

Contextual, Focal, or Fear: How Metroidvania Games Fit into Bernard Perron's Terminology

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Abstract. Introduction: *The Metroidvania subgenre is widely recognized for its exploration and nonlinear progression, while the horror genre seeks to evoke fear through specific design strategies. However, the intersection between these two domains remains underexplored in academic literature.*

Objective: *This article aims to analyze how games from the Metroidvania subgenre can be classified within the pyramid of scary games proposed by Bernard Perron, which categorizes horror experiences into contextual, focal, and fear levels.*

Methodology or Steps: *The study is based on theoretical references about Metroidvania and Perron's terminology, including his Scare tactics. The games Blasphemous and Hollow Knight were selected and analyzed through gameplay observation, secondary sources, and identification of fear related mechanics.*

Results: *The analyzed games feature elements associated with horror but do not aim primarily to provoke fear in the player. These findings suggest a lack of Metroidvania games that explore fear as the central objective of the experience.*

Keywords: Metroidvania, Horror Games, Game Design, Fear.

1. Introduction

In 1986, Nintendo released *Metroid* for the NES (Nintendo Entertainment System), a title that already featured elements of what would later become known as Metroidvania, though it still had limitations such as repetitive maps and excessively hidden secrets. Its sequel, *Metroid II: Return of Samus* (1991), released for Game Boy, retained many of these issues and, despite being more linear, the monochromatic screen made the environments very similar, hindering navigation.

Then, in 1994, under the direction of Yoshio Sakamoto, *Super Metroid* was released. The title retained aspects of the original but developed them further, with larger maps, more interesting bosses, and, this time, an explorable setting without the need to draw a map or buy a Nintendo Power issue [Game Maker's Toolkit 2018b].

Unlike the *Metroid* franchise games, the *Castlevania* franchise was always much more linear. In some titles, such as *Castlevania: Rondo of Blood* (1993) and *Castlevania II: Belmont's Revenge* (1991), there were aspects that reduced linearity, like hidden paths and stage selection, but almost the entire series was completely linear [Game Maker's Toolkit 2018a].

However, this only changed when Koji Igarashi took over to direct a new game in the series. Thus, in 1997, Konami released *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, where

the entire game takes place in a gigantic, interconnected castle, allowing players to find powers to overcome obstacles and secret passages containing hidden items. Despite the similarities, Koji Igarashi stated in a 2014 GDC (Game Developers Conference) panel that the project's main inspiration was not *Metroid*, but rather *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) [Christian Nutt 2015].

After the release and consolidation of these games in the market, it became possible to observe several common points between the two projects. This served as the basis for consolidating a new subgenre called Metroidvania, with the nomenclature being the union of the names of the two reference games for the subgenre. It is not known exactly when this name emerged, but there is consensus that it was popularized by Jeremy Parish, editor in chief of the 1UP blog [Soares e da Mota 2021].

In a manner similar to the process observed in Metroidvanias, the horror genre also underwent a consolidation process over the years. Although there is no specific date for the genre's origin, some of the earliest horror related game projects can be found in the 1970s, but it was only in the 1980s that horror games gained greater popularity and began to more effectively explore horror elements [Renato de Souza Silva 2022].

With the arrival of the 1990s, horror games took a major turn in popularity with the release of *Resident Evil* (1996) for PlayStation 1, thus giving rise to the subgenre known as *survival horror*. Based on this subgenre, researcher Bernard Perron's book *The World of Scary Video Games: A Study in Videoludic Horror* emerged [Perron 2018].

In Perron's book, the author proposes a terminology called *pyramid of scary video games*, for classifying horror games. This classification is divided into 3 levels, as defined in Figure 1: *horrific context*, *sporadic fear*, and *fear as game's*. Throughout this paper, these levels are referred to as *contextual*, *focal*, and *fear*, respectively. This simplified terminology is adopted solely to improve readability and avoid repeatedly using the original, longer expressions, while preserving the meaning of Perron's framework. The objective of this article is to analyze Metroidvania style games and classify them according to the terminology proposed by the author.

