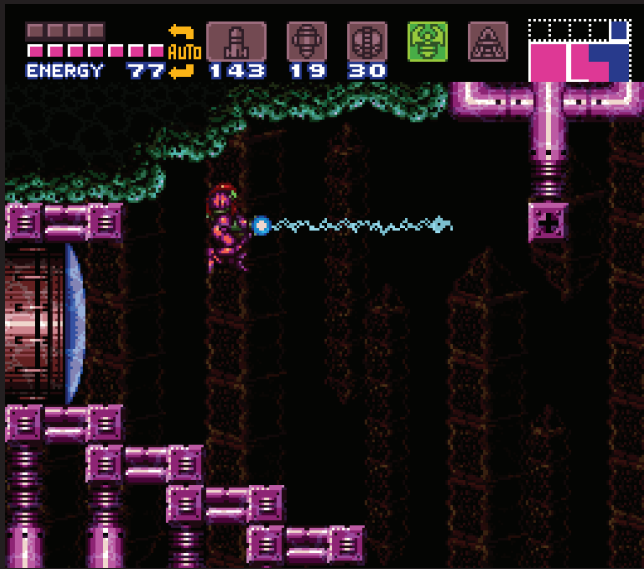
The payoff for dealing with them? Hidden goodies in the walls. Here you can find a Super Missile in a blocked-in spot in the wall of a large chamber that can only be reached by dropping into a hidden spot in the adjacent cavern. Fortunately there's one of these little crab guys to tip you off, if you're paying attention.



I mentioned Metroid II earlier, and in many ways Maridia feels more like Metroid II than any other portion in any other Metroid game. Without the intricate gating of weapons and tools, the rooms here sprawl in every direction. Maridia contains the largest chambers in the entire game, and most rooms have multiple exits that allow them to be navigated in multiple directions. Now the trick isn't to figure out how you get to where you're going but rather

to keep track of where you've been and make sure you don't miss anything.

Oh, and also, you want to make certain not to carelessly get stuck on the wrong side of a one-way passage. The door leading back to the shaft near the Power Bombs in Brinstar can be a serious punch in the biscuits if you're not paying attention.



Many of the cavernous expanses here in Maridia must be traversed with the Grappling Beam in classic Bionic Commando style, swinging from point to point and making multiple consecutive in-air grabs of single contact points. The Grappling Beam has some weird physics, especially the way it lets you spin 360 degrees around a single grapple point. You can even come to a halt upside down above a free-standing grapple block if you do it right. This doesn't really have any material impact on the



game, but it's fun to goof around with. The sheer flexibility and number of undocumented features in Super Metroid's tool set is matched only by, say, Hideo Kojima games, or your better flavor of roguelike.

Maridia's wide-open spaces are riddled with hidden passages, some totally huge — at several spots, you can simply walk into a wall. The brazen obviousness of some of these secret areas stands in amusing counterpoint to the way the rest of the game until now has operated.

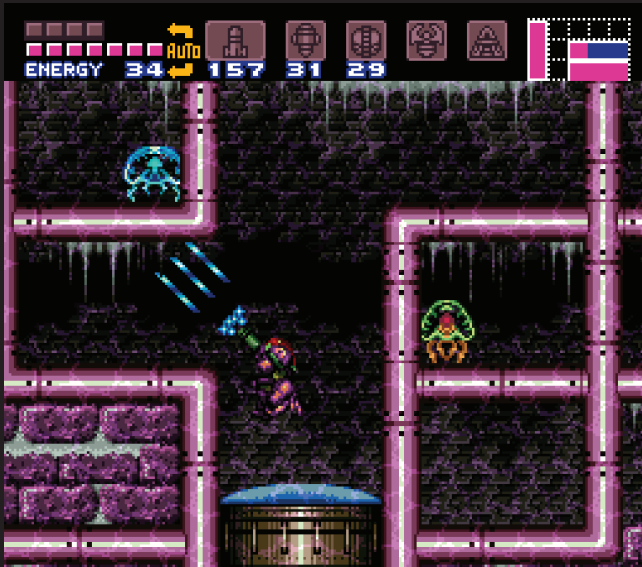
And the game never ceases to come up with entertaining or unexpected new ways to put your tools to the test. Even though the learn-through-play phase of the action is largely over, you still need to experiment. The floating balloon-like creatures, for example, can be used as a grapping point... but when you attach to him, he inflates and begins to rise, forcing you to react quickly.

This area makes extensive use of shinesparking. There's one missile expansion back near the glass tube that requires an incredibly complex maneuver involving clearing out an adjacent room of obstacles, storing up a spark before reaching the door, dashing over to a specific spot in the floor, and performing a pixel-perfect shine jump up a narrow corridor between several platforms and into a Samus-sized hole where the missile awaits. It's possibly the most difficult item to collect in the entire game, a test of mastery.



At other times, the game plays with the quirky traits of monsters. These snails can only be destroyed with Power Bombs, but they retreat into their shells when you shoot them. And if you run into one while it's pulled into its shell, you'll kick it along with an amusing tin can sound effect. Again, this has no material impact on the actual game, but it's an amusing little quirk.

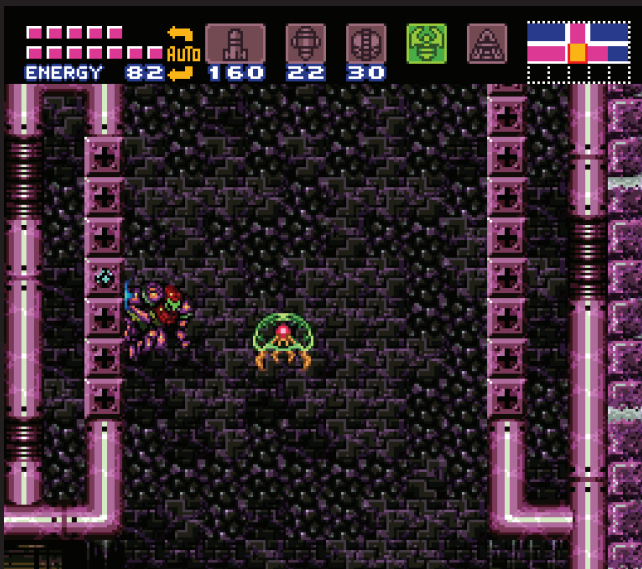
And then, out of nowhere, bam! Metroids! Whoa,



you think. Metroids already!?

Nope, not metroids. Just moctroids, those foul fakers of the sea. It was a moctroid that you may have spotted as a momentary blur during Samus' descent from Maridia's sandy regions to the watery caverns below.

Mochtroids are — as the name suggests — mock metroids. They look similar and exhibit similar behavior, floating through the air (or water, actually), homing in on Samus to hover near her and drain her energy away through contact. But they're pale shadows of real metroids; they're smaller, move more slowly, and can be destroyed with Samus' arm cannon alone. Physiologically, they demonstrate their weakness relative to their deadly cousins by featuring only a single red nucleus rather than a cluster of three.



Like everything else in Super Metroid, the existence of moctroids is never explained. There's no data-

log entry to talk about their origins, no running navigator commentary to muse on their behavior or appearance. You're left to wonder about them — are they actually related to metroids? A new larval form? There are clues, or rather suggestions, about their nature in the design of the environment; moctroids exist only in a specific region of Maridia, an industrial structure that cuts through the natural caverns above and below, attached to the bizarre technological boss' room. The suggestion seems to be, perhaps, that the moctroids were an experiment or something similar, artificially created and left behind when this region (like the rest of the planet) was abandoned.

Or, heck, maybe they're just jellyfish that coincidentally bear a weird resemblance to metroids. You're never told, and it doesn't matter. It's just an intriguing mystery you encounter along the way, made all the richer for the fact that there's no answer to be had.



Living amidst the moctroids is a random mini-boss encounter — one of many unique creatures living in Maridia's depths. It's a strangely unchallenging battle — the creature pops out of the walls from a random hole and either slides to another hole or simply belches out some projectiles. A few shots to the head puts a stop to all that, though. If not for the fact that you're locked into this room and the wall to the right doesn't crumble away until you destroy the creature, it wouldn't even really feel like a boss. Of all the battles set pieces in Super Metroid, this one is easily the most mundane.

The remainder of the main path through a Maridia makes heavy use of grapping points — swing points per usual, of course, but also tall parallel columns of them that Samus can cling to before leaping off in the opposite direction. This is basically just another means of platforming, effectively the same as simply leaping from one platform to the next higher one, but it requires slightly



more technique and skill. It's an interesting application of the Grapple Beam, a different and never-before-seen twist on the well-explored rules of grappling in platform games.

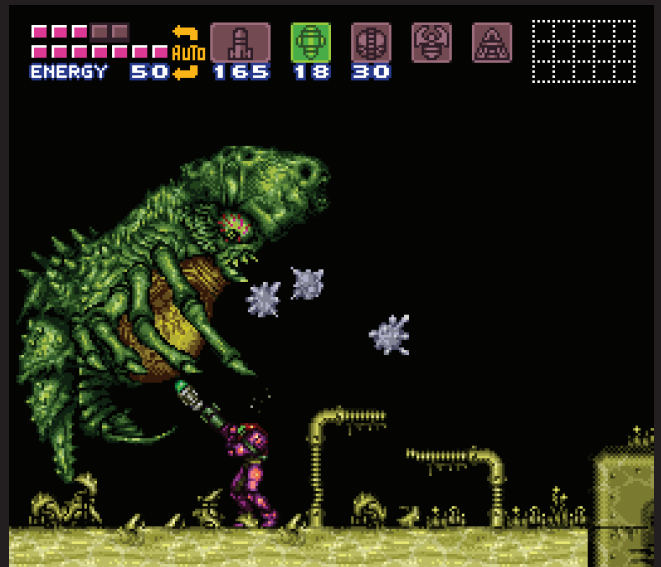
The stacks of grappling points ultimately lead to another of those eye-door things, which should give a good picture of what's ahead.



Yes, yes, another boss.

Draygon — a creepy-beyond-belief fusion of seahorse, crab, shrimp, and Tetsuo Shima's fetal mutant form — lives in a massive chamber lined with energy beam turrets. The guns on the side take pot shots at Samus, firing on her current position, while Draygon sweeps into the room along an arcing path that brings it into range of Samus' head. Naturally, a collision hurts Samus, not Draygon.

Draygon approaches in one of two different ways, actually.



In addition to the quick swoop, it also advances much more slowly from a lower angle, firing grey gobs in a random spread. The gobs are an adhesive substance that bind Samus and keep her from jumping; once she's bound, Draygon darts forward and grasps her, rising into the air in a growing spiral movement and stopping occasionally to pound Samus with its tail. These physical strikes are absolutely devastating, inflicting tremendous damage on Samus, and it keeps right on assaulting her until you button-mash your way free.

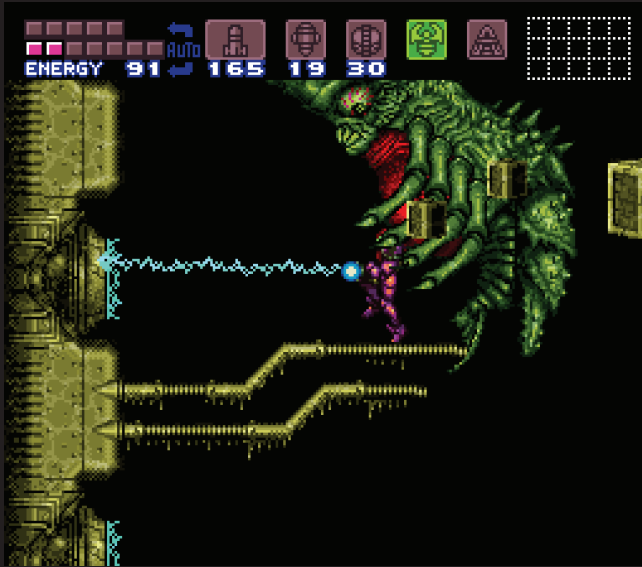
Frankly, the fight initially seems hopeless. Draygon moves so quickly that you can't simply spam Super Missiles, which are much too precious to waste filling the air trying to predict its movements. Its slow, relentless adhesive assault is difficult to avoid and leads to absolutely brutal direct attacks. And all the while, those stupid turrets are peppering you with energy blasts.

More than any part of the game to date, the fight against Draygon demands observation, mastery of patterns, and good timing. Draygon makes its swooping attacks until you manage to connect with a hit or two, at which point it switches to barfing goo globs. And while it's essentially impossible to dodge these projectiles on the ground or to jump over Draygon from a dead stand, you can manage it pretty easily from the short ledges at the edge of the room. Of course, standing there is simply begging to be bombarded by the emplacements directly above. But that's actually easily remedied — the turrets can be shattered with missiles, reducing them to passive dangers (raw electrical fields that cause terrible damage if you brush against one) rather than active ones. That allows you to stand on the ledges to leap over Draygon as it makes a slow pass, avoiding its most dangerous attacks... and as a bonus, the ledge puts you at just the right height to fire a few missiles into its exposed belly as it draws near.

Draygon is the toughest, deadliest boss to date in

the entire series, but discipline and cautious play will win the day.

Or you can play dirty and commit mutual suicide.



Those gun emplacements, when shattered, reduce to high-voltage sockets absolutely sizzling with electricity. The energy is deadly to Samus, but interestingly it can also harm Draygon as well. Of course, the creature is smart enough to avoid it, but you can force the issue by performing an act of double self-harm. If you allow Draygon to grab you, its rising spiral movements will eventually bring it to a point where you can create a circuit by lashing out with the Grappling Beam. If you manage to connect, energy will pour into Samus' armor, quickly sapping her health... but the energy ravaging her system will deep-fry Draygon, which becomes stun-locked and frozen in place. Provided you've collected enough Energy Tanks, all you need to do is maintain the circuit and wait it out; eventually, Draygon will run out of health before Samus does.

This is a deeply counterintuitive tactic, but at the same time it's not at all opaque. It makes absolutely logical sense; of course Samus' metal armor would be a conductor for this intense electricity. Of course it would harm an aquatic beast in contact with Samus. And of course the idea of snagging the energy ports has been alluded to in the design of the immediately preceding area, which saw Samus snagging onto vertical surfaces with the Grappling Beam in order to climb walls. This alternate tactic asks you to synthesize observation with common sense to perform an action that seems utterly insane but also perfectly logical.

