



## Metro

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## Introduction

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The *Metro* video game series is comprised of three instalments: *Metro 2033* (2010), *Metro: Last Light* (2013), and *Metro Exodus* (2019). In 2014, *Metro Redux* was released, a remastered version of both *Metro 2033* and *Metro: Last Light*. The games are based on the novel series of the same name, written by Russian author Dmitry Glukhovskiy (Eoin 2011; Wierel 2016), and were all developed by the Ukrainian studio 4A Games. The first of the games was published by THQ; the other three games by Deep Silver. The series was released on multiple systems, including PC, Xbox 360, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch, Stadia, OSX, and Linux. All games are first-person shooters with horror and survival elements. Some light crafting mechanics feature in the latest instalment. The games are exclusively single player.

The *Metro* series takes place in a fictional near future where all human life on earth appears to have been destroyed by a global nuclear catastrophe. A number of residents of Moscow manage to survive the apocalypse by seeking refuge in the subway tunnels and station below the Russian capital. There, these remnants of humankind are struggling to survive against the hostile wildlife of the mutant-infested wasteland and against a civil war over the control of the metro systems. The player controls Artyom, whose job it is to not only protect the people but guide them southwards to unspoiled lands to build a new thriving civilization.

## The Story

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*Metro 2033*, *Metro: Last Light*, and the initial part of *Metro Exodus* take place in the Russian capital of Moscow in 2033 and 2034. Twenty years prior to the events of the series, a global nuclear holocaust destroyed almost all human life on earth. Only a handful of Muscovites managed to take shelter in the metro system underneath the city, effectively sealing themselves off from the rest of world. (In *Metro Exodus* it becomes clear that the destruction was severe, but not as complete as the Muscovites underground had believed.) The world above is ravaged by unstable weather, deadly mutants, radiation, and unknown 'anomalies' causing psychological damage to everyone in the vicinity.

The metro survivors fight each other for the scarce supplies. They are divided into four factions (Bishop 2020): the 'Fourth Reich' (neo-Nazis); the 'Commonwealth of the Stations of the Ring Line' (militarised merchants); the 'Rangers of the Order' (also known as the 'Spartans,' an elite paramilitary organisation trying to maintain political balance); and the 'Red Line' (a Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist faction) (Livers 2020, 76). In addition to these human threats, a group known as the Dark Ones form the real danger lurking in the background of the first two games. They are human survivors of the nuclear holocaust who were unable to flee into the subway tunnels and consequently underwent mutation caused by the radiation. They are related to psychic phenomena, but precisely how remains unclear.

All games of the series feature Artyom Alekseyevich Chyornyj (part of the Rangers faction) as the player's avatar and as the game's main and silent protagonist. During the loading screens, Artyom's voice is heard as a voice-over relating to the player what has happened in the last level and what the goal is of the next. In *Metro Exodus* and *Metro: Last Light*, Artyom is more or less a plaything in the hands of the Dark Ones and each of the factions in the Metro. The Dark Ones declare him to be the 'chosen' one and clumsily try to persuade him to open negotiations for a peaceful coexistence between the two species; the latter each try to win Artyom over to fight for their respective visions of the Metro's future.

In the third instalment, Artyom, his now pregnant wife Anna (the two met in *Metro: Last Light*), and several other major characters from the previous instalments leave the Metro to travel eastwards in a steam locomotive they call the Aurora. The reason for their journey is twofold: they are disillusioned with the continuous corruption and fighting in the Metro and—after Artyom has disabled a radio jammer—they find out that Moscow is not the only place harbouring nuclear survivors. After many adventures, Artyom leads his team to Lake Baikal in southern Siberia, an area free of human enemies and radiation.

## Morality System and Endings

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The series features an implicit morality system that judges the decisions made by the player (Bosman 2018). For example, if the player makes the effort to listen to characters talking to one another, to spare enemies after they have surrendered themselves, or to return a lost teddy bear to a young child without explicitly being asked to do so, the player is awarded moral points. On the other hand, if the player kills everything indiscriminately, risks the lives of friends, or steals something, points are lost. The system is implicit because the player is not aware of its existence during the moments it is active. Neither is the player aware of what judgement it is passing. *Metro's* morality system is subtle, giving low levels of visual and auditive feedback to the player. But because of this subtlety, individual players may not notice it immediately or at all.