2. Theoretical Foundation

To enable both the analysis of Metroidvania games and their classification within the *pyramid of scary games*, it is necessary not only to define each level of the pyramid but also to define what constitutes a Metroidvania and its key aspects.

2.1. What Characterizes a Metroidvania Game

Although definitions of Metroidvania vary among authors, there are common characteristics considered essential. In his book *Backtracking: An Ecological Investigation to Contextualize Rewards in Games*, Jack Hart succinctly defines a Metroidvania: encountering an insurmountable obstacle, upgrading the character, and then returning to overcome it [Hart 2019].

The website *Platform Adventure* provides a more detailed definition of characteristic aspects of Metroidvania games, titled: Exploration, Nonlinearity, Persistent Progression, and Platforming [Platform Adventure 2022].

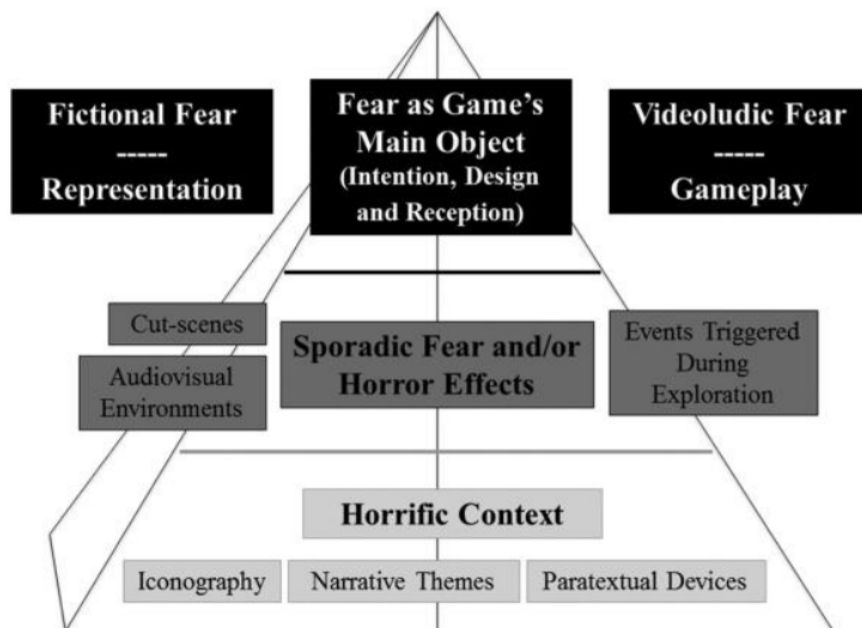


Figure 1. Pyramid of scary video games

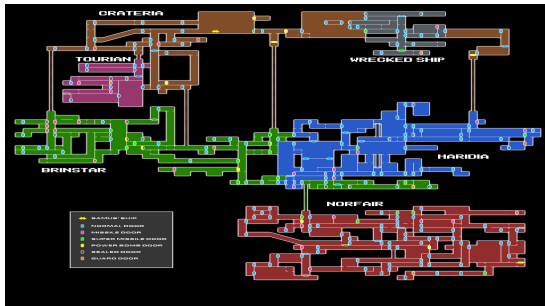
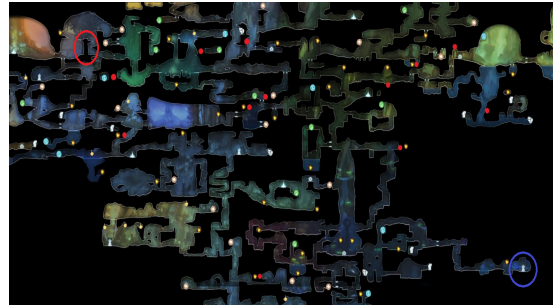
Exploration consists of typically large, open, and interconnected maps, where some sections may be blocked and others may grant the player advantages or abilities, as shown in Figure 2 (a), which displays the highly interconnected map of *Super Metroid*.