However you manage to destroy Draygon, your reward is the Space Jump. Super Metroid's Space Jump works more or less like it did in Metroid II, allowing you to perform infinite consecutive midair jumps, but the timing

is far more forgiving this time around. The ability to hold a Charge Beam shot when you leap as a sort of limited, ersatz Screw Attack extends to Space Jumping, which can be tremendously useful. The Space Jump makes Maridia much easier to navigate in any case — between the sand that mires Samus' leaps and the vast, cavernous spaces all around, gaining the ability to bypass most of those areas is a huge help.



And of course, you can only exit Draygon's chamber by Space Jumping out. On the way out, you'll probably notice the strange cubic objects in the background — are they fixtures of the ceiling? Do they represent a vast distance within this chamber? Are they objects suspended by the antigravity that makes Space Jumping possible? Again, no answer are forthcoming, and the game is all the better for the mystery.



DRAYGON

Like Super Metroid's other new main boss, Phantoon, Draygon's role in the game feels rather ambiguous. We know Ridley is a major player in the space pirates' plans, given that he's the one who abducts the baby metroid in the first place. And Kraid seems to have a place of honor given that he returns from the original Metroid and even has a fancy doppelganger hanging out in front of his lair. But Draygon and Phantoon seems less like masterminds and more like incidental critters who just so happen to live on Zebes.

That seems particularly true for this creature, though. Residing in a lair hidden far from the main action along with what appear to be either its offspring or Kraid-like mini-clones, Draygon has a bestial sense about it. On the other hand, maybe there's a clue in its appearance and its location. Draygon lives beneath what looks to be the space pirates' science lab, where it seems cloning experiments have given rise to off-brand metroids called moctroids.

Draygon bears an uncanny resemblance to its "children," the evirs, but it also has a very similar morphology to some of the mature metroid forms seen on SR388 – the exposed, rounded belly; the segmented carapace on its tail; the insectile legs. While this beast could simply be the mature form of an evir, it could also be the result of space pirate science's attempts to fuse Zebes' indigenous life with a later molting phase of the metroid life cycle.



Samus' main goal in Maridia was to acquire the Space Jump, which you need to reach the next section of the game. With Draygon down, that mission goes in the books as "accomplished." However, I've only really talked about the critical path through this region. Maridia has much more to offer than simply a path to the boss.

More than any other region of the game — or in fact any other map region in the whole of the Metroid series — the design of Maridia communicates the notion that it's a habitat — a wild, untamed region. The Space Pirates occupy it, and their facilities slice through it and separate the dry upper caverns from the flooded lower spaces, but unlike the rest of Zebes you come away from Maridia with the feeling that this place was never fully cultivated. A number of chambers in this area play host to unique and often non-hostile creatures, unlike the upper regions where everything is out to kill Samus.

Most memorably, there's this guy. Or lady, maybe? It appears to be some sort of ankylosaur-type beast whose babies look remarkably like Buzzy Beetles. These ruminants occupy their own room, a space occupied by no other life. They're perfectly happy to ignore Samus; if you run along next to them, they continue grazing peacefully. On the other hand, if you molest any of the babies, the parent goes berserk. (Don't worry, though; the babies' hard shells protect them from any and all weapons Samus has on hand.)

Both the children and the larger of the creatures basically goes full-on Gamera — it retreats into its shell and begins spinning rapidly, trying to smash into Samus. If you hop on top of the shell, it'll start flying up into the air, though it doesn't rise high enough to smash Samus into the ceiling. It does, however, rise high enough to bring Samus within grappling distance of a single grapple block high above, atop which an Energy Tank sits. That's right, Super Metroid actively encourages you to abuse baby

wildlife so that you can become stronger. This is not really a good message to send to impressionable youths, in my opinion.

Of course, if you wait to revisit here until after you've acquired the Space Jump, you can simply leap up and acquire the Energy Tank peacefully.



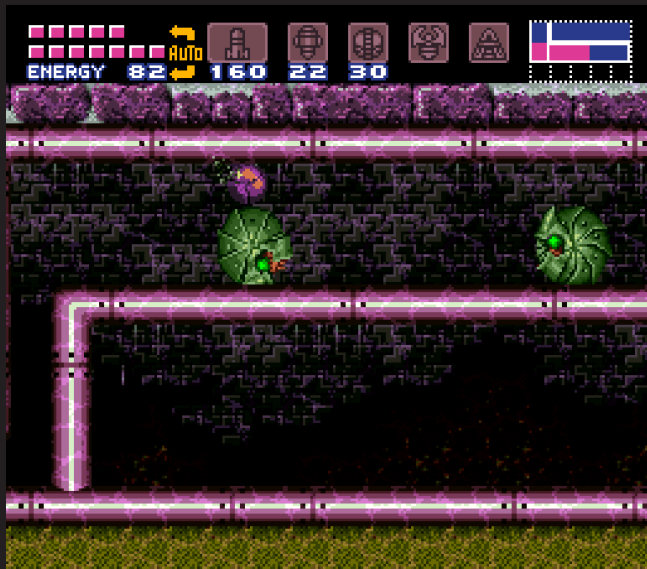
Then there's this... guy? Unusually for Super Metroid, there doesn't appear to be a biological component to this creature; in fact, it appears to be some sort of tunneling or boring mechanism. It simply sticks to a fixed pattern, roaming around the room it appears in by setting down one of its "feet" and pivoting around the most recently planted appendage. It won't attack Samus, though it also won't stop for her sake and will blithely injure her if she stands in its path.

Initially, the borer occupies a single small room which it circles infinitely, but you can use a Power Bomb to break down the wall to the right, exposing tender sandstone that Samus can't break but which the borer makes short work of.

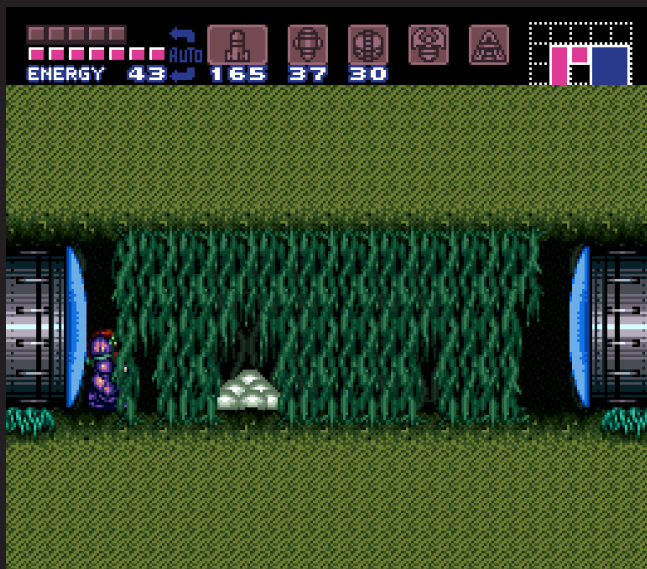
This is another spot in which the fixed position of the screen hides a passage forward — the screen won't scroll right until you blast the wall on the right side. But there have been enough of these that you should be suspicious of the ill-fitting violet wall that hugs the right edge of the screen so conspicuously. On the other hand, you can easily destroy the borer with a few shots, so you might never think to investigate further. That would make you a pretty poor explorer, though. The fact that this path leads to a single dead-end room occupied by a non-aggressive robo-creature that appears nowhere else in the game should scream "Hey, there's a secret here!"

And indeed, the secret here is no mere Missile expansion. Instead, you'll find one of the final unique power-ups of the game hidden in this not-quite-dead-

end: The Spring Ball. As in *Metroid II*, the Spring Ball allows Samus to leap while in Morph Ball form — and leap quite high at that. You can easily finish the game without the Spring Ball; this is a wholly optional power-up, one you won't be penalized for missing. Between this and the Space Jump, it seems Maridia's treasures revolve around reducing the fuss and bother of getting about.



For example, when you encounter these guys — another indigenous life form that only appear in a single room of the game — the Spring Ball makes getting past them far less annoying. These crustacean things spin toward you, and while you can roll over them safely to pass, this can be difficult; the armor crest above their eyes actually registers as a slight irregularity in the creatures' collision detection, and their spinning motion can scrape you right off and plant you on the ground. With the Spring



Ball, though, you can get past them without brute-forcing bomb jumps.

And finally, perhaps the most enigmatic of all of Maridia's wildlife: A pile of eggs. To my knowledge, these have no purpose or function within the game. They're just... eggs. They sit in a pile and pulsate slightly, but I've never seen them hatch, and they don't correlate obviously to any creature in the surrounding rooms. But they do fit the theme of Maridia as a region still teeming with native life, and fit neatly with the protective turtle-beast and its pups seen elsewhere in the area. For that matter, they echo the region's boss itself, as Draygon also appears to be motivated by the desire to protect its young. In the wettest place on Zebes, life finds a way. Too bad you're going to blow up the planet.

OK, no, these exist to show off the Plasma Beam's piercing effect. On the way in, you can only shoot one egg at a time; on the way out you can vaporize them all in a single shot. Yes, these unborn babies came in the world only to die and demonstrate how badass Samus is.

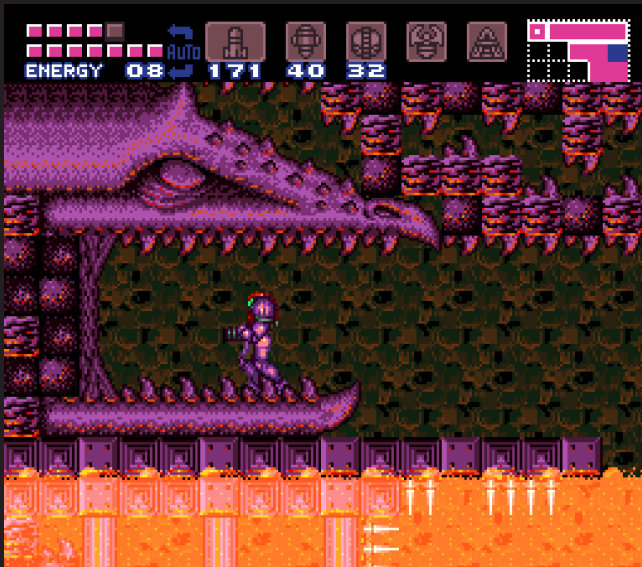
Speaking of Draygon's spawn, they don't only appear before and after the battle; they also descend into the sand in a pair of really annoying rooms. Between the quick-action suction of the sand and these stupid things burrowing into the ground and pelting you with globs of spittle, this room is a giant pain in the butt. Now, if you come back once you have the Space Jump, you can cruise right over the guys and find a secret hidden in the ceiling of a nearby room. And if you come back once you have the Plasma Beam, you can even fry these guys in a single shot, which is deeply, deeply gratifying.

The Plasma Beam, incidentally, allows you to destroy just about every creature that until now has been invulnerable. Maridia's lavender Space Pirates in particular. Interestingly, these are the only Space Pirates that appear in this watery region, and their coloration seems remarkably similar to Samus'. Are they wearing Gravity Suits, too? Well, it doesn't matter, because once Draygon is dead the locked door high up in Maridia's sandy zone opens and allows you to grab the Plasma Beam. The satisfaction of being able to blast these guys, among others, more than makes up for the fact that the way the weapons is locked up (behind a door that opens when a boss dies, the same as the lock on the shortcut from Draygon's chamber back to the Plasma Beam) is uncharacteristically inelegant for this game. Sure, doors seal behind you to force you to deal with a new enemy or master a new tool, but it's strange to see a sealed door that simply opens and reveals some kind of prize for killing a boss.

Maridia still has quite a few chambers beyond what we've examined here, including some parallel one-way passages that make it impossible to acquire every item here in a clean run. You need to really explore Maridia and probe its depths in order to clear it out. It's by far

the most open portion of the entire game, trusting in you to have mastered the basics and have learned to explore on your own. Many of Maridia's treasures are optional, so you can survive without them... but the more you explore, the easier a time you'll have with the remainder of the game.

Anyway, that's Maridia. From the shattered glass tube connecting Maridia to Brinstar, it's a quick jog to your next destination. Of course, you don't have to go that way, and in fact there's a third exit from Maridia that takes you to an early room in Brinstar. It's a one-way door, incidentally. (One of the game's crueller pranks.) At this point you basically have a fully equipped Samus capable of going pretty much everywhere in the game. All those secrets you couldn't quite reach before, especially those you had to pass up because you couldn't leap or dash through water, are within your reach now. With the Space Jump, you can go everywhere, including Ridley's lair, deep inside Norfair.



In a clever twist, there's a little dead-end passage that leads to this portal. You can roll there fairly early on and scope out your next destination. But you couldn't actually reach this entrance until now, because not only does the translucent magma require the Gravity Suit for safe navigation...

...the enormous magma chamber beneath the entrance necessitates the Space Jump. It's far too high a space to jump, and those stupid alien head dudes would make bomb jumping impossible. On top of that, the prospect of cheating with wall jumps is out of the question thanks to the spikes the line the upper wall and the underside of the lip beneath Ridley's vanity portrait. But kitted out with just about every bit of gear to be found, you're good to go.

By stepping into the vast stone maw of Norfair's

LOWER NORFAIR

As in the original Metroid, Ridley's lair occupies a sizable chunk of space well below the main bulk of Norfair. The design of Ridley's hideout has changed considerably for Super Metroid, but the underlying spirit remains much the same. Where the upper reaches of Norfair always feel convoluted and puzzle-like, Lower Norfair in both adventures demands a more linear, combative approach. You've solved the riddle of reaching this area, and now survival boils down to raw twitch skill and nerve.

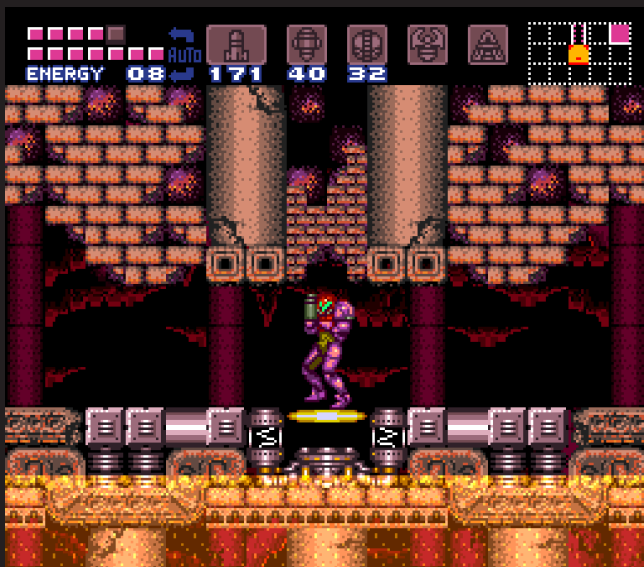
The original Metroid team didn't really possess the tools to make Ridley's lair as taxing and intense as they clearly desired, but Super Metroid more than makes up for it. Lower Norfair contains the deadliest basic foes in the game, a variety of traps, and massive chambers rigged to drown Samus beneath millions of gallons of white-hot magma. While the showdown with Ridley provides the main event here, you'll also face off against a number of boss-caliber foes before you reach him. Lower Norfair makes you earn your victory.