The system of morality seen in *Metro* is in contrast to those of other games, such as the *Mass Effect* series, in which a player can be both good and bad at the same time. Morality systems have been criticised (Svelch 2010; Birch 2014; Rio 2014; Knoll 2015; Nguyen 2016) because of their simplistic dualism (actions can be either 'good' or 'evil'), because of the selectiveness of the actions judged (some actions are morally judged while the majority are not), because of the inconsistency of the rule system (e.g., killing an evil character is considered 'good' while stealing from him is 'evil'), and because of the occurrence of a massive ludo-narrative dissonance (Hocking 2007; Healy 2018). This dissonance occurs when the gameplay asks one thing of the player (for example, kill all adversaries) while the game story points in

another direction (show mercy to one's enemies).

All three instalments feature an implicit morality system which has a significant influence on the endings of the games. The statistics that the games use to decide whether the player has achieved enough morality points to obtain a specific ending are hidden, so calculating the exact threshold is difficult. Favourable points are rewarded for showing interest in a person's life by talking to Nonplayable Characters (NPCs), for playing a guitar to lighten the mood, for abstaining from non-necessary kills, or for returning a child's teddy bear from a mutant's nest. Unfavourable points are given for interfering with another's business, for shooting or stabbing dead bodies, or for killing soldiers who are in the act of surrendering.

All games feature two endings, each of which is connected to a certain threshold of morality points. In *Metro 2033*, the unfavourable ending is called 'Ranger'. In this ending, Artyom allows himself to be convinced that the Dark Ones have to be eradicated once and for all. In the favourable ending, 'Enlightened,' Artyom prevents the deadly missile attack at the last possible moment. In a monologue, Artyom explains his decision by observing that war has already destroyed the world and he was not ready for the same to happen again.

In *Metro: Last Light*, the choice is between the endings 'C'est la vie' (unfavourable) and 'Redemption' (unfavourable). In *C'est la vie*, Artyom sacrifices his own life to destroy a deadly virus in a military facility known as D6. The Red Line is destroyed but a lot of Rangers also meet their doom. In the epilogue, Anna recounts Artyom's bravery to his half-orphaned son. In *Redemption*, Artyom is stopped at the last possible moment by a Dark Baby, an infant mutant. In gratitude, the Dark Baby and his people, imprisoned in D6, kill the Red Line soldiers and promise to leave Moscow but to return one day.

In *Metro Exodus*, Artyom has to find a cure for the deadly affliction that Anna is suffering, having come into contact with nerve gas. In the 'Eternal Voyage' ending (unfavourable), Anna lives but Artyom dies of radiation poisoning, contracted when he was searching for a cure for Anna. Miller, Anna's father, explains to a now dead Artyom that he will be trapped forever on a dark version of the Aurora. In the 'Your Destination' ending (favourable), Artyom lives because of his fellow soldiers' willingness to donate substantial amounts of blood. In the end, Artyom is declared the new leader of the expedition.

The *Metro* series clearly features multiple facets characteristic of the post-apocalyptic video game genre [see [Video Games](#)]. Each instalment features an all-consuming disaster that ends the political and social order as we know it. Even though the series has an 'end-of-time' thrust to its main story, human civilisation does not end entirely; there are survivors. In the series, the persistence of pre-apocalyptic evil is portrayed through the continuation of civil war between the Metro survivors in Moscow (initially) and Russia more widely (later in the series). The story of *Metro* is essentially a battle between good and evil in which the player is given the ability to choose a side. Through *Metro's* morality system, the success of the forces of good are not a given fact, but something the player—through their avatar—has to fight for.

## Religious Themes: Creation and Theodicy

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The *Metro* series, particularly the last two instalments, features an interesting range of religious notions and ideas. In December 2012, the developer released a special trailer for *Metro: Last Light*, called "Metro:

Last Light - 'Genesis' - Gameplay Trailer (Official U.S. Version)," ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unN8ltC\\_rQ4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unN8ltC_rQ4)). The description reads:

*Through the millennia, civilizations rose and fell, each re-telling their own story of the world's creation. Now, beneath the ruins of Moscow, the last civilization of man has its own story to tell...*

What follows is an intriguing combination of an English-speaking voice-over (with a clear Russian accent) re-telling the creation story of Genesis 1 and images of the post-apocalyptic world of Moscow. The effect is that the grandeur and beauty of God's original creation, as repeated in Genesis 1 ("and God saw that it was (very) good" in verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31), is contrasted with its total destruction at the hands of humans, God's own creation ("according to his own image" in verse 27). The voice-over states:

*In the beginning God said: Let there be light to burn away the darkness. On the second day, the sky was born as a majestic canopy for the earth. On the following day, God sculpted the bountiful earth and planted it with trees. With the fourth day, God split day from night and blessed the earth with the cycle of the seasons. Then, God filled the sea with life and set forth the birds to soar in the skies. On the sixth day, God created glorious creatures. Chief of these were mankind, whom he created in his own image. He blessed them, giving them dominion over all living things. To care for. To nurture. To rule. On the seventh day, they say, God rested. But God didn't rest. God left. Or perhaps died. Judgement Day came and he abandoned us, casting humanity aside like parasites. But there is still hope. We have to face this hell full on. My fate, I hold in my own hands.*

In the Genesis narrative, God rests from his work on the seventh day. The day resembles a holy day of God's reign over his creation. The first full day that humans experience is therefore a festive day. After all, humans are allowed to participate in God's reign (van Wieringen 2015). In the trailer, however, the Sabbath is the opposite of a festive day; God does not rest but leaves his work behind. In fact, he may even have died. The perspective for humans is therefore one of misery, and perhaps even death.