Nonlinearity can be partial or total, with total nonlinearity (the focus of this work) being more common in Metroidvania games. A totally nonlinear game features various branching paths that must be explored to progress. In Metroidvanias, these paths typically need to be explored for the player to acquire skills or powers that enable overcoming obstacles in other areas, as in Figure 2 (b), from *Ori and the Blind Forest* (2015), where the player can only pass the obstacle marked in red after acquiring the ability highlighted in blue.

Persistent progression is based on unlocking new permanent skills, powers, or items, allowing continuous access to new map areas. Typically, even if areas can be unlocked with just one skill, as the game progresses, it becomes necessary to combine multiple skills to overcome new barriers. For example, in Figure 2 (c), from *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, the player acquires a persistent ability (the character's transformation into a wolf) which facilitates map exploration and can be combined with other abilities to unlock new areas.

The platforming structure is typically what distinguishes Metroidvania games from action adventure games. In this case, platforms are not merely present to challenge the player with difficult jumps but also contribute to the rhythm of movement and facilitate the creation of alternative exploration paths. As shown in Figure 2 (d), from *Dead Cells* (2017), even if not extremely challenging, the platforms add depth to the map.

From these points, it is possible to define the main characteristics for a game to be considered a Metroidvania. We will use these definitions to assist in selecting titles for

(a) Complete map of *Super Metroid*

(b) Difference in position between challenge and required ability to overcome it

(c) Alucard in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* using a permanent ability(d) Platform arrangement in the *Dead Cells* environment**Figure 2. Examples of Metroidvania aspects**

analysis.

2.2. Analyzing the Pyramid Levels

As mentioned earlier in this article, Bernard Perron's *pyramid of scary games* has three levels: *Contextual*, *Focal*, and *Fear*. To classify the games to be analyzed, it is necessary to define these three levels.

The *Contextual* level refers to the base of the pyramid; this level includes games in which horror serves only as the background of the experience. Titles that fit this level incorporate horror across multiple aspects, including their iconography, themes, concept art, and advertising [Praise The Game 2025]. *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* is an example of this level. On its back cover, it announces: "The legacy of evil returns...", "More than 140 different enemies, bosses, and monstrous creatures." However, upon starting the game, the player encounters a 2D side scrolling platformer with the camera far from the character, featuring more adventure and RPG (Role-Playing Game) elements than horror. Even with impressive settings and creatures, the 32 bit aesthetic and abundance of colors ultimately break any sense of discomfort, anguish, or fear the player might feel, as can be seen in Figures 3 (a) and 3 (b) [Perron 2018].

The *Focal* level corresponds to the middle of the pyramid; this level defines games that present horror in an occasional way, where, for most of the *gameplay*, the player is performing activities that do not involve fear, such as fighting, exploring, etc. [Praise The Game 2025]. *F.E.A.R. First Encounter Assault Recon* is a good example for this level. In *F.E.A.R.* the player takes on the role of a soldier sent to neutralize



(a) Catacombs environment



(b) Confrontation against the Legion boss

Figure 3. Environment and confrontation in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*

Paxton Fettel, a telepath who controls a battalion of cloned super-soldiers. The suspense and horror of the game come from a few elements such as voices, strange sounds, and *gore* in some *cutscenes*, but mainly through the appearances of Alma Wade; however, these appearances last only for a short period of time. The first appearance of Alma, shown in Figure 4 (a), only occurs during the second stage of the game and lasts for just 20 seconds, emphasizing the fact that the title is more focused on combat, as seen in Figure 4 (b) [Perron 2018].



(a) First appearance of Alma Wade



(b) More frequent combat

Figure 4. Combat and horror in *F.E.A.R. First Encounter Assault Recon*

Already the level *Fear* corresponds to the top of the pyramid; this level defines games that present horror in a more complete way, where the main objective is to cause fear in the player. To achieve this, it is necessary to structure the *gameplay* so that the player feels vulnerable, since constant danger and the ongoing challenge of surviving the imposed situation are what generate fear [Praise The Game 2025]. It is at this level that the subgenre *survival horror* is located, which motivated the writing of Perron's book, although this analysis does not restrict itself to that subgenre. In *Resident Evil* the player explores the claustrophobic and suffocating corridors of the Spencer Mansion, as seen in Figure 5 (a), with a low amount of resources both for combat and healing, as shown in Figure 5 (b), which keeps the player constantly tense, afraid of being attacked because they may not be able to defend themselves or may end up losing the few resources they have.