The biggest difference between this rendition of Ridley's home and the original is that the blocky, antiseptic look of the original Metroid's Lower Norfair has been replaced by a rough-hewn look (with the original spiral block designs appearing prominently in Ridley's chamber), perfectly complemented by the intense chanting in the soundtrack. This is primal combat in primal earth.



Ridley effigy, you're obviously taking this journey back to where it started. Now, I don't mean that literally, since the place the game began is now a minor constellation of glittering, radioactive, metal dust where once existed a space colony. No, I mean you're going after the guy who set events into motion by killing scientists and kidnapping a baby. Ridley, man. What a jerk.

Unlike in the first game, Ridley doesn't reside in an area specifically designated as his lair; instead, it's the lower extension of Norfair. However, for all intents and purposes, it feels like a different place than upper Norfair. This further descent into Zebes takes you to a hotter, more intense region of the underground, where magma becomes pale and translucent from its intensity; the Gravity Suit can't withstand its heat. The music changes to an intense, driving beat – probably the most memorable track in the game, thanks to the insistent drone of per-



cussion and the eerie chanting that carries the melody. There's something primal about this area, with its vaguely Mesoamerican visual motifs, its searing flames, and its bold music. Usually in sci-fi epics, the technology grows in sophistication as the story reaches its climax, but not here; instead, you feel like you've entered a more primitive world (befitting your saurian opponent), and the atmosphere becomes tenser.

Lower Norfair reprises a lot of familiar hazards and situations, increasing their difficulty. Platforms become smaller, environmental traps grow more aggressive, enemies move more quickly. Much of what you encounter in this region you've seen before, but not at such a high threat level. To add to the intensity of this sequence, save rooms become scarce once you descend into the gullet of Ridley's effigy. There's only one in this entire extended sequence, and it's a fair distance from either of the bosses.



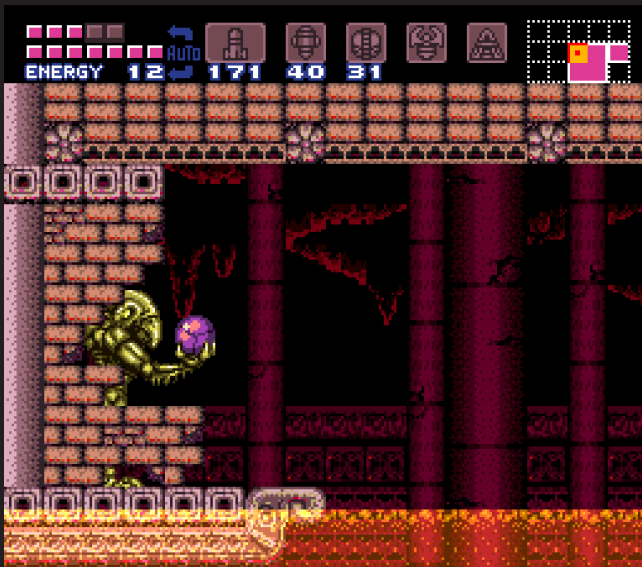
Perhaps the most significant change Lower Norfair brings to the action is a strict sense of linearity. The progressively more open level design and structure of Super Metroid slowly built up to Maridia, a vast and meandering region that required considerable backtracking to complete in its entirety and which rewarded straying from the critical path with all sorts of interesting extras. That ends the moment as you descend the elevator from upper Norfair; while you can advance a few rooms to the right of the elevator landing, you'll quickly hit a dead end and be forced to return the other way. The route to Ridley isn't about player agency. The most you can do here is wander a room or two off the main path to collect an item, but really there's only one way to the inevitable showdown.

The biggest, most dangerous non-metroid enemies in the game reside here. Space Pirates are everywhere, along with larger, stronger versions of monsters like



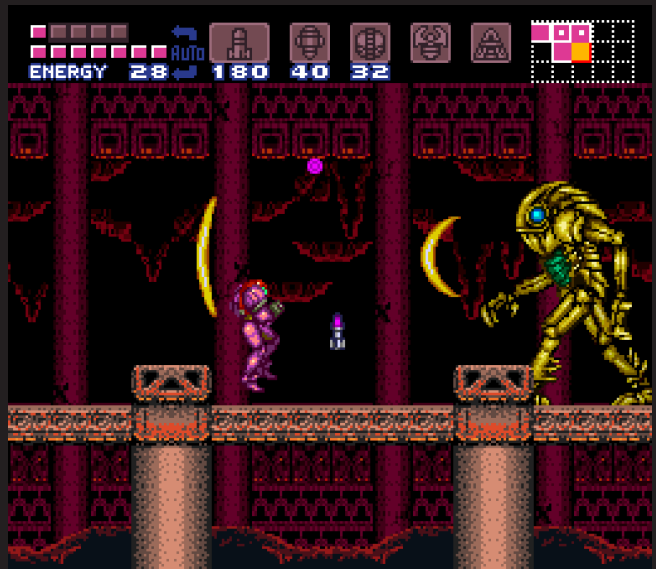
Dessgeega and Holtz. The layout of the environment offers no quarter, either.

For instance, there's the room that appears to be a complete dead end, offering nothing but a vast pit of ultra-heated magma. But if you use the Space Jump to cross the magma and detonate a Power Bomb...

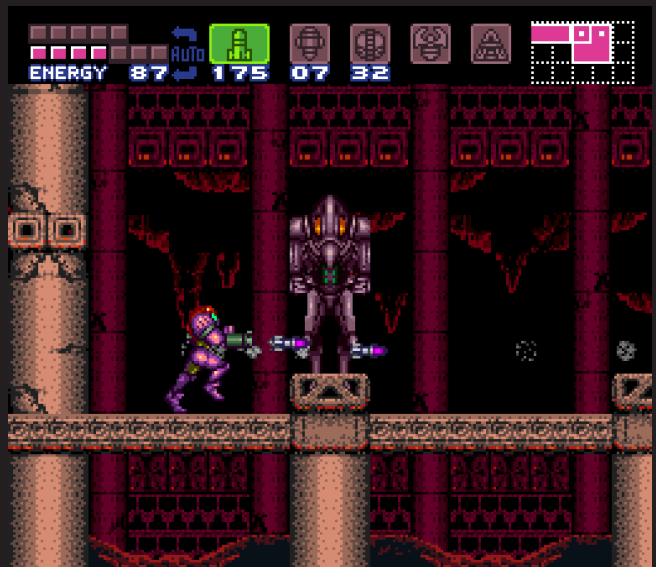


...you'll reveal another mysteriously helpful Chozo statue, which lowers the lava level for you to let you advance. The statue isn't completely hidden, but it's obscured heavily enough that you need to be attentive in order to notice it. And once you do expose it, Super Metroid expects you to dredge up your memories of the Wrecked Ship area in order to figure out what to do here.

As a reward for solving the mystery here, you're dropped into a battle with another Torizo guardian statue. If you remember your first encounter with one of these guys – all the way back at the very beginning of the game



– you'll recall that it performs a couple of different attacks and is only vulnerable in its chest. None of that has changed; this Torizo uses the same attacks as the previous one. It is, however, much more powerful, with devastating energy beams and a tendency to be much more active in leaping about the room, greatly increasing your chances of an injurious collision.

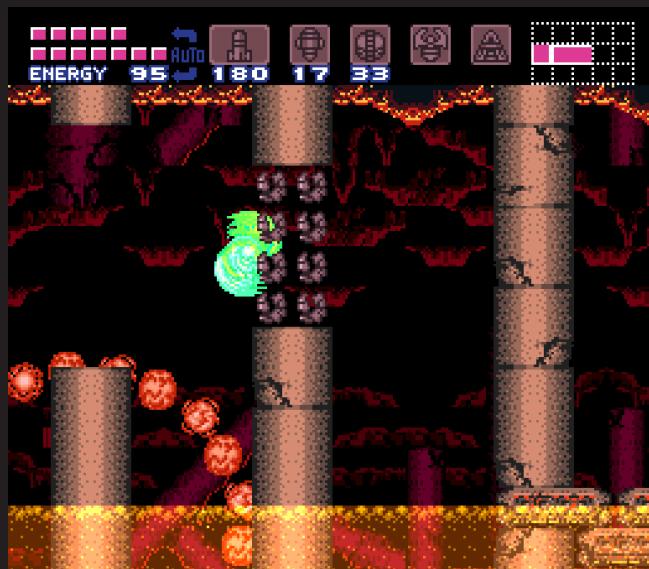


What really makes this encounter tricky, however, is the fact that you can't use your missiles against this guy. Only the charged plasma beam works. If you fire an expendable projectile at him, he does something no other enemy in the game can do: He breaks the two-dimensional plane of the action and pivots into the background, neatly sidestepping your attacks. This is a surprising defensive tactic – and a cool detail as well. You didn't really see 2D action games make use of the third dimension in this pre-polygonal era; there were the chain-link fence

“layers” in Super Mario World, but that was really the only precedent for this that comes to mind. This encounter breaks the “rules” of the game to add an extra challenge... but happily, not in a way that harms the game.

I’m also reminded that if you fire Super Missiles at the Torizo, he doesn’t simply side-step them; he plucks them from the air and throws them back at you. Of course, this can be exploited; while he’s standing there chucking your own projectiles back at you, you can lay into him for a pretty easy win.

It’s not often you see a game cheat like this, changing mechanics on a fundamental level, without diminishing or cheapening the whole affair. In this case, though, the Torizo’s little maneuver is basically just a cosmetic embellishment for a standard trait among many enemies (weapon-specific invulnerability). The designers could just as easily have made missiles simply bounce off this guy... but they didn’t. They applied a special, unique detail to this one enemy to help communicate ineffectual attacks in an interesting way and encourage you to try different tactics. And, at the same time, the Torizo’s ability to work outside the rules governing Super Metroid convey the message that you’re dealing with high-level foes, that here in the heart of the Space Pirates’ lair all the rules you’ve taken for granted have been thrown out and there’s no refuge in the comfort of precedent. It’s a brilliant detail that didn’t need to exist, but its existence adds a great deal to the game.



Upon defeating the Torizo, you collect the Screw Attack. In previous games, the Screw Attack was simply a weapon, but Super Metroid is highly scrupulous about making sure all weapons double as tools; in this room, you encounter walls that can only be broken through with Screw Attack contact. And even if you could shoot through the columns, doing so would be too slow. Magma

steadily rises as you work your way through this room, forcing you to step up your speed or risk dying and losing your victory over the Torizo... and the Screw Attack is the only way to accomplish this. Again, this echoes something we’ve seen before – namely, the rising lava you had to race once you collected the Speed Booster – but here it takes a longer, more difficult form with greater potential for failure.

However, this was a warm-up, really. The hardest scenarios are yet to come.

With the Screw Attack, Samus Aran’s essential arsenal is now complete (barring one final power-up that you experience so briefly and use in such a limited capacity that it amounts to a set piece). You can go anywhere. Do anything. Acquire any item. The entirety of Zebes is now at your fingertips, and a 100% item acquisition rate is now within your power.

Ah, but there’s one place you still can’t go: The passage obstructed by that statute of the conglomerated bosses. The Ridley figure remains inactive. And since you’re here so close to Ridley himself, why not go ahead and finish him off here? Super Metroid offers nonlinearity – there’s a short route from the Torizo battle back to the entrance to lower Norfair – but it’s also designed in a way that sometimes it doesn’t make sense to do anything but power on straight ahead. Down here in Ridley’s cul-de-sac you find one of those instances. You don’t have to defeat him now, but why on earth wouldn’t you? Unless you didn’t stock up on enough Energy Tanks for the fight ahead, I mean.

Lower Norfair continues to throw high-stress versions of every trick you’ve already seen at you as you advance on the boss’ lair. Immediately following the Torizo encounter, you come to one of the largest chambers in the entire game. You enter high up the left wall with no platform under your feet, causing you to plummet to the ground far below. As soon as you land, though, more of that magma/acid/Velveeta begins to rise rapidly, sizzling at your heels as you as you rise to the door installed high and to the right of the room. While there is a small path to the top in the form of a few platforms, they’re situated in a way that they run counter to your natural path to the top if you attempt to Space Jump up there; if you collide with one, you could easily break your Space Jump chain and drop back to the bottom, meaning you’ll fall behind the rate at which the magma rises and have to slog your way to the exit while suffering steady health drain... which could be dire news coming right after the Torizo fight without a recharge station or save chamber.

As it turns out, though, you need to follow the path of the ascending platforms to a certain degree, as the exit from this flooding cavern is situated atop a long ledge that extends quite a ways into the room, providing a natural sort of roof for what will ultimately become



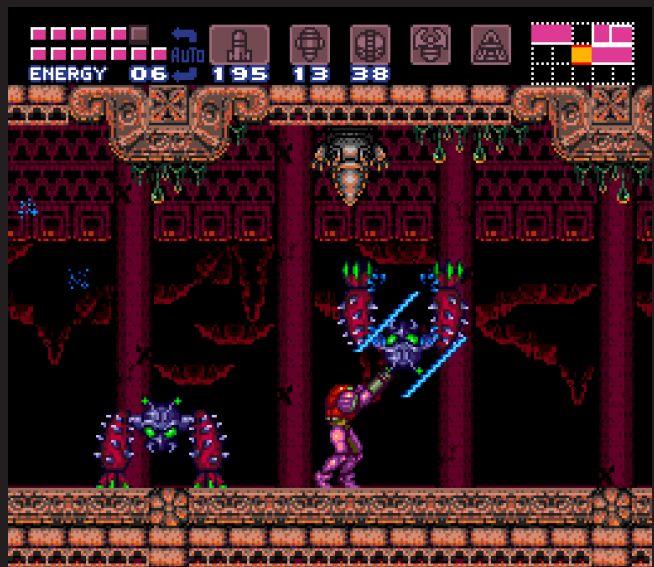
the magma chamber. If you space jump to the top while hugging the right wall, you'll find yourself boxed in with the caustic fluid. Oh, there are also some Space Pirates, but at this point you're basically a spinning ball of plasma death, so who cares? The real challenge here is the race against the magma. It's not a hard room, per se, but coming at the tail end of a tricky battle serves as a reminder that even though Samus is like a small armored god at this point, you can't just breeze through the rest of the adventure on auto-pilot. The environmental design has changed from the sprawling free-form confusion of Maridia to self-contained tests of skill, because after all mere traversal no longer poses a challenge to a woman who can defy gravity and destroy anything she touches as she does so.

