

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: HADES
Platform: PC/Mac/Switch
Genre: Roguelite, RPG, Action
Release Date: September 17th, 2020
Developer: Supergiant Games
Publisher: Supergiant Games
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Greg Kasavin

Overview

With a sword in hand, you take control of Zagreus as he attempts a daring escape from the Underworld against your father's wishes. As the son of Hades, he grants you no mercy against his forces guarding the Underworld and makes every effort to make your time in hell...well, hell. Zagreus begins the game blissfully unaware of the complex relationships between his family members (and his true mother, Persephone). Through the events of *HADES*, Zagreus persists in his efforts of escaping the Greek Underworld initially to unite with the Olympians. Later, the player learns Zagreus' efforts are actually to reunite with his true mother who abandoned him at birth, unknown to the Olympian gods. At nearly every turn, characters from nearly every walk and corner of the Greek world will attempt to aid Zagreus in his escape attempts—members of the House of Hades (i.e. Dusa, Achilles, Thanatos, Hypnos, Nyx, Orpheus), the Olympian gods (Zeus, Poseidon, Hermes, Dionysus, Athena, Artemis, Ares, Demeter, Aphrodite), and even souls confined to the depths of the Underworld (i.e. Skelly, Charon, Chaos, Sisyphus, Eurydice), often offering boons, resources and trinkets which Zagreus can use against the forces of the Underworld. Hades inevitably resorts to the various shades and monsters residing in the four regions of the underworld to prevent Zagreus' escape. Notably, these include: the furies in Tartarus (Megaera, Alecto, and Tisiphone), the Bone Hydra in Asphodel, Asterius and Theseus in Elysium, and Cerberus in the Temple of Styx, even taking a personal hand in Zagreus' demise at the surface of the Underworld should Zagreus get that far. When the son does falter and fail, he will be returned by the river Styx back to the House of Hades, from which he can start a new escape attempt.

Between escape attempts and battles, Zagreus spends most of his time getting to know and connect with the colourful cast of the House of Hades. With each of these characters, a unique set of events unlock with each encounter based on the player's actions. If Zagreus chooses to consistently gift Dusa nectar and ambrosia bottles, Zagreus

will learn more about Dusa's place in the House and potentially start a relationship with him. Checking in with Thanatos frequently may lead to him opening up to Zagreus about his relationship with his brother Hypnos. The choice is entirely up to Zagreus and based on his actions—nothing is hand-delivered to the player without the player first putting in the work in connecting characters. Eventually, other characters may be brought to (or depart) the house as well as their respective narrative arcs progress, such as Orpheus, Achilles, Eurydice, and even Zagreus' true mother Persephone. The presence (or absence) of these characters will also cause a stir among many of the residents in the House, leading to unique conversations and events as well. While *HADES* does follow a traditional three act structure found in so many works of fiction, it does so deceptively by leading players to believe their current narrative act is the last in the chain—that there are no further objectives to be achieved from a narrative standpoint.

Characters

- **Zagreus**—The player-controlled avatar window into the events of *HADES* which players learn about the world and cast of characters through. Son of Hades and Persephone, cousin to many of the Olympians, and friend to many of the members in the House of Hades. Zagreus has a strained relationship with his father and was unaware of his true mother Persephone until the events of *HADES* unfold. Against his father's wishes, he attempts to escape the Underworld no matter how many attempts it takes, with the assistance of the Olympian Gods, his mentor Achilles, his caretaker Nyx, and many other characters. Ordinarily, Zagreus would serve as a member of the House of Hades in supporting its operations, but he has since ceased his duties both on his father's orders and through his own volition. Zagreus is a rebellious and at times, humble to those who earn his favour. He uses his wit and sarcasm in tandem with his humour to entertain and critique the world around him, but never shies away from showing compassion to those who deserve it.
- **Hades**—God of the Underworld, and the primary administrator of the House of Hades, he serves as the major antagonist to Zagreus in the events of *HADES*. He often seeks and employs methods to restrain/subdue Zagreus during his attempts to escape the Underworld. Hades has left much of the caretaking of Zagreus to Nyx which has resulted in major strain on Hades' relationship with his son. Hades is brother to Zeus and Poseidon, and cousin to many of the Olympian Gods, and employer to many of the staff in the House of Hades. He serves as the titular boss at the end of each run through the Underworld should Zagreus reach the surface. Hades is also the separated husband to Persephone and shows a cold but strict side when not around her, while relenting to a quiet but pragmatic demeanour in her company. Only two members of the House of Hades seem to garner his affection (or at least avoid his harsh judgement): Persephone, and Hades' animal companion Cerberus.
- **Nyx**—the second-in-command in the House of Hades, she serves as Zagreus' caretaker and embodies night itself. Daughter of Chaos and mother to Charon, Hypnos, Thanatos, The Fates, and many others, she provides council and coordination to the residents in the house. She is calm with a strong attachment to tradition and authority. Nyx often offers the player insight into the events Zagreus