(a) Claustrophobic mansion spencer environment



(b) Scarcity of items leaving the inventory empty

Figure 5. Environment and resources in *Resident Evil*

2.3. Scare tactics

Since the definition of what constitutes a horror game is closely tied to players' experiences, the same mechanics or styles in different games can lead to different experiences. For this reason, Perron introduces in his book what he calls "Scare tactics".

Before defining the tactics, it is necessary to distinguish diegetic and non-diegetic elements (which, in Perron's book, can be viewed as discursive or extradiegetic). Diegetic elements are those justified by the narrative. For example, a diegetic sound in a game is a sound that could be heard inside the game world, as if the characters themselves could hear it; in contrast, a non-diegetic sound is typically associated with a soundtrack that the player hears but that does not exist within the game's universe.

Perron's Scare tactics are divided into four main topics: *Point of View*, *Environment*, *Monster Behavior*, and *Resources*. Each of them has its own subtopics and definitions.

The *Point of View* tactic is divided into *Blind space (diegetic or non-diegetic)*. The *Blind space* consists of obstacles that obstruct the player's field of view. These obstacles can be diegetic, such as darkness, fog, blurred vision, or physical obstacles in the world, or non-diegetic, such as a specific framing, position, or camera angle chosen by the designers. This tactic is important because, in a horror game, one expects the presence of a threat, and a lack of visual clarity increases tension and uncertainty by making it harder for the player to see where threats might come from.

The *Environment* tactic is divided into *Environmental threat*, *Random or pre-scripted effect (diegetic or non-diegetic)*, and *Visual or auditory forewarning (diegetic or non-diegetic)*. The *Environmental Threat* consists of risks that are inherent to the setting itself, giving the player the impression that the place they are in is dangerous. The *Random or pre-scripted effect*, also known as a *jump scare*, is an unpredictable event designed to frighten the player. This tactic can be diegetic, such as the first appearance of the *Licker* in *Resident Evil*, or non-diegetic, such as the fake deletion of save files in *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002). The *Visual or auditory forewarning* is a visual or sound cue that signals danger to the player; sometimes the warning is genuine and sometimes it is not, depending on how the game intends to increase tension and unpredictability in the

gameplay. This tactic can also be diegetic, such as footsteps or voices within the game world, or non-diegetic, when the warning is delivered through the game's HUD (Heads-Up Display).

These elements are used to achieve something fundamental in horror games: to make the player experience a continuous sense of discomfort while exploring the environment. Even if the setting is normally familiar, such as a school or a hospital, it is important that the environment feels dangerous, usually through broken furniture and objects out of place.

Behavior of the monster is divided into *Monstrous beings and entities*, *Invincible monster*, *Tough monsters or bosses*, and *Gore imagery*. *Monstrous beings and entities* refer to the game's enemies, something that threatens the player. They do not necessarily have to be terrifying beings; they can even be human throughout the game or only become visually degraded over the course of the campaign. The *Invincible monster* is an enemy that cannot be defeated, leaving the player only able to flee or hide. Even if the player has weapons, they can only slow the monster down. *Tough monsters or bosses* involve confrontations with stronger enemies, which raise the player's tension because they fear losing their progress. *Gore imagery* are usually linked to explicit violence committed by enemies, including mutilation, dismemberment, or splashes of blood. Although it is common for horror-game enemies to be repulsive monsters, there are cases where enemies look human; in those cases, what instills fear is often their behavior in a context of violence.