One you make it through that particular gauntlet, this terrible sight awaits you. Evidently it was enough for Ridley to have one effigy of himself; there's also this one.

It's a rougher, less refined portrait of the creature than the one that housed the entrance to lower Norfair, which seems appropriate given the primal feel of this region. Also fittingly, it marks the exit to this section of Zebes; you can head up from here to return to upper Norfair. Also fittingly, it contains one of the game's final big secrets: If you take out the alien head embedded in the wall, you can roll through a passage that leads you to an Energy Tank housed near the lower portion of this statue, beneath faux-Ridley's extended arm – yes, Ridley had his space pirates sculpt an entire giant maquette of himself.

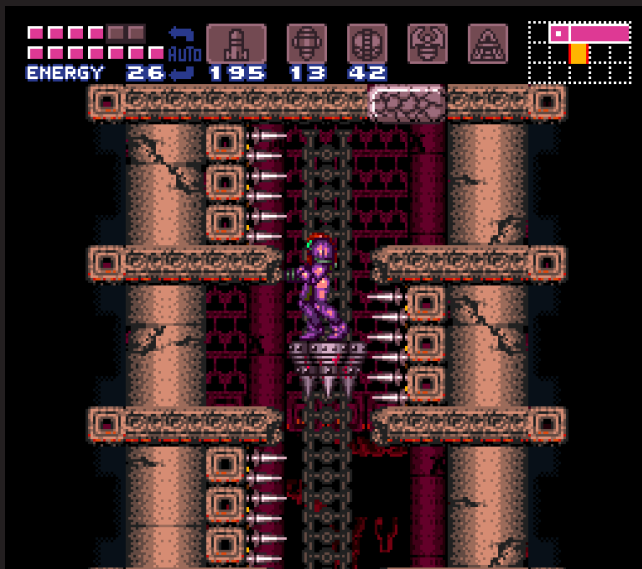


Ridley statues aren't the only work of rough-hewn art in this region, though. Lower Norfair contains a number of what appear to be primitive Chozo statues as well. Unlike the ones that present Samus with power-ups or turn into Torizo, though, these are fatter and sit facing into



the screen, not entirely unlike the way the final Torizo was able to pivot into the background. Again, there's a Me-soamerican feel to the architecture in this region, and the almost fetish-like proportions of these statues reflects the sense of a lost aboriginal civilization. Even though Super Metroid doesn't offer detailed notes on its environments or the history of Zebes, you can clearly see you've entered an area that even the Chozo who once populated this world appeared to have left behind. At this rate you practically feel like a Great Old One is next on the agenda.

But it's not. Instead, you just have to deal with swarms of incredibly deadly standard creatures, like these giant Desgeega. Only the charged Plasma Beam has the ability to take them out quickly, but they move fast and appear in large numbers, attempting to overwhelm Samus – and they hit hard, too, dinging Samus for a full Energy Tank upon contact. It's not hard to work up an energy deficit here, and with no recharge station to be found the only way to heal up is to blast respawning enemies that emerge from nearby pipes.



This conveyance – a pair of rising and falling spike platforms in a narrow shaft lined with spikes – definitely conveys the message that Ridley does not want you bothering him. It feels more like something from a Castlevania game than from Metroid.

However, nothing in lower Norfair compares to this strange room, which appears to be almost a command center or something. The primal figures of the ancient Chozo have been retrofitted with what appear to be computer monitors or something. If Ridley is really the space pirate leader, this definitely looks like his base of operations... and he's clearly recruited his most elite subordinates to man the station.

The two space pirates in this chamber are like no other enemies in the game. They're invulnerable to



all forms of attack, and they possess a frightful array of skills. They respond to Samus' actions rather than simply fighting blindly. These guys know kung-fu, and they're not afraid to use it. If you keep your distance, they attack with projectiles that appear to be their own limbs. If you move in close, they attack with kicks and punches. If you keep a middle distance, they don't move, period; they hop from foot to foot in place, breathing heavily like Street Fighter characters, squaring off against you and waiting for you to make a move.

And when you do go on the offensive, they start jumping around doing flying kicks at you. One of these guys would be tough enough, but two at once can quickly overwhelm you. Their one weakness is a tendency to drop out of their invulnerable state temporarily when they make their flying leaps – for about two seconds after they jump, their color shifts from grey to gold, leaving them open to a charged Plasma Beam attack. A few hits while they're defenseless will put them down for the count, but that's more easily said than done; the window of opportunity is brief and only comes after they've taken offensive action that you'll likely try to dodge by jumping... but in the time it takes for you to land, they'll probably have shifted back into their armored forms. On top of that, they're very rarely vulnerable at the same time, and whichever of the creatures is currently armored has a tendency to run interference for his friend, blocking your shots when you try to strike.

The speed, ferocity, complexity, and scarcity of attack opportunities in this encounter combine to make it quite possibly the most challenging fight in the whole of Super Metroid. Despite the space pirates' relatively small size, they're exceedingly dangerous.

Coming so soon after the space pirate elite, the long-awaited showdown with Ridley seems almost disappointingly straightforward. It basically boils down

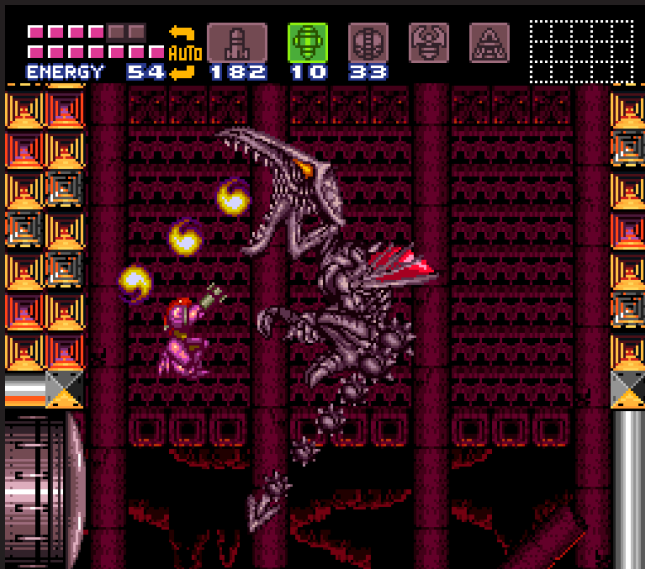
RIDLEY

Of all the returning foes from the original Metroid, Ridley has undergone the most significant changes. No longer a lazy, fat blob that hops in one spot and shoots useless arcs of fireballs at Samus (or over Samus, as the case may be), now Ridley is a fast, aggressive, powerful foe. He swoops down to snatch Samus from the ground and wallop her with his muscular tail or hovers well out of reach to scorch her with fireballs from an oblique angle.

By far the most difficult boss in Super Metroid, Ridley doesn't have a simple and easily exploited pattern (as with Draygon) or a behavioral tic that you can easily avoid (as with Phantoon). He's fast and likes to get right up in your face, which makes him by far the most challenging of the game's many bosses – one that stands as the bane of people who seek to complete Super Metroid with as low a percentage of collected items as possible.

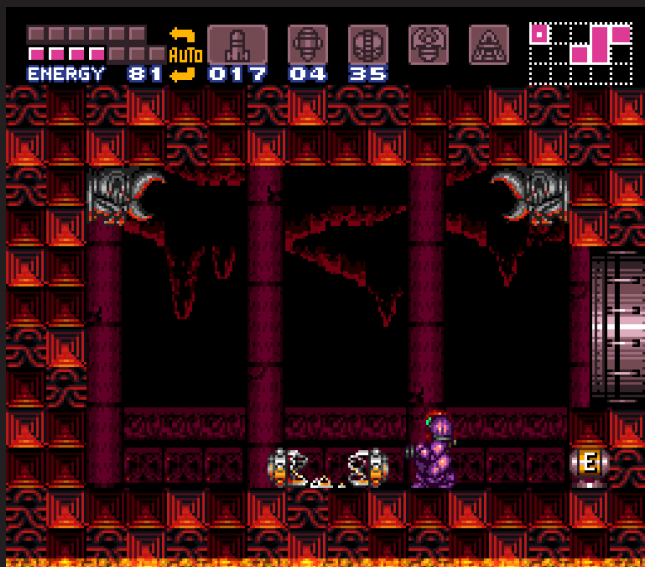
In many ways – that is, both in terms of difficulty and in terms of narrative role – Ridley feels like the final boss of Super Metroid. Everything from here on out is simply coasting along to wrap up some narrative details.





to a simple slugfest: He flies around, blasts you with fire, attempts to spear you with his tail (which whips around violently throughout the battle), and hovers at the edge of the screen when not actively attacking to avoid your retaliatory fire. When Ridley descends, he generally either darts in to grab Samus so he can slam her with his tail – much as Draygon did, but with far greater urgency and ferocity – or launches into a strange pattern where he extends his tail directly downward and pogos around the room on it, attempting to spear Samus.

By and the large, the strategy for this battle amounts to pumping him full of missiles before your own energy runs out. This is much more difficult if you're doing a low-item run, but playing normally you should be able to win just by button-mashing and keeping your weapon arm trained at a 45-degree angle most of the time. It doesn't take much in the way of brains, but it does make



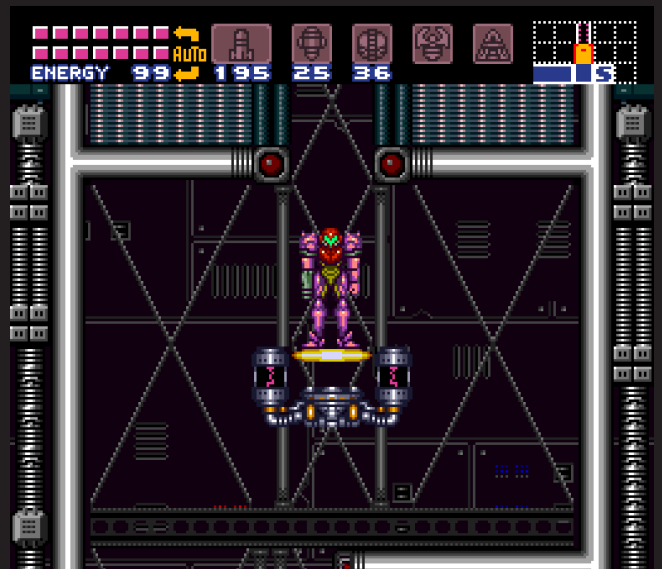
for a nice callback to the boss tactics of the original *Metroid* and *Metroid II*.

Unfortunately, this isn't the final battle of the game after all; you find the baby metroid's container in the room behind Ridley's lair, but not the metroid. Not that this should be a huge surprise given that statue of the bosses, which obviously hides something important. Still, there's no resolution here. Whatever Ridley's reasons for stealing the baby metroid, it wasn't so he could have a cute little pet for his office.

With Ridley down, there's just one place left to explore: Whatever lies beneath the mysterious statue you saw back at the beginning of the game. Every time you return to the statue after destroying a boss, the eye gem has shattered in the corresponding statue component for the freshly slain foe, while that portion of the statue has faded in color. With the entire thing desaturated, all that's left is to watch it sink, revealing an underwater path.

Despite the presence of water here, the elevator at this point doesn't take you to a subaquatic region akin to Maridia, though. Instead, you face more or less the opposite setting from the rough-hewn hell of lower Norfair where Ridley resided.

The final phase of the game takes place in a series of austere, high-tech corridors, just like the original *Metroid's* final showdown. Yes, it's a reprise of the Tourian zone, freshly rebuilt in a new location.

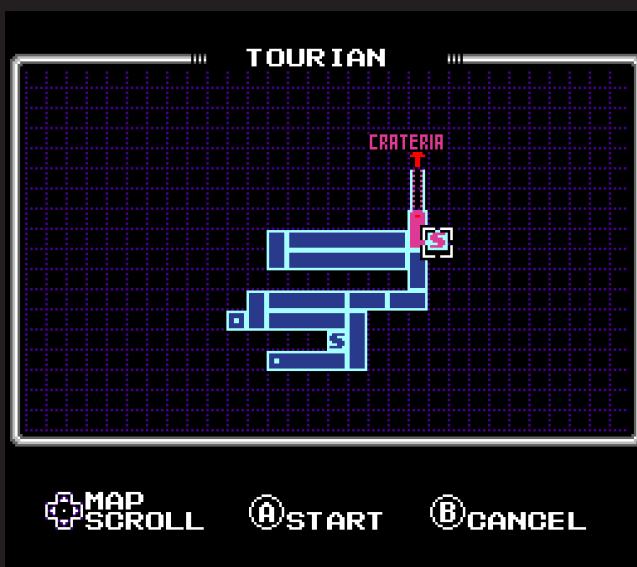


TOURIAN

Of all the regions in *Super Metroid* to take their cues from the original NES game, Tourian is easily the least different. A wholly linear, constantly undulating series of high-tech chambers leading to Mother Brain, Tourian once again pits you against deadly metroids, which once again can be defeated with the ice/missile combo. While the game misses an opportunity to incorporate aspects of the metroid life cycle here, it sticks to the basics for a reason: The game wants its big twist to hit you directly in the face.

And indeed it does. The eponymous super metroid lurks in the center of Tourian, eagerly sucking the life from any and all creatures that come within range of its ravenous pseudopodia. Tourian sticks to the original game's script in order to amplify the impact of your encounter with the newly outsized baby metroid – so the the horror of what the space pirates have done to Samus' adopted child resonates all the more profoundly. Despite this series of tunnels leading ostensibly to the final battle, it feels more like a denouement in terms of gameplay: The action falling to give way to the plot.

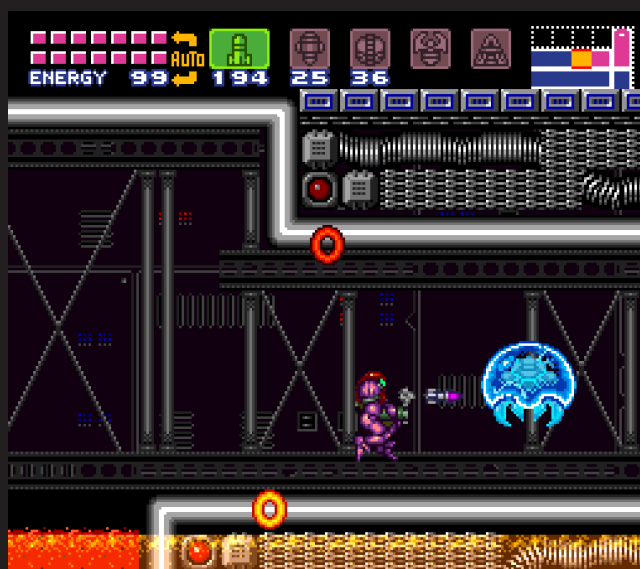
Tourian defies traditional game design logic and marks a shift to narrative needs overwriting arcade thrills. These days, *Super Metroid*'s late-game shift in priorities is hardly uncommon; we've seen it in everything from *Half-Life 2* to *Mass Effect 3*. But for many fans, the original still did it best. *Super Metroid* plays its final hand masterfully here.