encounters and offers council for him to reflect on how to proceed (such as prior to escape attempts).

- **The Olympian Gods**—included in this group is (in no order):
 - Zeus
 - The God of the Sky and Thunder, typically portrayed as the leader of the gods.
 - Poseidon
 - The God of the Sea.
 - Hermes
 - The God of Commerce, Trickery, Travel, an assistant to Charon in seeing souls into the afterlife, and the messenger of the Gods.
 - Dionysus
 - The God of Wine and Madness.
 - Athena
 - The Goddess of Wisdom and Strategic Warfare.
 - Artemis
 - The Goddess of the Hunt and the Wilderness.
 - Ares
 - The God of War/Violence.
 - Demeter
 - The Goddess of Agriculture.
 - Aphrodite
 - The Goddess of Beauty and Love

The Olympian Gods each govern some aspect of nature, the world, or mankind but all are quite aligned in assisting Zagreus out of the Underworld so that he might unite with them on Mount Olympus. None of the Olympians are aware of Zagreus' true intention—to find and reunite with his true mother Persephone and bring her home to the House of Hades. Initially, Zeus is the first Olympian to reach out to Zagreus, with the other Olympians extending their support as the player continues their escape attempts.

- **Persephone**—the true mother to Zagreus and a character only met part way through the events of *HADES*, they serve as Zagreus' mother and council to counterbalance the cold and strict demeanour of Hades. She was once known as Kore on Mount Olympus but eventually fled to the Underworld and had a Zagreus once in a relationship with Zagreus. When her son died after birth, she fled the Underworld as well and started a garden in Greece to help her forget her past troubles. The gods of Mount Olympus believe her to be dead.

Breakdown

“Family? Death is your only family. Death, and I. Best get accustomed to the both of us.”

- Lord Hades

HADES, when closely read into is a game focused perhaps not just on family, but rather the relationships which bind characters together. From the strain between Zagreus

and Hades every moment they have to even exchange passing glances at one another, to the brief moments between Thanatos and Zagreus as they reflect on their duties, friendship and allegiances, each moment between characters is just that—a concession between characters showcasing dialogue and narrative beats for the sake of character development rather than to accomplish a narrative requirement. Characters can organically react to one another as they wish, making them believable. The below analysis will provide no shortage of examples to this end.

Additionally, it is worth noting that *HADES* does follow the traditional three act structure found in so many bodies of fiction but does so deceptively. Players are provided singular, massive objectives to work towards as the goal to each arc, yet none of these goals seem to give away the next narrative step or goal. Zagreus' first encounter of Persephone does not necessarily give away a full family reunion occurring at the end of the game, though it certainly does warm the player up to such an idea. This three-act structure should be especially emphasized when analyzing *HADES* as will be attempted below.

ACT 1: The Meeting

“Nobody gets out of here, boy, whether alive or dead. You think I jest? You think I haven't tried?!” – Lord Hades

Zagreus' primary goal (as is the player's) is to escape the Underworld for the first time. For many, this is a considerably lengthy undertaking. On average, it appears this average sits around 25 and 35 attempts between players to achieve. Zagreus strives to do for varying reasons; initially his escape attempts seem to be a way of putting distance between him and his father through any means necessary. Later, once the Olympian gods have stepped in, it appears as though Zagreus would intend on escaping to Mount Olympus to live with them. However, after the final driving element (Zagreus' flashback sequence) plays out and Zagreus learns of his true mother Persephone, his outrage turns to eagerness in finding his true mother on the surface. Nothing else seems to take priority over this goal and it becomes a clear central narrative stream for the player to proceed. When talking with characters such as Megaera or Sisyphus, their day-to-day struggles seem to be nothing compared to the trials and tribulations Zagreus is going through to find his mother. Even his own father has banned the mention of her name in the House of Hades, telling players it is more than just a sore spot for Hades—there must be a tactical reason he has forbidden anyone from speaking about her in his domain. Later in the game, Zeus admits to his attempts at, ‘...trying to set up Hades with more wholesome types...’, than the likes of Cthonic gods or authorities such as Nyx. During her grief, Demeter will sometimes discuss her daughter Kore (aka Persephone) who dealt with countless problems with the Olympians during her time on Mount Olympus, who eventually left for an unknown destination. This is allusion at its finest, which plants the narrative seeds to blossom as the mystery thickens around who Zagreus' true mom is, what happened to Kore, and *if* the two were the same person (which at this point is not confirmed). It also tatters on the question of how Hades and Persephone came to be together, and why Zagreus was abandoned at birth. Moments like these in game narratives provide excellent examples as strong narrative design because they offer