The *Resources* tactic is divided into *Precarious physical and psychological integrity*, *Defective control*, *Limited offensive/defensive resources*, and *No means of defense*. *Precarious physical and psychological integrity* refers to the punishment the player receives when facing or being attacked by an enemy, which can take many forms, such as the character limping or the screen changing color or brightness. *Defective control* occurs when an effect on physical or psychological integrity directly affects the player's control, increasing tension because the player fears becoming more vulnerable to the enemy. *Limited offensive/defensive resources* are related to a scarcity of resources, which puts the player in a vulnerable state. This limitation can apply to weapons, ammunition, or even healing items. Being *No means of defense* means the player has no other resource than to flee and hide, similar to the idea of the invincible monster, but in this case without even a resource to slow it down. Another way of limiting the player's resources that has been widely used in horror games is save-limitation. The uncertainty about whether or not to save raises tension, making the player more cautious about playing certain sections because they cannot safely save the game.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, characterized as a theory driven multiple case study. The objective is to analyze how Metroidvania games can be positioned within Bernard Perron's *pyramid of scary video games*, based on the identification and interpretation of fear related design elements.

The research is grounded in a theoretical analytical framework, using Perron's concepts [Perron 2018] as the primary lens for analysis. In particular, the study employs both the structural classification proposed by the *pyramid of scary games* and the

operational categories defined by the *Scare tactics*.

Two games, *Blasphemous* and *Hollow Knight*, were selected as case studies. The selection followed a purposive sampling strategy, considering their relevance within the Metroidvania subgenre and their perceived association with horror elements, either through aesthetics, narrative, or gameplay, as indicated in critical reception and community discussions.

The analytical procedure was conducted through qualitative content analysis. Each game was examined according to four analytical dimensions derived from Perron's framework: *Point of View*, *Environment*, *Monster Behavior*, and *Resources*. For each dimension, the presence, absence, and intensity of fear related elements were identified and interpreted.

Data collection was based on three complementary sources: (i) direct gameplay sessions conducted by the authors; (ii) observation of recorded gameplay material; and (iii) secondary sources, including professional reviews and critical analyses. This triangulation of sources aimed to reduce interpretative bias and increase analytical consistency.

The interpretation of results was conducted through a comparative approach, allowing the identification of patterns and differences between the cases. Based on this analysis, each game was positioned within one of Perron's three levels: *contextual*, *focal*, or *fear*.

4. Case Studies

The games analyzed in this study were selected based on predefined criteria. Since this work aims to analyze games belonging to the Metroidvania subgenre, an initial search was conducted to identify representative titles within this category. Subsequently, digital game distribution and storefront platforms were searched for titles simultaneously tagged as Metroidvania and Horror, in order to identify games containing horror-related elements.

Among the titles identified, *Blasphemous* and *Hollow Knight* were selected because they are widely recognized within the Metroidvania community and because the authors possess sufficient familiarity with both games to support a detailed qualitative analysis. In the following sections, each game is analyzed individually to determine which fear tactics it employs and whether it can be classified within Perron's *Pyramid of Scary Video Games* and, if so, at which level.

Raw data regarding the tactics implemented by each title are available on the Zenodo website¹; whenever the article cites conclusions drawn from this data, it references the spreadsheet named after the game being analyzed.

4.1. Blasphemous

The editor and producer from *GameSpot*, Alessandro Fillari, describes the beginning of *Blasphemous* as a "terrifying opening." The game begins with The Penitent emerging from a sea of bodies before traversing the Brotherhood of the Silent Sorrow, filled with corpses, and defeating its guardian. Afterwards, he performs a ritual with his own blood, establishing the dark tone of the journey [Alessandro Fillari 2019].

¹<https://zenodo.org/records/21303095>

Lluís Anyó, in a paper presented at the *Segundo Congreso Internacional DiGRAES23*, describes *Blasphemous* as a game that combines a retro visual style with modern gameplay mechanics. Inspired by the pixel art of the 1990s and the 16- and 32-bit console era, its 2D platform structure shapes both exploration and hack-and-slash combat, reinforcing the game's visual identity and dark atmosphere [Anyó 2023].