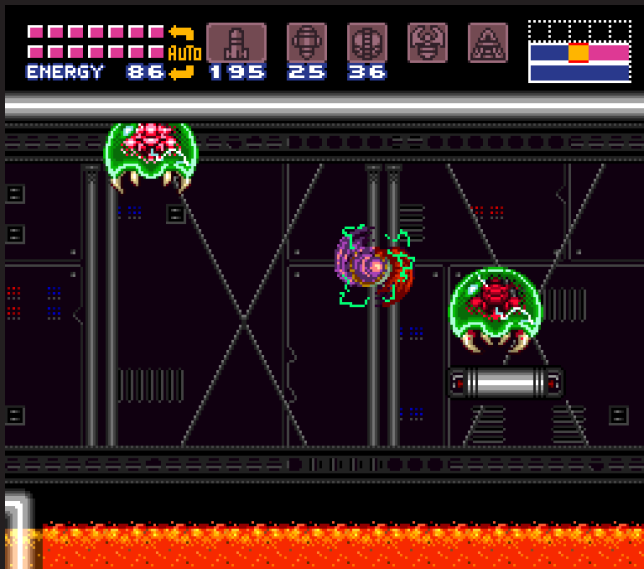


And, as in the original *Metroid*, this version of Tourian is short on exploration. A series of linear hallways working downward away from the surface awaits, with a handful of save points along the way.

Initially, Tourian holds no surprises for veterans of Samus' NES adventure. I suppose the metroids themselves could technically be a surprise, since the one that was abducted in the beginning was definitely stated to be the last in existence, but since the first game's plot revolved around the space pirates reproducing metroids with beta radiation their proliferation should hardly come as a shock. If you choose to interpret Maridia's moctroids as failed metroid clones, this is even less astounding.

Those who remember their encounters with larval metroids in the first two games will find these encounters a breeze: Freeze a metroid, then hit it with five missiles (or a super missile) to destroy it. Even though they seem larger



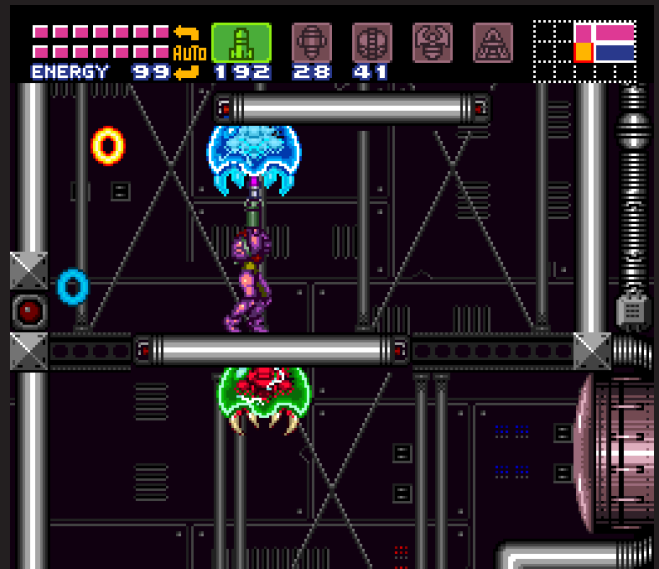


here, metroids still attack by swooping to seize Samus with lightning quickness, and once they've attached they begin draining her energy at a prodigious rate – much faster than lava or acid sap her health. They can only be dislodged by rolling into morph ball form and shaking them loose with a bomb.

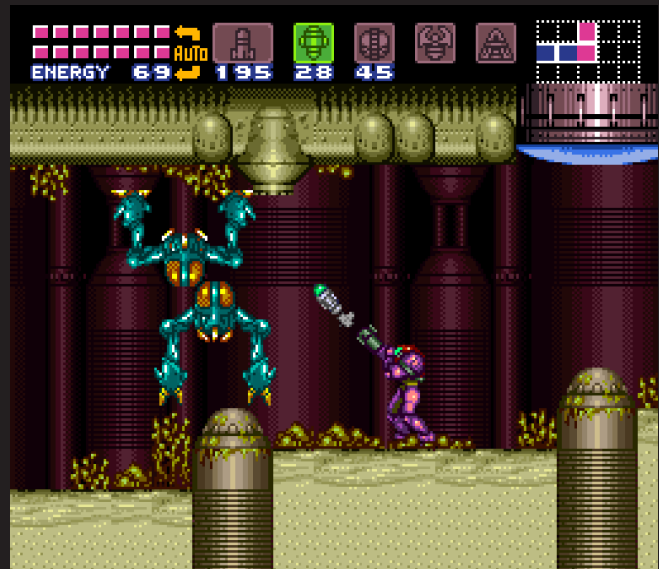
Of course, those experiencing Metroid for the first time here won't know these rules. Unlike in the older games, though, you don't come into this battle unprepared. Several creatures around Zebes have demonstrated behavior similar to that of metroids, and your encounters with them have created a knowledge base for dealing with the real thing. Mochtroids exhibit a less deadly form of metroids behavior, though they could be destroyed with Samus' arm cannon; meanwhile, the Beetoms you've encounters from time to time also demonstrated an ability to cling and drain Samus' health and could only be dislodged with bombs. By combining these two previous object lessons and making the connection between those creatures and the traits demonstrated by metroids, the solution becomes clear.

This version of Tourian does feature some hazards and scenarios not present in the original game, perhaps most notably large expanses of acid that can only be traversed with Samus' space jump. While the Screw Attack will keep the parasites at bay as you jump, they quickly move in once you land. You need keen reflexes to come out ahead in these scenarios.

On the other hand, some situations are much easier to deal with this time around. Metroids below you are much less of a threat now that Samus can aim downward either at an angle or directly down and combine ice and wave beams. There's no longer any need to tentatively lure them around corners. And, as in the original, you can't advance until you defeat every metroid, as their lives are linked to the door controls.

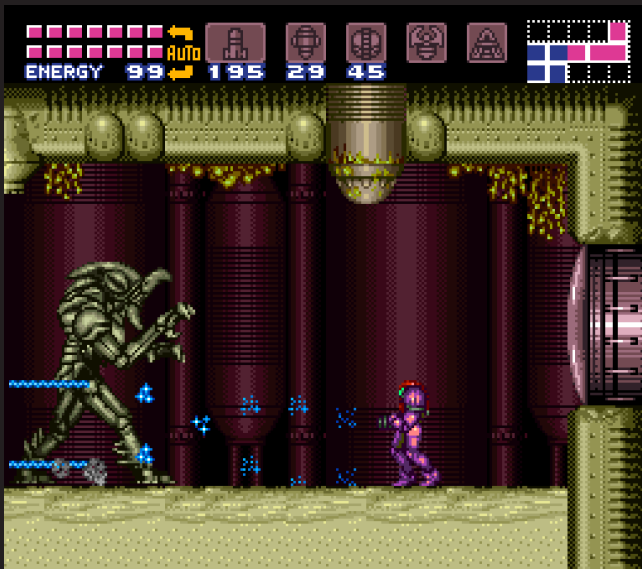


Midway through Tourian, however, the design begins to diverge from that of the previous iteration of the zone. The high-tech look gives way to a strange, dusty, almost desert-like setting. Curiously, a pair of sidehoppers live here; they're easily dispatched, but their presence breaks the rules of Tourian's design: No life forms save metroids and Mother Brain's biocomputer components. Something is definitely different this time around.



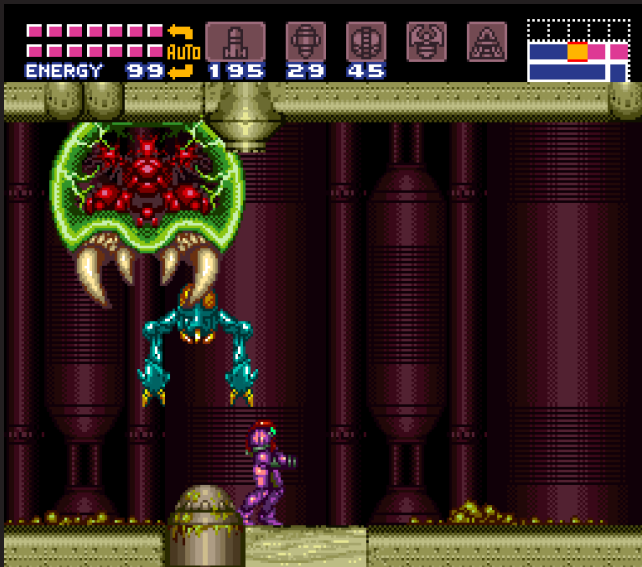
The next room is even more bizarre: One final Torizo encounter. But this one stands frozen in place, already in an attack position. It doesn't seem like it was waiting to ambush Samus, but rather that it was frozen in the middle of some other conflict.

Even more strangely, shooting it causes it to disintegrate into dust. What should have been an epic final battle with the ultimate Torizo instead amounts to little more than watching your prospective opponent turn into

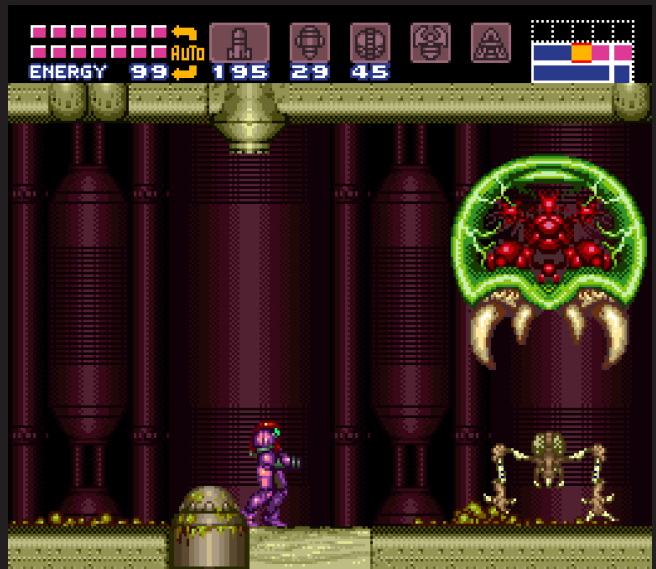


dirt. It's all very mysterious and somewhat disconcerting. What could have caused this, you wonder? And in the next room, you learn the answer as a lone sidehopper bounces toward you...

...only to be snatched from the air by the biggest metroid in existence. It turns out the game isn't called "Super Metroid" because it's Metroid on Super NES; it's called Super Metroid because... well. This hulking monstrosity. The super metroid.

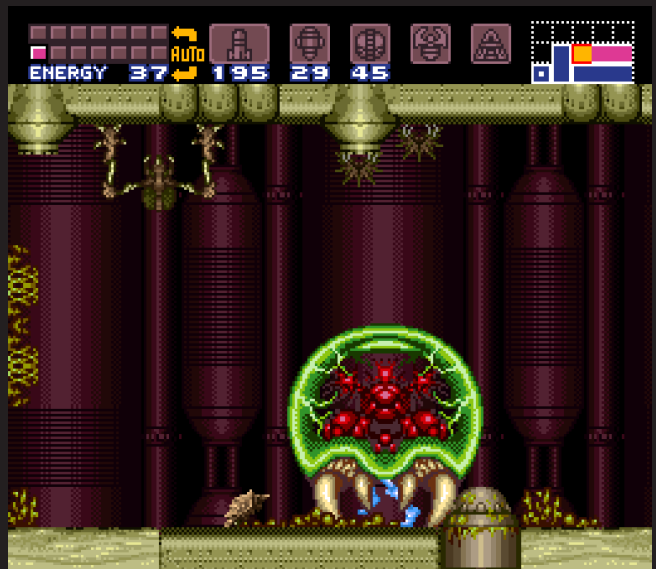


Samus is frozen in horror as the beast drains the life from the sidehopper in a matter of seconds, leaving behind another of those dusty husks that collapse at a touch. This behemoth was clearly responsible for reducing this area to a desolate wasteland, and it's capable of destroying a powerful Torizo in mid-swipe. Super Metroid is back to where it began – creating atmosphere and narrative within the confines of the game itself – although

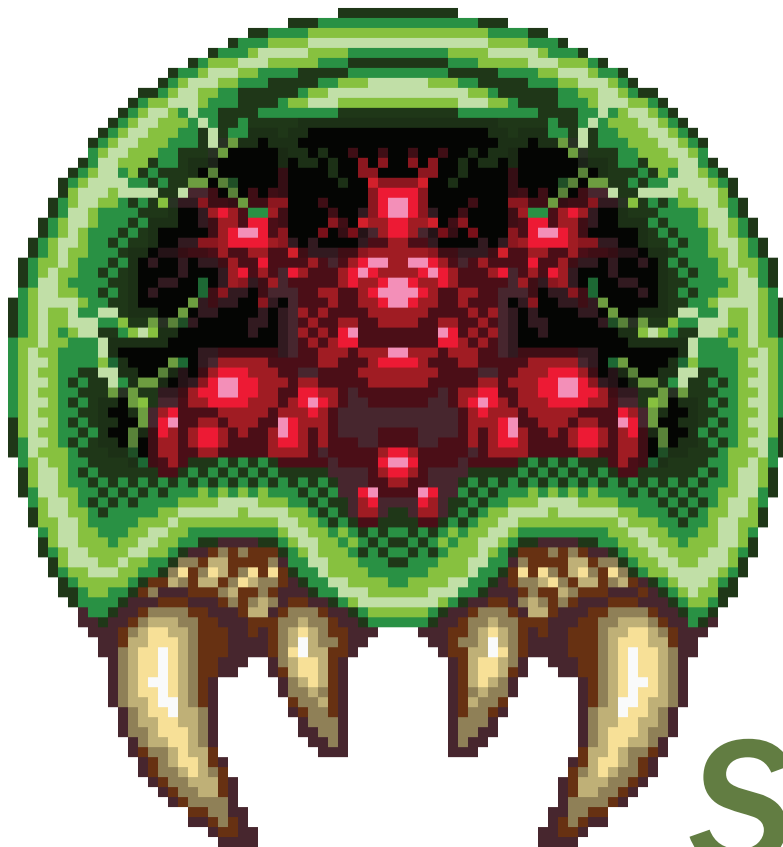


as the eponymous monster rises from its snack and trains its attention on Samus, the silent narrative conveys much less "eerie but harmless" and more "well, I'm dead" than the spooky opening sequence in the ruins of the former Tourian region.