opportunities for characters to behave in compelling and organic ways. Zagreus has every right to be angry and as he has with his father, Zagreus is known to show attitude to those who disrespect him on a regular basis. In this case however, Zagreus chooses to set his anger aside (mostly) in favour of seeking answers. Since he will not receive them from his father or anyone fearing his rule, Zagreus is forced to turn his sights to the surface for answers. By this point, Zagreus' curiosity has gotten the best of him (just like the player's has) and Zagreus' character bends slightly but reasonably beyond the expected bounds of his traits. While he would normally take it out on his father and be done with it there, Zagreus chooses to acknowledge the importance of family to him, regardless of whatever answer Hades provides him. Zagreus chooses in this instance to put aside his sarcastic/bitter approach to his father in favour of better understanding who his mother was. When met with opposition from Hades, Zagreus does not falter and instead makes it his mission to find Persephone on the surface.

Many modern video games are content enough with handling this arc as an entire narrative structure in the context of their games, choosing to borrow the damsel in distress trope as a driving force for the main character to achieve a task and save the day. *The Legend of Zelda* often features this as Link strives to get the master sword, slay the beast of the game---typically Ganon in some form or another—and unite the triforce to save the lands, then rescuing Zelda from captivity or working with her somewhere in the process. *Mario* follows a similar structure with fewer beats between starting the game in 1-1 and saving Princess Peach. Bowser will usually need to be slain a few times, but the structure is typically quite simplistic in comparison, even before all the dialogue, cutscenes, events, characters, etc. introduced to add levels of complexity to this specific arc. This specific arc of narrative gameplay often encompasses what entire franchises have attempted to repeat for years—a hero's journey structure. This is one of the most effective strategies *HADES* employs in storytelling—convincing the player into believing the game's entire narrative is set on one goal which once surpassed, will signal the conclusion of the game's events. It fools the player into believing the narrative is one built from extra touches and polish including events and conversation rather than enduring acts which demand more of the player's skills and deductive skills to succeed.

Act 2: The Return

“You wish to have your mortal-colored blood spill once again upon this bed of snow, then fine. Let us proceed.” – Lord Hades

Once Zagreus has slain his father for the first time, Zagreus will venture forth into the Greek countryside to discover his mother Persephone in a garden not far from the Temple of Styx. At first, she does not recognize him, but after a brief conversation they come to terms with each other's existence. Persephone reveals she initially believed Zagreus to be dead at birth, causing her to flee out of grief from a failing relationship with Hades. As an outcast to the Olympian gods and to grief-stricken to remain in the Underworld, Persephone chose the garden she now resides in as her new home. However, Zagreus begins to lose his life force as their discussion goes on and ultimately dies as he is bound to the Underworld and cannot live away from it. They mutually agree they would like to see each other again, spurring the player to reconnect the pair through another successful run. Little does the player know that they will need to complete 10

successful runs to see how Zagreus eventually persuades Persephone to join him in the underworld. Each encounter with Persephone is designed to bridge some of the gaps in knowledge while creating new ones in their place; narrative hooks are imbedded in Zagreus' history with Persephone, stirring both the player and Zagreus to remedy this the only way they know how—visit her more and more to get the answers they seek. By this point in the story, visiting Persephone must feel as though taking a vacation from the Underworld for good reason. Hades is always berating and scolding Zagreus after each run, many of the characters while interesting on their own, wish to avoid confrontation with the same god as well. Furthermore, when Persephone speaks with Zagreus she is perhaps the only character to take pride in their bond at first. Hades constantly expresses his embarrassment for having Zagreus as his child, Megaera frequently chastises Zagreus for what she feels is his reckless abandon of his post in the House of Hades, Thanatos points out how Hades is more likely to take out his anger with Zagreus with him gone on several occasions, among other occasions. Even Nyx, who served as the prince's caretaker nearly all his life only seems to address him as 'my child', suggesting a sort of abstinence in their relationship. Nyx is *required* to help Zagreus although he is not truly hers, which she takes as a duty somewhere between looking after family and looking after house staff members. Even at the end of their first encounter, these Zagreus and Persephone say to each other:

Persephone: "The Styx shall take you, then. Oh, Zagreus. Farewell, my son. Won't you come back to me? When you are able, please. Come back. I shall be waiting here. However long it takes."
Zagreus: "However...long...it takes..."

Perhaps one of the finest points of the second narrative act in *HADES* is players will likely not think of it as a second act. In Zagreus' (and the player's) eyes, the objective of the game did not change. Zagreus is still seeking out their mother and hoping to convince his mother to return to the Underworld eventually. He does not know when (or if) Persephone will return willingly with Zagreus, but it is the best idea they have for the time being. By this time, the urge to reunite his family is at an all-time high, given every escape attempt (~30 of them by this point) have been building to connecting these two characters. By the time the player can convince her to return home, it will be anywhere between run #40 - # 80 for most players. From a gameplay standpoint, that is a lot of reinforcement, and the player only has themselves to blame for reinforcing this. The more the player strives to reunite Persephone and Zagreus, the more they want it to happen. Additionally, the more they fail, the stronger this desire becomes. *HADES* balances gameplay and narrative in such a way which leads to the 'one more run' phenomenon discussed so frequently. An average run may be between 15 and 60 minutes (by no means short depending on what you're doing), though this isn't enough to deter the player's attempts. Using rogue lite game mechanics, the player is always able to take something away from a given run, such as darkness for upgrading their skills, gems for renovating the House of Hades, pointers on where to improve, or even just another opportunity to talk to their favourite character(s) between runs. All of these elements have a random chance to appear in a run, but Zagreus will always encounter at least one, making every run just slightly different from the last run in some way, every time. This is what keeps the downtime between plot progression easy to manage and the game remains addicting to play as a result.

Act 3: The Reunion

“Say, man, if I’m not mistaken, I think you got yourself a bottle of ambrosia, there? I’d no idea you could get that stuff downstairs! Do me a solid, though, hang on to any more you find, or better yet, give it away! I’d hate to think even a drop has gone to waste!” -

Dionysus

Once Zagreus has visited Persephone 10 times on the surface, she will side with Zagreus and return to the Underworld through the aid of Charon and his boat on the river Styx. In this moment of the story, many would argue the ‘ending’ of the game is reached and the player has ‘beaten’ *HADES* as the credits play, all the while Ashley Barret and Login Cunningham sing ‘In the Blood’ as Eurydice and Orpheus, respectively. This level of pomp and circumstance in games traditionally means a game’s narrative conclusion has been reached and any narrative events afterward are post-game content. *HADES* certainly follows this formula quite well at first glance. Credits are shown, an artistic cinematic or artwork is shown (Persephone, Zagreus, and Charon riding the Styx back to the House of Hades), a major goal has been achieved after all the challenges faced along the way—Zagreus can bring his mother home finally. While all these events are of significance to the events of *HADES*, players should also be reminded of the three-act narrative structure spoken of in act 1. This same structure features three acts: a problem is introduced, and the hero is tasked with facing it, the hero trains/overcomes their limitations/learns something of use and faces off against the main antagonist/force in the story at the peak of the second act, and finally the third act provides a narrative cadence or resolution to the story. While it can be agreed *HADES* provides all these elements plainly (Hades serves as an antagonist, Zagreus trains to escape the Underworld, Zagreus is tired of being imprisoned in the Underworld, etc.), it might be wise to also consider the challenges of Zagreus’ family as a hurdle he must solve. Consistently throughout the story, his friends and colleagues agree Zagreus is putting the Underworld (and Hades) in a tough situation by attempting to deceive the Olympian gods for his own gain. Consider instead that the true challenge Zagreus must face is not rescuing his mother from the surface, but instead is to reunite his family. Zagreus’ actions at nearly every turn suggest his desire to have a functional **family** rather than an explicit connection with only his **mother** seem to be vocalized more often and freely. How does the third act fit into the three-act narrative structure then?