Callum Agnew, in his *PC Gamer* review, describes the combat as simple yet challenging. Although prayers are available, gameplay emphasizes dodging, parrying, and melee attacks [Callum Agnew 2019].

Together, these characteristics establish a strong horror atmosphere through the setting, visual design, and narrative. However, gameplay remains centered on exploration and combat, with tension arising primarily from mechanical challenge.

Considering these characteristics, *Blasphemous* can be analyzed according to Perron's *Pyramid of Scary Video Games*. The results summarized in Table X indicate that the game implements six of Perron's fifteen fear-related sub-topics. However, these elements mainly reinforce the game's atmosphere, visual identity, and combat challenge rather than generating a persistent sense of vulnerability or psychological tension.

Overall, the analysis indicates that *Blasphemous* is not primarily intended to frighten the player. Although the game contains violent imagery and macabre environments, these elements reinforce its aesthetic and narrative identity, making the experience closer to the conventions of the *Soulslike* genre, where tension arises from challenging combat and the possibility of losing progress.

Therefore, *Blasphemous* is best classified at the *Contextual* level of Perron's pyramid. Horror is conveyed primarily through the game's iconography, themes, and atmosphere, while its gameplay remains focused on action, exploration, and challenge. This interpretation is reinforced by its similarities to *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, which likewise employs horror aesthetics without making fear the central objective of the player experience.

4.2. Hollow Knight

The beginning of *Hollow Knight* is simple and straightforward. The game features two *cutscenes*: the first shows a character trapped inside a kind of egg, while the second introduces the player character on the way to a village. With little explanation, the player quickly takes control and proceeds to *Dirtmouth*, passing through an area that functions as a tutorial.

According to Eric Stein, Hallownest's insect-inspired creatures became fundamental to the game's identity, shaping its visual style and distinctive atmosphere [Stein 2020]. Stein also argues that *Hollow Knight* is commonly categorized as both a *Metroidvania* and a *Soulslike*, although its strongest connection to the latter lies in its themes of corruption, failure, and decay rather than its gameplay [Stein 2020].

Tom Marks, associate editor at *PC Gamer*, compares combat to a dance between attacking and evading, despite the impactful hits dealt and received [Tom Marks 2017].

These observations indicate that *Hollow Knight* builds its atmosphere mainly through its artistic direction, narrative, and world design. Although its environments often

evoke melancholy and unease, the overall experience remains centered on exploration, discovery, and combat.

Based on this analysis, *Hollow Knight* can be examined according to Perron's *Pyramid of Scary Video Games*. The results summarized in Table X indicate that the game incorporates several fear-related tactics, but these are employed only in specific moments rather than throughout the entire experience.

Areas such as Deepnest illustrate this pattern by restricting the player's vision and creating a significantly more oppressive atmosphere than the rest of the game. Likewise, some boss encounters increase tension through their difficulty, although these moments remain exceptions within an adventure primarily focused on exploration.

Overall, the analysis suggests that *Hollow Knight* is not primarily intended to generate constant fear. Although certain regions and encounters significantly increase tension, these strategies appear only during specific moments, while most of the game remains focused on exploration and adventure.

Therefore, *Hollow Knight* is best classified at the *Focal* level of Perron's *Pyramid of Scary Video Games*. Fear and tension remain localized, secondary to its primary focus on exploration and adventure.

5. Conclusion

From the results obtained during the research, it is possible to conclude that among the major games in the Metroidvania subgenre, there is a lack of horror titles whose main objective is to cause fear in players.

It can therefore be concluded that there is a gap in the game market for titles that combine Metroidvania and horror and, moreover, that actually instill fear in the player; that is, titles that are positioned at the top of Bernard Perron's *pyramid of scary games*. To achieve this, it would be necessary not only to apply the Scare tactics provided by Perron himself, but also other horror aspects mentioned in this article, such as unpredictability, an element that is largely missing in the environments of the analyzed games.

6. Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies

The authors declare that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing process, concept generation, or data analysis of this manuscript. The entire work was conceived and written exclusively by the authors.

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