It is striking that the trailer speaks about the idea that God may have died. The idea evokes the religious theme of the death of God. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was the first to discuss this theme. In Nietzsche's philosophy, it is the human being who kills God (Trowitzsch 1997). But in the trailer, the responsibility of God's possible death is not placed directly onto humans. The death of God may not be the final word. The game has to answer this question.

The trailer's voice-over probes yet another theological theme: the theodicy. The theodicy, or 'the problem of evil,' is the ancient question about the existence of an omnipotent and good God alongside the existence of evil within this created world, a theological conundrum inherent to all monotheistic religions, including Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (Hick 1966; Keller 2013, 94-95). How can God exist as all-powerful and all-righteous if there is so much suffering in the world? The trailer's voice-over draws a clear conclusion: the Apocalypse-cum-Day of Judgement came and went. This disaster would not have happened if God had existed. It happened, *ergo* God cannot exist.

In *Metro: Last Light*, Artyom ends up in the ruined Saint Basil's Cathedral on what was once Moscow's Red

Square. In one of its side-corridors Artyom finds Pavel, a treacherous soldier belonging to the Red Line and one of the game's main antagonists. He is crouching against a cupboard, wearing a gas mask with no filter on it. Artyom puts his knife to the throat of Pavel, who is taunting him, but the Dark Baby is interfering. In the next couple of minutes, Artyom witnesses some of Pavel's key memories in order to understand what has really happened. In the end, Pavel is grabbed at by tormented souls, leaving Artyom to make a final decision regarding his fate. If the player chooses to save Pavel from the tormented souls, Artyom is seen attaching a new filter to his enemy's mask. The Dark Baby comments: "He will live. So that's what forgiveness is. Thank you. I'll remember this." This decision goes in support of the Redemption ending. If, however, the player chooses to leave Pavel in the hands of his tormentors, Artyom is seen giving a now deceased Pavel a final push. The Dark Baby comments differently: "You couldn't forgive? I see. He did a lot of evil. I'll remember this." The decision to leave Pavel to his tormentors is considered the unfavourable one, supporting the 'C'est la vie' ending.

Interestingly, above the cupboard Pavel is leaning against, the faint image of an icon is visible. It is the archetypal icon of Christ from Eastern Orthodox traditions (Guscini 2009). In both Western and Eastern traditions, it is identified and/or linked with the 'Image of Edessa,' the 'Shroud of Turin,' and ultimately with the legend of Saint Veronica (Nicolotti 2014). Being created according to God's image means that a human has the capacity to act like God. It is a regular theme in both the sanctification law in Leviticus and in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount: "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2; Matthew 5:48; cf. 1 Peter 1:16). This holiness in God's image also implies the possibility of forgiving the other, even more so the other who is actually an enemy. This image, in the context of Artyom deciding the fate of his worst enemy, alludes to central words by the crucified and dying Christ, such as "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34) and the biblical commandment to "love your enemies" (Piper 1979).

The Genesis trailer, the Christ icon, and the ethical choice involving Pavel together form an intertextual complex suggesting that the player of the game is given the place of a christophoric figure (Bosman 2019, 76-100). The player is positioned to take the place of the absent God of *Metro's* world; by forgiving 'your' worst enemy, you effectively become a divine being, not in a metaphysical sense but in an ethical sense. The trailer's ending suggests the same: "We have to face this hell full on. My fate, I hold in my own hands." The Dark Baby echoes the same message after Artyom saves Pavel. He concludes, "so that's what forgiveness is."

The name Pavel is noteworthy. It is the Russian name for Paul. It evokes a complex intertextuality regarding creation theology. According to Genesis, man was created in God's image. The apostle Paul interprets this view of the book of Genesis christologically (especially Colossians 1:15). The human is not the image of God but is created according to the image of God. That image of God is Christ. As Christ is the image of God, humanity is created in the image of the image of God (Stettler 2000). In this way Paul explicitly makes the human being christophoric. By using the name Pavel/Paul, this christophoric characteristic of the human is made explicit in the game and, therefore, underlines the player as christophoric as well. The image of God that is Christ thus has a referring function to God himself. Through the image of God, which in Christian tradition is thought of as the Christ (Colossians 1:15), humans are related to God. In other words, the image of God is sacramental; it opens a perspective on a divine world mediated by it (van Wieringen 2022). This theological idea is the basis for Eastern icon theology, in which an image is also a window onto divine reality. The icon hanging above Pavel, one of the Eastern icons *par*

excellence, reflects this icon theology.