The game uncharacteristically wrests control away from the player as the super metroid chows down on the sidehopper, and as soon as it's completed its snack you regain power over Samus again. There's just a split-second before it swoops down and latches onto Samus and begins depleting her health many times faster than any other source of power drain in the game. In mere seconds, Samus' health can go from maxed out to zero.



Well... not quite zero. At the very last moment, a split-second before Samus takes her place among the desiccated carcasses of Zebes' indigenous life forms, the

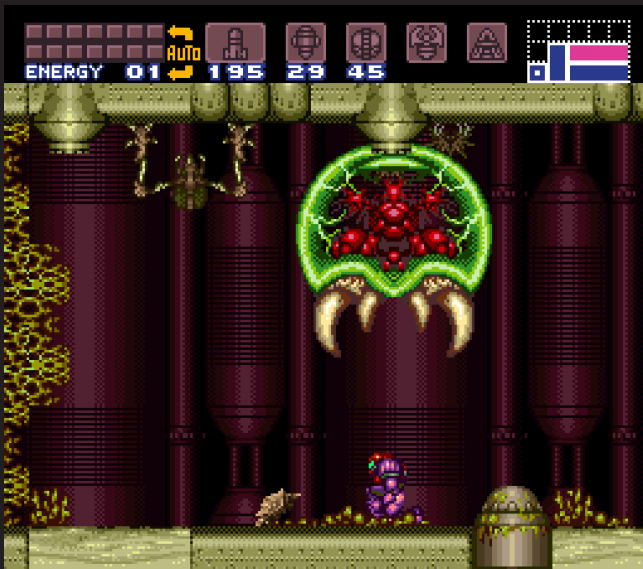


SUPER METROID

Super Metroid skips the muddled life cycle of metroids in their native environment of SR388 (as seen in Metroid II) to get straight to the point. Here, you have two different kinds of metroid: The super metroid, and everything else.

The super metroid – formerly the baby metroid – defies the life cycle for a reason. It makes a point. Metroids clearly aren't meant to grow like this; you've seen them in their home, witnessed the way they grow and molt and metamorphose into every more anthropoidal forms. This massive larval form isn't natural. It's not what metroids were meant to be. The space pirates have done something gruesome to the baby, warping and twisting it into this tormented form in the course of their experimentation.

Despite its monstrousness, the baby retains a shred of its former identity – just enough to recognize its "mother" and spare her life from its endless, ravening hunger. Its plaintive keening and evident suffering, combined with its final treatment at Mother Brain's hands, railroad the player like nothing else in this nonlinear adventure. There can only be one conclusion to this journey: Revenge.



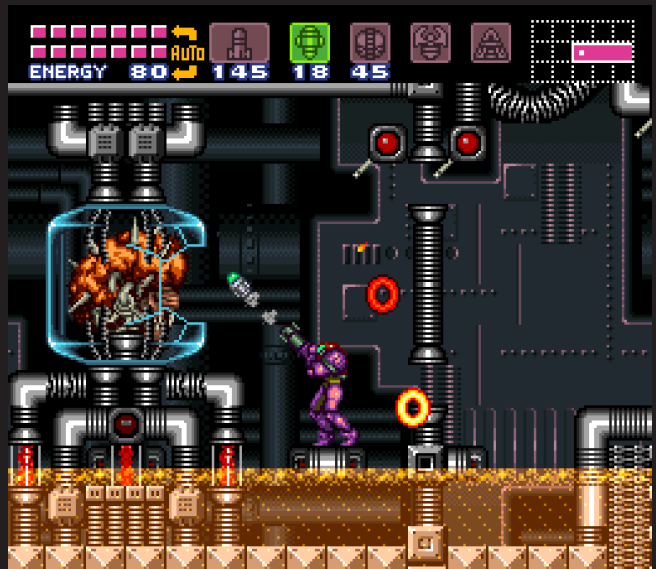
super metroid has a change of heart. It pauses and releases Samus, hovering uncertainly over her as she pants, on one knee, in mortal exhaustion. And it begins keening, making the exact same noises that the baby metroid made at the beginning of the game – and, of course, on the title screen every time you load the game – lest you'd forgotten that crucial audio cue in the hours between the prologue and these final moments of the game.

Again, without a single written word, Super Metroid makes its storyline clear: The space pirates abducted the baby metroid so they could use it as the key to their metroid army, cloning it with beta rays and evidently mutating it in the process. The original metroid resides here in a special pen in Tourian, close to the heart of the space pirate's operation, bloated into some kind of monstrosity with a voracious appetite, but still enough in possession of whatever instinct or sentience it might have had to recognize Samus as its "mom." One can only assume the lavender Gravity Suit caused the initial confusion.

Unwilling to kill its adoptive mother, the super metroid flies off, surprisingly expressive for a hulking space monster whose entire demonstrative range consists of tensing its mandibles and chittering. Must be something in the way it hovers.

There's an energy recharge station shortly after this encounter that will helpfully take Samus back from 1 HP to however many thousand she has built up. Does the super metroid treat the energy station like a water fountain, do you think? One of those eyeball doors guards the inner sanctum ahead, unscathed by the massive parasite it shares board with. I guess even ravenous metroids have standards.

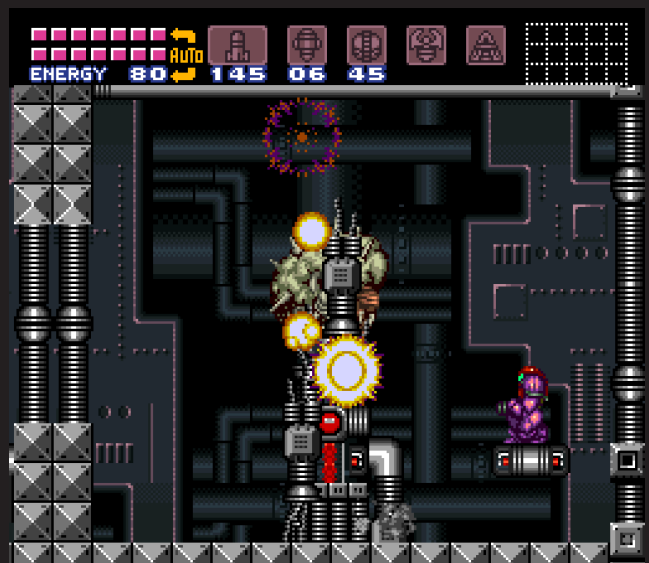
And finally, a familiar sight (even if you didn't play the original Metroid, thanks to the prologue of this game): The Mother Brain's lair in the central core of Tourian. The layout and hazards will be instantly familiar to veterans:



Rinkas materialize and home in on Samus; rotating gun turrets provide defensive fire, and acid lines the floor. As before, your task is to destroy the regenerating Zebetite columns that form the Mother Brains perimeter, advancing on the boss herself.

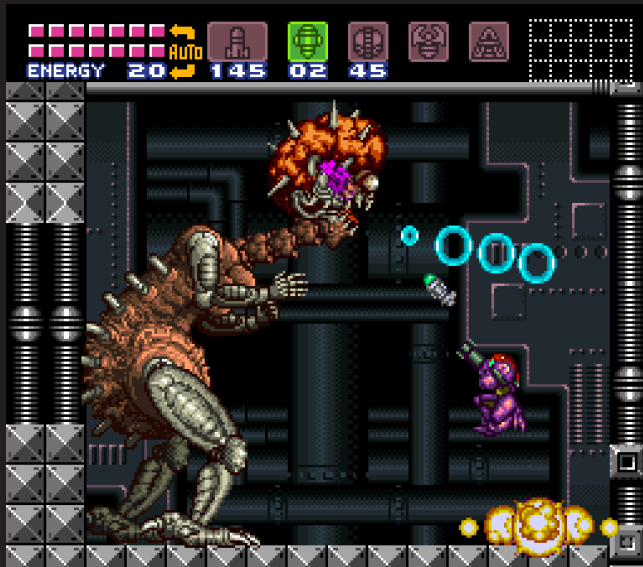
You will find a few small differences, as befits the march of technology: Some of the Zebetites are half-height and require a little more finesse to destroy, and you need to roll up and hop through the opening in order to advance. Otherwise, though, the drill is much the same, and thanks to Samus' expanded arsenal – hello, Super Missiles – this process turns out to be much less harrowing than in Metroid.

That holds doubly true for the Mother Brain battle. This face-off proves to be vastly easier than it was the first time around. Not only does the glass surrounding her give way to a much larger opening, her engineers even thoughtfully constructed a small platform at a perfect height



to give Samus safe purchase from which she can aim up and pepper the Mother Brain unit with super missiles.

It's really quite laughable as final bosses go....



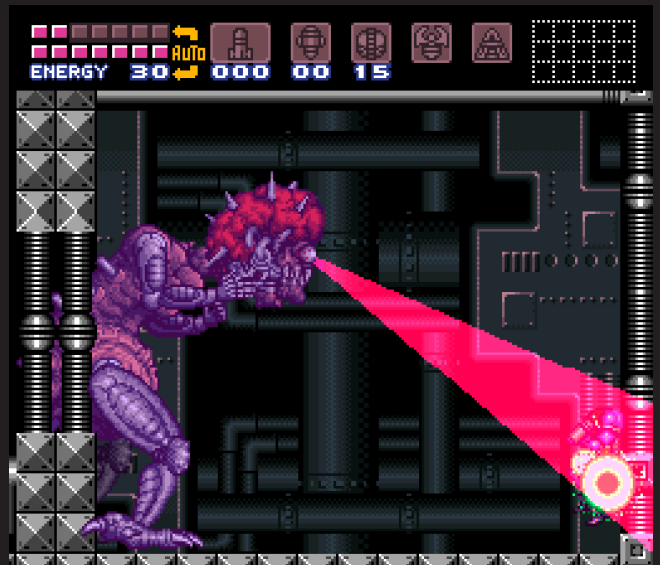
Until, of course, Mother Brain's case disintegrates, leaving only the brain itself intact... which attaches to a cybernetic horrorshow hidden below. Mother Brain's battle suit rises from the floor, and the real battle commences.

While not the most difficult battle in the game – Super Mother Brain attacks somewhat more slowly than Ridley, has no special retaliatory attacks against your heavy weapons, and doesn't crowd Samus the way Draygon and Ridley did – neither can you simply sit and shoot indiscriminately as you fight her. She fires streams of blue energy rings at Samus' current location while flinging forward explosive grenade-like devices that detonate upon contact with a surface and send out a runner of fire bursts away in both directions from the point of impact, similar to the Holy Water in the latter-day Castlevania games. Her brain core bobs up and down on its neck stem, constantly altering the angle from which it attacks.

The design of Mother Brain's battle body goes straight for grotesque; it's a freakish hybrid of Godzilla and a chicken, a fleshy and distended abdomen onto which biomechanical limbs and implants have been bolted. Besides the skeletal human-like hands, Mother Brain's arms and legs look remarkably similar in design to those of the space pirates, which gives rise to an interesting question: Which came first, the hulking Godzilla-chicken or the egg?

Mother Brain changes color as you pepper her with attacks, growing redder and redder as she takes damage. Eventually, she gives up on her standard attacks, and a fantastic piece of interactive narrative begins.

Nearing critical damage, Mother Brain eventually decides enough is enough and unleashes a devastating ultimate attack against Samus. There's no real way to

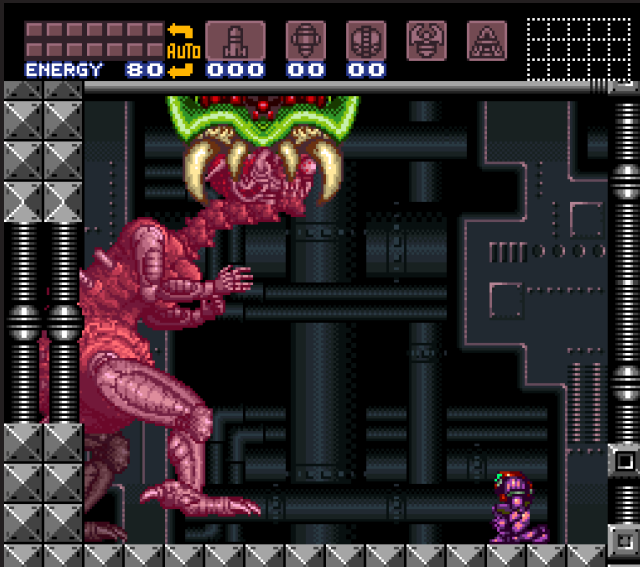


avoid this energy beam; it sweeps around the room, and once it makes contact with Samus it pins her to the wall and begins sapping her energy at about the same rate as the super metroid did. Once Samus takes one of these beams, she becomes immobilized, kneeling heavily on the floor as she did in the wake of the super metroid's attack. (One might theorize that the similarities are intended to suggest that Mother Brain has been outfitted with weaponized properties of the metroid, and, hey, why not?) While one hit probably isn't enough to deplete Samus' health entirely – unless you've been playing super sloppy, son – she'll keep hitting you with the beam until you've reached critical health.

There's an even greater sensation of helplessness in this battle than against the super metroid. The earlier deadly encounter transpires so quickly that you barely have time to process your panic; here, the Mother Brain takes her time, searing Samus repeatedly and charging up between attacks. To make it worse, the game doesn't take away your control over Samus here. You can still struggle to make her move and fight back – but that's all you can do. Struggle. Samus is too weakened to fight back, so all you're really doing is flailing against the inevitable. Being left in control of a weakened Samus gives you the sensation that you should be able to do something here, but you can't. As you cast about desperately for a tactic, Mother Brain systematically dismantles you.

