Understanding the paradox of MetroidBrainias: The case of *Animal Well*

Xin Pan
University of Nottingham Ningbo China
199 Taikang East Road
Ningbo China
xin.pan@nottingham.edu.cn

Wenting Cheng
Dongguan University of Technology
1 Daxue Road, Songshan Lake
Dongguan China
chengwenting@dgut.edu.cn

Keywords

MetroidBrainia, epiphany, cheating, paradox, metagame, object-oriented ontology

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Animal Well is a Metroidvania developed by Billy Basso in 2024. Within this game's community, the frequent use of the term "MetroidBrainia" in reviews and discussions stands out. What does this word mean? Why is MetroidBrainia not Metroidvania? Available sources indicate that Nick Suttner, an indie game designer, first mentioned "MetroidBrainia" in 2015 while commenting on Jonathan Blow's *The Witness*. However, the term has neither been comprehensively defined nor gained mainstream adoption. We aim to provide a nuanced interpretation of this concept, using *Animal Well* as an example to illuminate the distinct pleasures and contradictions embedded in MetroidBrainias. This paper presents a preliminary finding based on an online ethnographic observation of the *Animal Well* community on Discord.

MetroidBrainia derives from Metroidvania, sharing some structural similarities. To comprehend MetroidBrainia, we first examine Metroidvania. Metroidvania is a game genre defined by the operational logic of *Metroid* and *Castlevania*, characterized by an explorable space with secret areas and a navigational map (Mawhorter, Ruslanova, & Mawhorter, 2022). These games lack a clear, linear direction in gameplay, allowing players to explore areas that can be reached currently. Certain areas remain inaccessible until players acquire new skills or equipment that expand their ways of movement. Players thus recurrently revisit previously traversed paths. Oliveira et al. (2020) describe this as "recurring scenario exploration" (p. 838), emphasizing that the primary enjoyment in a Metroidvania game comes from this progress of rewarding backtracking with hidden areas.

The similarity between Metroidvanias and MetroidBrainias lies in the realization that previously insurmountable challenges become solvable. However, the property of these challenges sets them apart. In Metroidvanias, obstacles are tangible—such as

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

unreachable rooms—solved through physical items or abilities; while the challenges of MetroidBrainias are abstract, emphasizing the knowledge players learned about the game's rules and deeper understanding of the gameworld. The essence of MetroidBrainias is best described by the term epiphany—a transformative feeling that recontextualizes players' prior experiences. This explains why seemingly disparate games like *The Witness* and *Animal Well* are both considered MetroidBrainia. It operates neither at the level of mechanics nor in the realm of representation, but rather rooted in experiences. Therefore, we propose that MetroidBrainia is better understood as a gameplay element for triggering epiphanies, instead of a game genre.

To delve into MetroidBrainia requires situating it within a specific context. Therefore, we turn to our case study, starting with Billy Basso's description of the gameplay experience of *Animal Well* in its introductory trailer. He presents this game as

> a layered experience. […] The base layer is something the average players can play through and enjoy to completion. [For the second layer] There are lots of hidden items in nooks and crannies throughout the world. They are not obvious, and players need some help to find these. The third layer has puzzles that don't really present themselves as puzzles. [..] They might require some community collaboration to solve (Thegameawards, 2022).

This game's experience echoes some characteristics of MetroidBrainia described above: the game features layered puzzles, where the breakthrough of each layer is experienced as an epiphany, representing a deeper understanding of the game. However, *Animal Well* highlights a unique optionality: players can experience epiphanies at any point throughout the gameplay, or potentially not at all (considering the players who only experience the base layer). Furthermore, Basso emphasizes the significance of community collaboration and guidance in MetroidBrainias. Notably, he explicitly informs players about the existence of layered puzzles before they play, rather than allowing them to discover them by themselves.

These observations illuminate two fundamental paradoxes of MetroidBrainias. The first paradox emerges as players experience *Animal Well* as a MetroidBrainia only on the premise of knowing this game is a MetroidBrainia. With the deeper layers of puzzles being optional and nearly imperceptible, many players may only experience *Animal Well* as a Metroidvania, never engaging with its MetroidBrainia aspects. This explains why Basso explicitly signaled the existence of multiple layers, which then raises a question: does this act diminish players' potential for genuine discovery and epiphany? This inquiry propels us toward the second paradox, concerning the relationship between facilitating epiphanies and the game's approach to puzzle-solving. By suggesting community collaboration and external help, *Animal Well* appears to inadvertently encourage cheating. Through our ethnographic observation, we identified two types of players within this game's community. The first, called secret finders or data miners, employ tools to excavate hidden game files, unveiling the deeper layer puzzles and their pathways. The second, numerically dominant group, is secret seekers who execute operations according to the guides provided by the former. Drawing from Karppi and Sotamaa's (2012) identification of three cheating modes in games: (1) using built-in cheat codes; (2) employing external cheat tools or modifications; (3) referencing strategy guides or walkthroughs—both player types are cheaters. Herein lies a contradiction: while the essence of MetroidBrainias resides in the moments of epiphany, cheating fundamentally undermines the epiphany the game seeks to evoke. Consequently, the pleasure of epiphany in *Animal Well* becomes

ironic: can this game truly deliver authentic epiphanies when they are achieved through cheating? If the spontaneity of discovery is systematically suppressed, where does the pleasure of MetroidBrainia reside?

This paper proposes three approaches to investigating these paradoxes: through the perspectives of players, game designers, and the intrinsic nature of the game itself. The first approach involves interviewing players from the community to understand their feelings and experiences after engaging in cheating. From the second angle, we argue that *Animal Well* functions less as a game designed for players, but rather as a metagame Basso has crafted for himself—a game about the game (after Boluk & LeMieux, 2017). For instance, the game includes easter eggs accessible only through cheating, such as finding nine hidden bunnies using the Cheater Ring, a game item that cannot be legitimately obtained. Intriguingly, accessing all these bunnies corrupts the player's save file. This suggests that Basso is not simply encouraging cheating but utilizing it to playfully joke with cheaters. Finally, Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology provides another approach to examining the paradoxes. Harman (2017) emphasizes the irreducibility and autonomy of objects, arguing that objects always retain hidden sides beyond individuals' comprehension. Viewed this way, *Animal Well* resists complete control by its designer and full understanding by its players. The paradoxes thus arise from this game simultaneously revealing certain properties while perpetually withdrawing from the players, allowing them to realize that the game is even deeper and more complex than they ever imagined. The save files corruption exemplifies how a game generates a new layer, inducing players to cheat in order to unlock emerging paths through it.

REFERENCES

Billy Basso. 2024. *Animal Well*. PC Game. Bigmode.

Boluk, S., and LeMieux, P. 2017. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Harman, G. 2017. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. London: Penguin Random House.

Karppi, T., and Sotamaa, O. 2012. Rethinking Playing Research: DJ HERO and Methodological Observations in the Mix. *Simulation & Gaming, 43*(3), 413-429. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878111434263

Mawhorter, P., Ruslanova, I., and Mawhorter, R. 2022. Representing Exploration in Metroidvania Games: A demo of the exploration Python library. In *Proceedings of Procedural Content Generation Workshop (PCG Workshop '22)*. Athens, Greece, 5 September.

Oliveira, B. P. et al. 2020. A Framework for Metroidvania Games. In *Proceedings of SBGames 2020*. Recife, PE, Brazil, 7-10 November.

Thegameawards. 2022. *Animal Well - Day of the Devs: Summer Game Fest Edition 2022.* Video. YouTube, 22 June. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZQ4Y4an7fM