The third act of *HADES* begins with Hades and Persephone discussing the ramifications of Zagreus’ actions both in the Underworld and on Mount Olympus after Zagreus has escaped the Underworld so many times and now has returned the Queen home. First and foremost, the Olympian gods have become wary of Zagreus as they recognize he has escaped several times but seems to always die at the surface even after escaping. They offer their support nonetheless but under a veil of confusion on the subject. This confusion could only remain temporarily and if left unchecked, could hurt and compromise Zagreus’ and Hades’ relationships to the Olympians. As Hades points out, the Olympian gods are quite vindictive at times, such as when Zagreus is forced to pick favourites among boons. Second, Persephone points out that for quite a long time, the Olympians have not believed her to even be alive still. Demeter (Persephone’s mother) still believes Kore/Persephone to be dead, which would create some issues

should the Olympians visit the Underworld for any reason or should word of her return reach the surface/Mount Olympus. While Hades was able to prevent discussion on the topic with her absence, having her back would make that quite difficult to manage for diplomacy's sake. Furthermore, Zagreus' attempts to escape the Underworld have provided Hades with many glaring weak spots in the security of the Underworld which may damage the reputation of the Underworld. With so many issues to handle, they decide to handle it as though nothing had changed at first. Hades asks Zagreus to continue in his onslaughts through the Underworld so that Hades might learn where to improve upon the security of his domain. For Hades, this is a huge step in taking criticism and embracing his son for arguably the first time in many years and signifies a turning point in his character now that the queen has returned.

Persephone later drafts a plan to reveal her relationship with Hades to the Olympians and explain Zagreus' escape attempts as efforts to reunite his family. While not entirely true, the Olympians (Zeus especially) would understand this to be their attempt at family diplomacy and a sign that they wished for peace and openness in their family moving forward. The Olympian family has evidently been filled with strife and strain for years. The Underworld's efforts to rectify this are taken as just that—an attempt to extend an olive branch to Mount Olympus. To reach this however, Zagreus must also max out his relationships with each Olympian through gifts of nectar and ambrosia using dating simulator mechanics. Given each character is only ever seen occasionally, this breathes new life into escape attempts, focusing largely on seeing each god rather than beating Hades himself. Instead of asking for gameplay mastery, the narrative has now directed the player to experiment as much as possible (a minimum of 7 gifts per Olympian, each gift being once per run). Upon succeeding in reuniting the family, the player will be presented with a narrator sequence summarizing the meeting of Olympians and the House of Hades which concludes, “A well-kept family secret, then, this would live on to be.”

Conclusion

The above three-act structure has made it evident to see *HADES* as a different sort of narrative game. It subverts the traditional three-act hero's journey structure found so often in video games using deception and misdirection by drawing attention to elements while laying breadcrumbs throughout the narrative for later developments and emerging themes to take root. Its use of this structure allows it to shift from a game about rescuing Zagreus' mom to a game about complex family dynamics and events, and the concessions we make along the way to make families work and keep them together. If there is one thing which can be said time and again about Hades, it is simple: the only two things guaranteed in this family are blood and darkness, each with their own consequences.

Strongest Element

HADES has a notable list of narrative elements going for it: a strong set of characters with compelling motivations and traits, frequent narrative interactions and events, a strong balance and tied relationship between narrative and gameplay, and an understanding of the various tropes already present in the field of video game writing

with knowledge of how to execute and subvert them. Most notable in the context of *HADES* however is its command and subversion of the three-act narrative structure. This game tasks players with solving **elements** of the problem Zagreus attempts to solve over the course of the game—to reunite his family. First, he begins by finding his mother, then investing time in his mother, reuniting his parents, then reuniting his family. *HADES* consistently persuades the player into believing their current goal is the overarching goal of the story structure, only to later reveal it is a piece of the puzzle, all while sprinkling in addicting gameplay, engaging side stories and a long list of other elements quite too long for mentioning at this point. The narrative praise sung for it here and in other reviews is well justified as it understands the conventions which players operate and expect in video games and is willing to play with these rules to achieve something truly worth analyzing.