## Religious Themes: The Promised Land and Paradise

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The religious theme is continued in the third instalment, conveniently called *Metro Exodus*. The reference to 'exodus' is self-explanatory. Artyom and his team flee from their confinement and self-imposed 'captivity' in the Moscow metro to find a new 'promised land' of freedom and safety, echoing the way that the biblical Moses led God's chosen people out of the Egyptian captivity and enslavement through the desert to the promised land of Israel. It is notable that Artyom was deemed 'the chosen one' by the Dark Baby in *Metro: Last Light*. Just as the Israelites faced all kinds of dangers and setbacks along the way, Artyom's team has to overcome countless trials as they make their way to safety.

Just like the name of the train (Aurora) they are using for their flight, the direction of Artyom's travels is also telling: the Aurora brings them to the East, from Moscow to Siberia. Aurora means 'Morning Star' in Latin and is used in Christian tradition to denote Jesus Christ, who is said to metaphorically enlighten the world by his sacrifice on the cross (1 Peter 1:19; Revelation 2:28; 22:16). Of course, the Morning Star appears in the East, bringing the name of the train and its direction together.

The promised land and the paradise are linked in the Bible. The setting of the paradise garden in Eden in Genesis 2 evokes the image of the biblical land itself—the promised land. The idea of the paradise garden as an interpretation of the promised land takes shape in the game through Lake Baikal. Lake Baikal is listed as a World Heritage site. The site includes three Zapovedniks (a Russian word meaning 'nature conservation area' which has the connotation of 'sacred' and 'prohibited from disturbance') and two nature reserves. Lake Baikal is the largest freshwater reservoir in the world and one of humanity's lifelines.

Yet another biblical reference is found in *Metro Exodus*. There, the Muscovites learn that they are far from the only survivors of the apocalypse. In the wastelands of Russia, other groups also exist, among them a group living in the Yamantau bunker, also known as 'the Ark'—a clear reference to the ark of Genesis. When the bombs fell, the bunker was hit hard but its structure withstood the attack. As the bunker had not been completed, its food reserves were insufficient to feed all, and the inhabitants of the Ark resorted to cannibalism. The antennae of the bunker, which were initially damaged in the attack but are eventually repaired, are then used to lure in innocent wasteland dwellers to be eaten.

The Ark of *Metro Exodus* represents a double reference to the biblical book of Genesis. After Noah leaves his ark, he enters into a covenant with God. God confirms Noah's salvation. He condemns bloodshed, both human and animal: "Whoever sheds human blood / By man his blood shall be shed, / For in the image of God He made mankind" (Genesis 9:6). But animal flesh without blood could be consumed: "Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you" (Genesis 9:3). The issue of cannibalism in the game is an exaggeration of the issue of meat consumption in the Genesis story. With this covenant, Genesis resumes the creation theology regarding the image of God. The creation of humanity in the image of God prohibits bloodshed, and certainly the game's cannibalism.

Due to the intertextuality with Noah's ark, an intertextuality with 1 Peter 3:20–21 is also established. Numbers are characteristic of the apocalyptic genre. The number of people rescued is explicitly mentioned



in this biblical passage and it is striking that a number is also mentioned in the game. While 1 Peter 3 speaks of eight people, the game speaks of a group of approximately 2,000 people. In both cases, the number of survivors is very small. In the Bible, however, the number eight also indicates fullness (think of the octave), but this element is missing in the game's mention of 2,000.

The figure of the player's avatar, Artyom, develops gradually over the course of the three instalments. In *Metro 2033*, Artyom starts as a more or less traditional game hero, without too many distinct characteristics. In *Metro: Last Light*, however, Artyom's portrayal is slowly imbued with christophoric characteristics. By virtue of the Genesis trailer and the icon scene, Artyom is in the position to become a Christ-like saviour, adopting traits traditionally associated with the Christ figure from Christian tradition, especially voluntary self-sacrifice and offering forgiveness to one's enemies. In *Metro Exodus*, Artyom is imbued with traits linking him to the biblical figure of Moses: he leads the chosen people from a place of oppression to a new paradise-like place, in his case to Lake Baikal. By doing so, he becomes a Moses-like saviour who brings the people to a paradise-like holy land.

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