Once Samus drops down to critical health, Mother Brain rears back for a final blow, and leans in for the strike

–



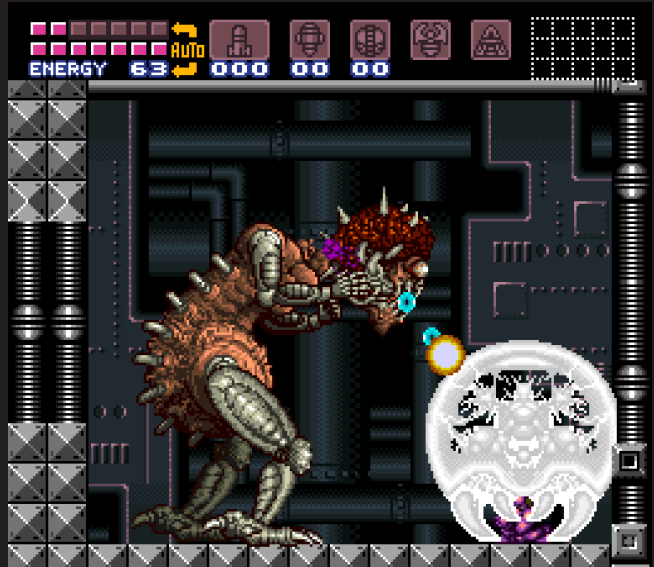
– only to be arrested in mid-attack by the baby metroid, which swoops in to protect its mother by turning Mother Brain’s life-draining powers against her. The enemy leader flails about helplessly, just as Samus was doing only moments before, but to no avail. There’s no stopping the super metroid.

With Mother Brain reduced to dust, the super metroid turns its attentions to Samus, but not to drain her dry. Instead, it restores her health – a trick alluded to in the intro of the game, where Samus mentioned the potential energy-creating properties of metroids. Here we see Chekhov’s battery in action, and our heroine is brought back from the brink of death.

Unfortunately, so is Mother Brain; evidently she learned about villainy from the Die Hard school of evil, and not even the Super Metroid’s assault can stop her. Samus’ little “ho ho ho, now I have a machine gun” note really

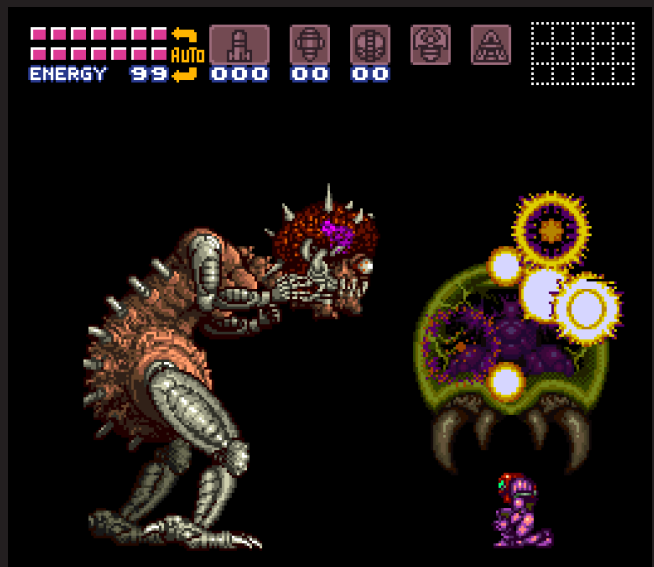
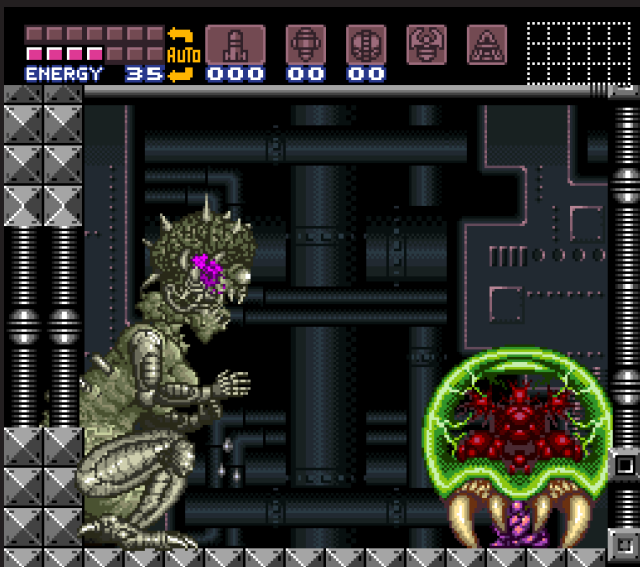
ticked her off.

As the metroid restores Samus’ health – a much slower process than the reverse, it turns out – Mother Brain recovers and takes aim at her disobedient bio-weapon. As the metroid happens to be passing along its life essence to Samus at the moment, it’s quite vulnerable to this onslaught. You can only watch in horror as it slowly weakens under Mother Brain’s attack.



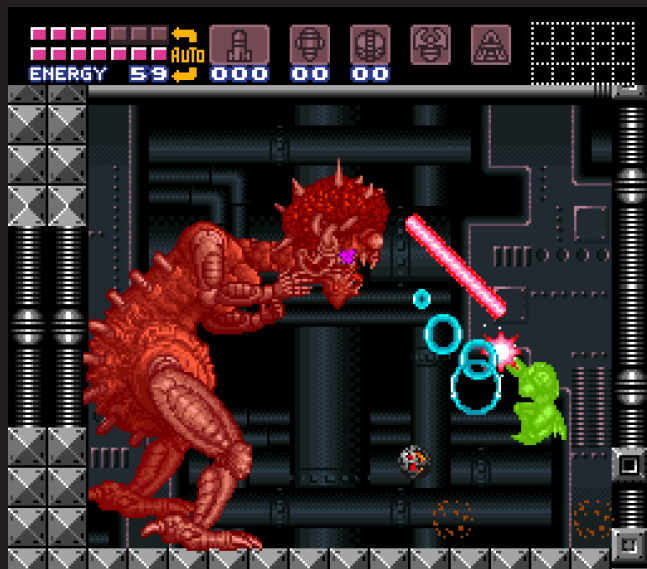
Once again, you’re rendered helpless here as events beyond your power take place around you. Though in this case Samus is perfectly safe from harm thanks to the sheltering aegis of the super metroid, you can only watch in dismay as your “baby” withers in order to defend you.

Samus’ health finally topped off, the metroid rises to retaliate against Mother Brain, but it’s too late; one final



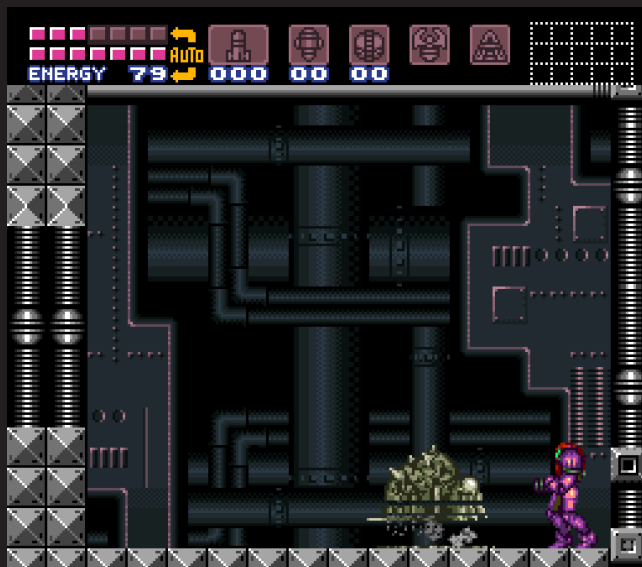
assault causes the friendly parasite to disintegrate, showing Samus with her life energy. At this point, the game is basically over.

In defiance of science and logic, but very much proper according to the appeal of your emotional sense of justice, the super metroid's final gift to Samus is a super-charged new weapon variant called the Hyper Beam. Its coloration is, perhaps not coincidentally, remarkably similar to Mother Brain's eye beam, but instead of taking the form of a fanned-out energy spread it instead condenses all the metroid energy into a focused beam, glowing white hot at the center.



With full health and a weapon seemingly capable of singeing the hair of God's beard, you have to really make an effort to lose this fight. Mother Brain is simply outclassed in every respect. She reverts to her standard weapons – one assumes the capacity to fire her ultimate weapon was lost to the metroid and, if visual cues are to be believed, transferred to Samus – while Samus tears through her. It's a cakewalk of a battle, but coming after the shock of Samus' near-death experience and the murder of the baby metroid, that toothlessness is 100% pure catharsis.

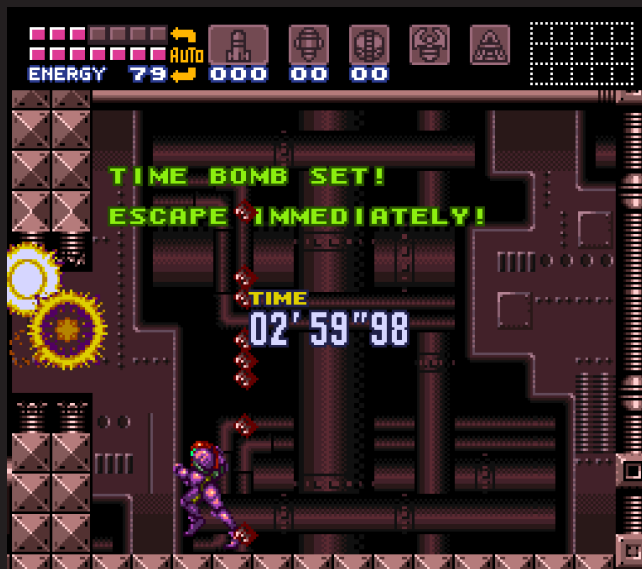
While Super Metroid offers a master class example of open-ended game design, the highly focused portions that bookend the adventure do an equally amazing job of telling a story through the most minimal means possible. That isn't to say every game should try to take this approach; Super Metroid works in large part because it's constructed on the foundation established by the two games that came before it. And, let's fact it, the story it tells is incredibly simple. But it's an excellent demonstration of working within your means and using story to complement gameplay rather than overpower it, and proving that the interactive nature of video games means less



can be more when telling a tale.

Eventually – and in fact much sooner than later – Mother Brain succumbs to Samus' ferocious retaliation and crumbles to dust, making for one of the most satisfying video game enemy deaths since Final Fantasy's Chaos.

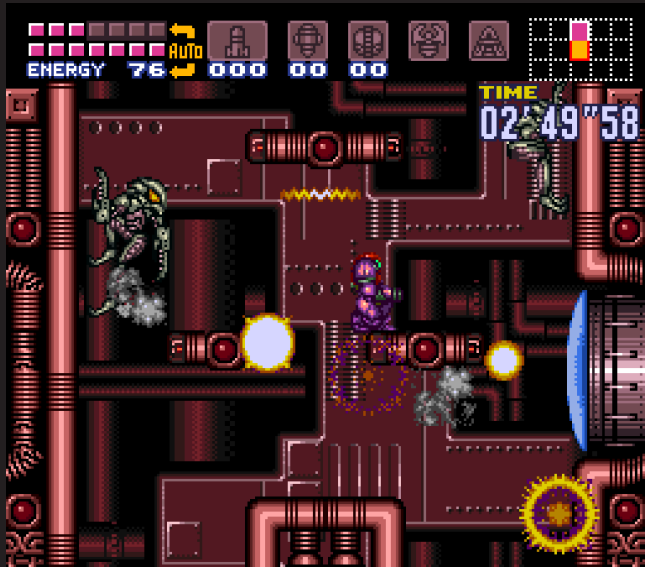
The defeat of Mother Brain doesn't mean it's game over, of course. It wouldn't be Metroid if you didn't have to run desperately to the exit before the enemy base explodes.



You have three minutes to reach your gunship before Mother Brain's lair detonates. While the notion of an escape sequence should feel like old hat for Metroid fans, the Super Metroid take on the concept differs somewhat from that of the first two games. The original Metroid's escape sequence was a tense reprise of that early sequence in which players climbed a seemingly endless shaft made far more difficult by the tiny size of the platforms and Sa-

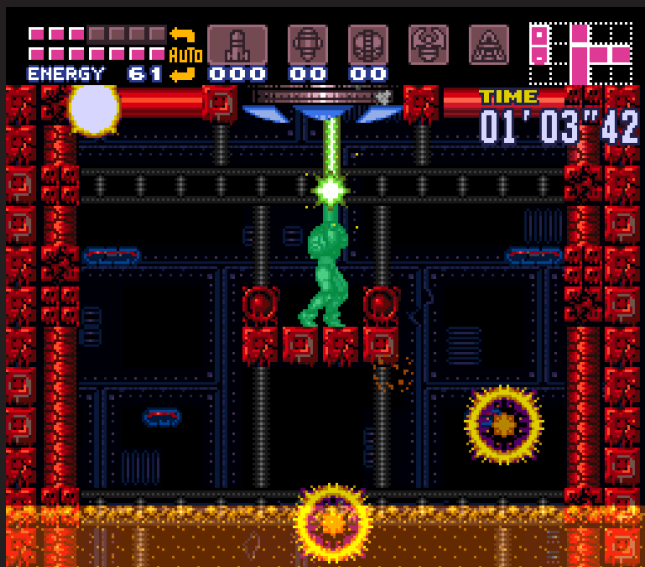
mus' slippery jump physics. Metroid II's escape scene was the exact opposite: A stress-free climb back to the beginning of the game made possible by the baby metroid.

Super Metroid, on the other hand, takes a third tack. Although the platforming here isn't nearly as difficult as in the first game, the exit route is much more convoluted. The challenge isn't simply jumping with swift precision but rather finding the proper path.



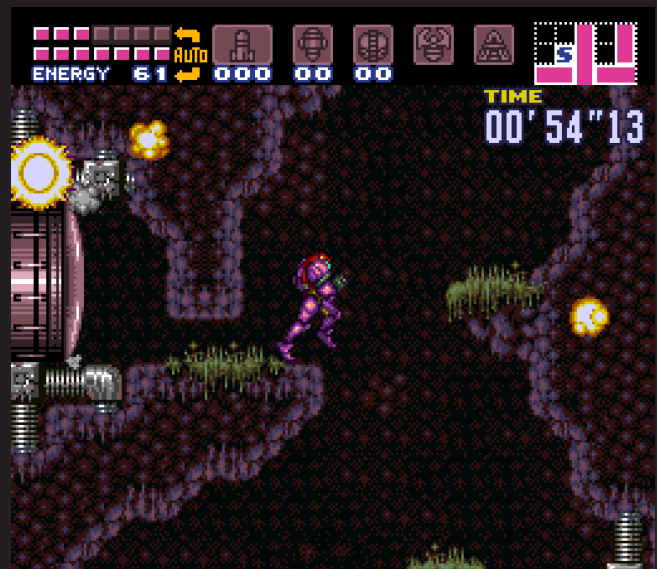
It doesn't help that the place is lousy with space pirates. Sure, the Hyper Beam cuts through them with surgical precision, but their acrobatics and energy blasts can slow you down, especially if you're trying to take the sustained space jump approach to the end.