Unsuccessful Element

HADES demands a sizable investment of play time before the player unlocks many of the neighbouring stories, such as Orpheus' quest to reunite with Eurydice, Achille's quest to reunite with Patroclus, discovering who hired Skelly, or romancing any of the eligible partners in the House of Hades. With an average of 5-10 runs required before these are typically available to the player, there is bound to be time spent on runs for the sake of practicing escape attempts, knowingly bound to fail. Many players seem to be fine with this investment with the promise of a worthwhile return for their time, though for others unfamiliar to this style of storytelling and roguelikes/roguelites as a genre, this may work against Supergiant Games when considering player retention and narrative velocity.

Highlight

When meeting for the first time with Persephone on the surface, Persephone does not initially recognize Zagreus. He in turn guesses at what he believes may be his mother. Her initial response brings on the anger, guilt and grief she felt when she originally lost Zagreus at birth and fled. Now that Zagreus has come to face her again, she chooses instead to face these things knowing her son could be hers again. In the face of anger and guilt, she does what any good mother would do—pays the cost in the name of family. When his health deteriorates due to his distance from the Underworld, his mother decides to no longer give up in the face of death. She asks Zagreus to return as soon as possible so that their days may be filled knowing each other better rather than trying to forget each other. While it is the first time players meet Persephone, it demonstrates a level of character growth not normally seen by a fresh character. It is evident from her history and personality that Persephone has had a life of cruelty dealt to her, first in the form of her time on Mount Olympus and again, with Zagreus' death at birth. Each time she has chosen to run away from these problems but given another chance to learn from her mistakes, she makes the decision to stay and keep trying. From a narrative perspective, this moment pulls on the heart strings of both the player and Zagreus and beseeches the player to do something about it to rectify the situation. The player knows they can't leave Zagreus without his mother seeing how much she so desperately wants him in her life now.

Critical Reception

Many reviews from sources such as IGN, Polygon and PC Gamer all seem quite favourable of *HADES*. They emphasize strong character with convictions or reasons for being who they are, not because the narrative requires it of them but because it speaks true to who they are as shades/gods/etc.. Nick Limon for instance discusses the likes of Sisyphus, Orpheus and Achilles. He argues, “Each personality feels like an authentic reinterpretation of a classic Greek myth, and they’re all a joy to behold.” Furthermore, the dynamic storytelling of characters such as Sisyphus and Orpheus are one of the major selling points behind *HADES* for Limon. What he truly enjoys about Sisyphus for instance is, “...instead of painting Sisyphus as a tragic character, he's an optimist who you encounter on a break while the gods aren't watching. Even his boulder (affectionately known as Bouldy) sports a carved smile that reacts in silence upon interaction. Investing in Zag's relationships with each character paves the way for interesting backstory reveals, world-building, new side quests, or even items to assist on your future escape attempts.” Nick Limon gave *HADES* a 9/10 on behalf of IGN.

PC Gamer critic Jody Macgregor also had quite a bit to say about *HADES*. Of note, she argues the formula behind narrative beats and their arrangement is quite different in *HADES*. She argues, “With each death Zagreus is sent back to the House of Hades where his father judges souls and legends gather. Doing a circuit of the court to see what new things they have to say (and give Cerberus a pat), lets you wind down and take a breath after your latest death has left your hands shaking. When I die in *Dead Cells* I want to quit, but in *Hades* the sting's immediately removed because I get to chat with an embodiment of night and see what's up with Orpheus.” Macgregor feels as though *HADES* has struck gold by tying narrative progression to simply completing runs (or failing runs) rather than completing a set objective as in *Dead Cells*. She also rated *HADES* 90/100 due to its addicting game loop and narrative focus.

Additionally, Polygon game critic Ryan Gilliam also wrote quite favourably of *HADES*' narrative focus. They argue the narrative elements such as story, voice acting and atmosphere scored an 'A+' while the combat ranked as a 'B-', though they remark achieving this level of storytelling in a roguelite is an exceptional feature because, “It's a roguelike, or a roguelite, or an action-RPG with permadeath. Whatever you call it, it is a genre where story is secondary, either hidden away in the lore encyclopedia or otherwise in the back seat—the back seat of one of those cars with a window separating it from the driver.” Perhaps not the clearest explanation of this point, but Gilliam gets the point across—*HADES* doesn't separate narrative from gameplay. Instead, it identifies the two as two sides of the same coin, each dependent on the other to move forward—something which *HADES* does quite well. Gilliam also remarks on a variety of characters as well, noting in the case of Hades himself, “Hades lives in that place of self-superiority, certain that his son will never understand the lengths he's gone through to be a father and lord of the Underworld. He doesn't seem to have the time or patience to deal with his son's rebellion any longer. In response, Zagreus exudes a real “fuck you, old man” attitude, but

he's too cool to ever say it out loud, preferring a sarcastic nod and a biting comment to direct, verbal confrontation." This is what he and many other critiques seem to be fawning over with this title—the characters of *HADES* are unapologetically genuine to who they are. If it offends the player, that is likely intentional because that is the sort of person they are. But they all have motivations and reasons for being that way. Hades is not rude and strict to Zagreus because he finds it 'fun' to be that way—he has motivations such as setting an example, keeping Zagreus away from the Olympians, etc. that drive him to this end. He uses discipline in very specific ways to achieve the things he wishes to see out of those around him because he cannot stand to see another way around it. Gilliam did not explicitly score *HADES* as many other reviews have, but his criticism of the characters provides compelling insights into the world of *HADES* in what it does right which so many other titles seem to fall short on.

Lessons

- Effective storytelling is the result of compelling characters which follow their motivations, not the direction of the plot.
 - Hades chastises Zagreus because his death is ultimately the reason Persephone left him. He chooses to discourage Zagreus from escaping and even fights his own son to stop him so that Zagreus might not make apparent the weaknesses in the Underworld's security systems, nor connect with the Olympians who would be sure to wreak havoc in Hades' domain. Hades does this not to be a tyrant, but because he is secretly scared of the alternatives.
- Character motivations and traits are best shown, not told.
 - Persephone is a character bound by her family but keen on running away from her problems. She flees Mount Olympus to avoid conflict with the gods there, only to start a relationship with Hades in the Underworld. They have a son together who dies at birth (Zagreus). From there she chooses to flee from the Underworld to run from her anger, guilt, and sorrow. When confronted by her living son again, she chooses to set aside her tendencies to run in favour of investing in her family bonds with her son. Time and time again she is shown that not even death can get in the way of who her family is, and she eventually chooses to embrace her family once again in the Underworld as queen.
- The three-act narrative structure can contain smaller narrative acts designed to fool players into believing the current act in the main/final act of the narrative.
 - *HADES'* First act includes:
 - A sub-act introducing the conflict—Zagreus wants out of hell, later revealing it to be to find his mother.
 - A sub-act which focusses on Zagreus escaping the Underworld for the first time after slaying Hades.
 - A sub-act which provides a cadence and introduction into the next act, as Persephone is introduced.
 - *HADES'* Second act includes:

- A sub-act focusing on Zagreus clearing the Underworld several times and learning more about his mother.
- A sub-act in which Persephone pushes Zagreus away and discourages him from returning in the favour of now causing trouble with Mount Olympus again.
- A sub-act providing narrative cadence as Persephone eventually returns to the Underworld as queen.
- *HADES'* third act includes:
 - A sub-act focusing on Zagreus re-bonding and supporting his immediate family as they transition into their old lives again.
 - A sub-act which requires Zagreus to maximize his bonds with the Olympians and gain their full trust.
 - A sub-act which provides narrative cadence as the Olympians visit the Underworld and learn the truth about Zagreus and Persephone.

Summation

HADES provides a fresh take on both storytelling practices and character relationships in stories within modern gaming. It also challenges traditional roguelike/roguelite traditions of placing story elements as a secondary/bonus element to gameplay and places it in the forefront of the game space. Narrative beats are leveraged with the trials and tribulations in their runs through the Underworld. The developments between characters, the player and the world around them are all interwoven into gameplay rather than tucked away in a compendium in a hidden menu, which allows *HADES* to put on display the lessons Greg Kasavin and co. have learned and mastered in their craft through the rich world-building and storytelling found throughout the game. The compelling characters unfold the events of their respective stories not because the game requires it of them, but instead because it is the natural, organic thing for them to do—to stand still (in many cases) would be out of character and against their convictions. Many moments throughout *HADES* showcase character (and player) personalities through actions rather than through exposition. Actions and reactions are what drive the narrative events and personality shifts in many of the characters such as Zagreus, who comes to learn the strain his father has endured prior to the events of the game and thus gains a newfound understanding for him, bordering on respect. These lessons are prime examples that narrative design does not need to be set aside to achieve stellar gameplay, nor because a genre traditionally has not featured such narrative design prior. *HADES* teaches players (and designers) how tradition is important in moderation, but room should always be made to adjust and change it when necessary, especially in the context of narrative design.