The escape sequence consists of two main rooms. The first is a sort of mini-maze that can easily



trick you into wasting time by following the wrong path – though it does offer a direct route that you can streak through by using the Speed Booster to rush to the end and air-dash through a portion of floor if you know it's there. The second is more linear, but it's convoluted in its linearity, forcing you to double back several times.

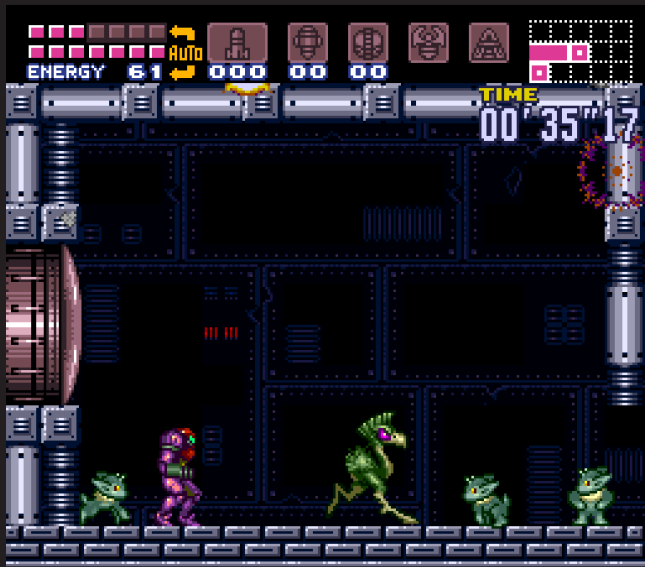
At the end, you have to deal with a room reminiscent of the large cavern following the acquisition of the Screw Attack: Lava rises, scattered platforms occupied by space pirates prevent you from simply jumping to freedom, and a ledge beneath the exit boxes you in if you stick to the right side of room. Where you could afford to screw up in Norfair and still come out ahead, too much of a goof here will cost precious time and prevent you from escaping properly.



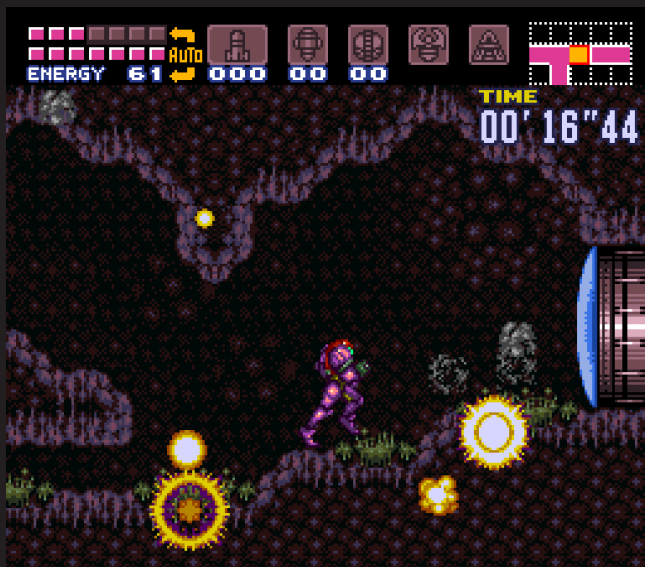
And just to rub salt in the wound, the escape route actually ends up leading you back to the ruins of the exit shaft from the first game. Granted, you have a Space Jump now, so it's nowhere near as hard as in the original Metroid, but it definitely gives you an "oh crap" sensation once you dash through what appears to be the exit only to find this waiting for you. Oh, and the acid or lava or whatever rises here well. No rest for the weary.

Eventually, you'll end up back in the "real" game world again, covering ground that you saw very early in the game (and possibly passed through in a hurry once or twice since then). While being thrust into the non-linear corridors Zebes could become disorienting or confusing while you're rushing to freedom, the designers very helpfully locked down all non-essential doors. There's no way to get lost here, because you're being guided. As so often has been the case with Super Metroid, arbitrary door locks keep you from wandering or backtracking at inopportune times. The fact that no one ever complains about this in Super Metroid but rail against it in Metroid Fusion

will make for a handy object lesson in subtlety of design, I think.



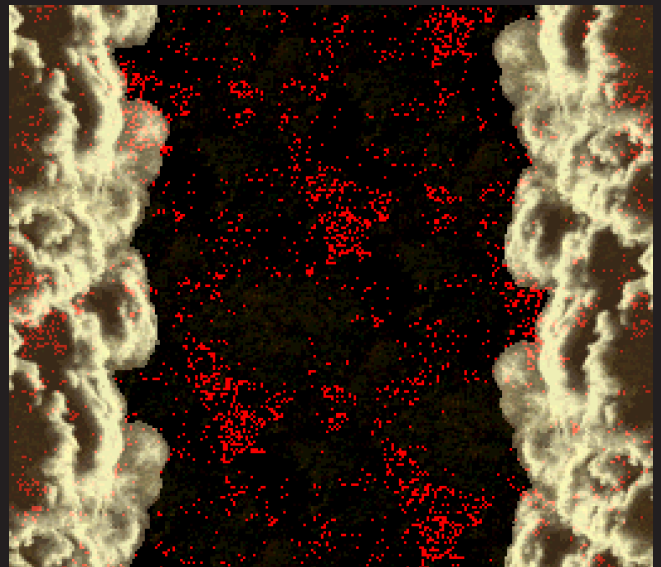
Well, there is one non-essential door you can duck through if you like; go down one screen to the right once you reach the surface of Crateria and you'll find the room that used to lead to the first Torizo and Samus' Bomb power-up now features your little tutorial friends locked in a cage for some reason. How they got here is a mystery – maybe Mother Brain was ticked that they helped you out? – but the fact that they've been corralled here works to their benefit. Once you free them, you can head out on your way again.



The explosions surrounding Samus grow more violent as the clock ticks down. This is kind of like Call of Duty and Uncharted, huh?

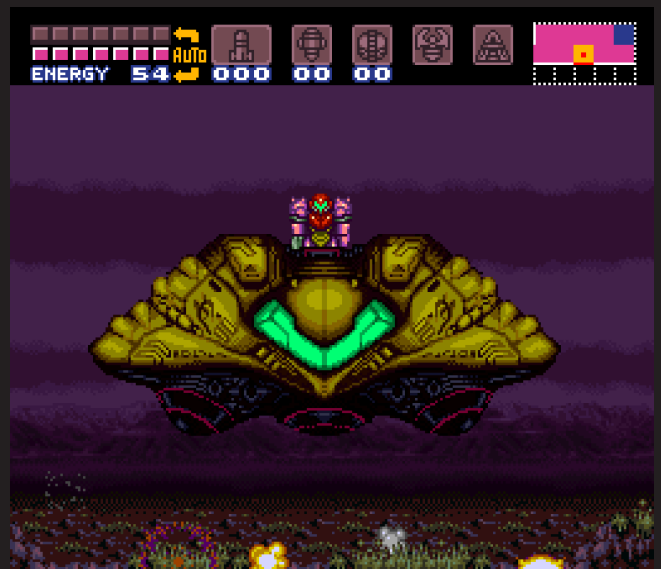
Your ultimate goal, of course, is Samus' ship.

Once you reach it, the game is truly over: Samus automatically drops down into the cockpit and returns to space.



Up through the fancy Mode 7 clouds, where the entire surface of the planet appears dappled with fiery light.

And this time around, it's not just the space pirate base that explodes; somehow the whole of Zebes goes up in flames.



Farewell, Zebes. Farewell, tormented souls of the Wrecked Ship. Farewell, mournful Draygon babies. Farewell, overly protective mother turtle and your innocent children. Farewell, dead adventurer guy and the grody space-bugs who were munching on him. Everything is gone now.

Only your tutorial buddies escape, should you set them free, flying away from the cataclysm as a tiny dot to



parts unknown.

In the end, you're given the obligatory time-based variable ending. Complete the game quickly enough and, per usual, Samus strips down to a bikini. Hey, just because she's the most powerful woman in the galaxy, capable of single-handedly putting a stop to an entire race and blowing up a whole damn planet doesn't mean she gets to have dignity. Come on, this is video games, man.



Look at those abs, though. She and Vaan should do fitness video together or something.

In addition to telling you how long you took to complete the game as Metroid II did, Super Metroid also tracks the percentage of items you've collected. This addition made a huge impact on how fans would treat the game in the following years, helping to inspire them to approach their playthroughs in different ways. Fastest

possible complete runs were the obvious outcome; less obvious were self-imposed challenges to see just how few items are needed to complete the game.



Of course, the real secret behind Super Metroid's extensive playability is its excellence. The game is fantastic, exquisitely designed from start to finish with hardly a misstep to be found. Those play variants are ultimately just excuses for people to explore a masterpiece in new ways, like watching a beloved film with director's commentary on. Super Metroid endures through the ages simply because it's great.

Though of course there are a few other reasons, too. Like any good game, Super Metroid contains plenty of secrets. Some intentional, some less so. The sheer number of working parts in the game that collide as you put the programming code through permutations the developers couldn't have predicted or accounted for inevitably make for some surprising interactions.

Some of the details are simply there for fun. If you manage to best Ridley in the prologue, it doesn't change the outcome of the game... but it does embarrass your enemy by causing him to lose his grip on the baby metroid's container. Rather than flying off because you've been bested, he takes off because you're too awesome for him to deal with while he has to worry about his captive.

But then there are more arcane secrets. The Crystal Flash technique is demonstrated in the game's rolling attract mode (which I didn't even realize existed until I saw it on a demo loop at Waldensoft), but the attract mode doesn't tell you how to activate it.

Besides being a Michigan-based chain of gas stations, Crystal Flash is also a super technique that allows Samus to convert weapon energy into health when low on life. The conditions for activating the ability are terribly



specific: She needs to have 50 or fewer points of health, a large stock of all expendable weapon types, and nothing in her reserve tanks. Pressing an arcane button combination while in morph ball form will then allow her to enter this sort of energy cocoon that drains her weapon stock in order to restore health. It's cool-looking – one of the few times we see Samus without her Power Suit outside of the original Metroid's New Game + – but few people would ever discover it on their own. It's there, though, just in case.

That so many details were accounted for actually is one of the game's more surprising features. The wall jump, for example, is a hidden ability that requires practice to master. And while you can use it to acquire certain items out of order, locations where you might potentially put it to use to severely break the game's intended sequence have almost entirely been accounted for. Likewise potential bomb jumping sequence breaks; rather than removing a feature that allowed players to break open the original Metroid, Super Metroid's creators left it intact without gimping it and simply built their stages to reflect their awareness that their fans would be experimenting with that technique. This is the definition of great design: Empowering players, never tying them down or stripping away their abilities, but taking great care to make sure that empowerment doesn't diminish the game experience.

Of course, there's no stopping a truly determined army of obsessed fans, so naturally Super Metroid players have found weak points in the level layouts, or other ways to exploit the game design.

For example, even after you learn you can perform the Shine Spark flying dash, you may not realize you can execute it in several different directions. Up is obvious, but you can also fly along flat surfaces. If you're really good, though, you can fly at a 45-degree angle – this requires exquisite timing and has very few practical ap-

plications. But you can use it break through a secret wall in your gunship's landing area to access a small set of rooms that you could normally only reach upon returning from the Wrecked Ship through a certain door. There's no real advantage to doing this, but again, the sense of personal empowerment that comes from doing things the "wrong" way is undeniably satisfying.



I've mentioned a few areas where the wall jump can be used to get to certain items out of proper sequence, but even here in the tutorial area you can find a test of wall jumping skill that goes beyond merely mastering the timing of the action. There's a narrow gap in the wall to the right at the top of this shaft, only one block high, that Samus can't simply leap into. Once she has the Spring Ball, it's a simple matter to hop over there and acquire the power-up within – but you're likely to stumble into this section long before acquiring that tool. With truly spectacular timing, though, you can wall jump over to the right and duck quickly into a ball, collecting the power-up and saving yourself the trouble of returning to pick it up later. Again, this is totally inessential... but when you pull it off, it feels amazing.

There are even more advanced exploits, things so specific and unintuitive the developers clearly never thought to test for them. For instance, you encounter a number of collapsing floors and descending gates early in the game that you should only be able to clear once you have the Speed Booster. But if you do an unaccelerated run while toggling the 45-degree aim controls, the resulting animation glitch may allow you to clear the descending gates before you're supposed to. This can result in a more extreme form of sequence-breaking than simply snagging an extra missile early; one of the items hidden behind these gates is the Ice Beam, which allows you to gain access to all sorts of interesting places. Likewise, it's

possible to open green missile gates from the wrong side, granting you the ability to poke around in areas that you should only be able to explore much later in the game.

These tricks and exploits lack the enormity of, say, the “minus world” in Super Mario Bros. or wall-walking in the original Metroid. Nevertheless, they’re a part of the game, and they’re grown over time to be a part of its fan culture. In a sign of class, the Metroid folks acknowledged Shine Spark exploits in Metroid Fusion, locking down certain potential sequence breaks but at the same time acknowledging the skill required to pull it off. That sure beats Retro’s approach to the double-jump exploit in Metroid Prime, which they simply ironed out of the game altogether in rereleases of the game. Where’s the fun in that?

Both with and without its secrets and exploits, though, Super Metroid stands as a true classic. Its intuitive, gamer-friendly design walks a delicate tightrope between developer control and player freedom, and even when it’s exerting the former it demonstrates a remarkable ability to seem like it’s wallowing in the latter. No wonder so many developers – independent and otherwise – look to Super Metroid for inspiration. This is one of those rare games that you can look at and say, “Yes, this is how it’s done.”



The works covered in this volume are trademark and copyright 1994-2015 Nintendo. No claim of ownership over the images is stated or implied. All screen images and artwork are used in the spirit of fair use, as this book represents a critical and academic analysis of these games and the visuals are used strictly to provide examples of the topics and design under discussion.

Original content (text and layouts) ©2014 Jeremy Parish.

Images sourced from VGMuseum.com and used with express permission.

The content in this volume available freely online at www.anatomyofgames.com

Cover illustration by Jeremy Parish, based on a photo sourced from critiques4geeks.com

WWW.ANATOMYOFGAMES.COM

*METROID, KID ICARUS, METROID II, SUPER METROID,
SAMUS ARAN, AND PIT ARE TRADEMARKS OF NINTENDO*

*THIS BOOK IS NOT ENDORSED OR LICENSED
BY NINTENDO OF AMERICA*

