

## How *Hades*' Narrative and Gameplay Build on Each Other<sup>1</sup>

Narrative and gameplay are two important aspects of a game, but it seems quite difficult for those two elements work well together. In a typical action-adventure game like *Tomb Raider*, our “innocent” player character, who is usually not a soldier nor a pro killer, needs to claim almost a hundred lives before crowned as the hero who saved the world. This type of discord between the character and the action could disrupt player’s immersive experience. Two polar opposite solutions are commonly employed. Games with heavy emphasis on the gameplay like *Super Mario* could just simplify or abandon its plot completely. Alternatively, games with heavy focus on narrative, like most David Cage’s games, tend to limit their gameplays. However, *Hades*, the newest title of Supergiant Games, the indie developer that excelled at both unique narrative and action-heavy gameplay, put on a great show at turning the conflict of those two elements into harmony.

*Hades* is a Roguelite action game set in the Greek underworld, and the player controls Zagreus, son of Hades, trying to escape hell to find his mother on the earth surface. In most Roguelite or Roguelike games once the player reaches the failure state, the player character dies permanently in that run, and the player has to start it all over in a new run. As a result of the permanent death, it is too hard for the designers to keep a consistent narrative that built upon those deaths. As the designers shy away from the narrative, the player character tends to have little personality as well. By setting *Hades* in the realm of the dead and the main character as a god himself, the “death” and revival of the player makes sense as the Greek gods can only be defeated but not killed. As the player character does not die permanently, the story can progress with each run, which allows the designers to put a heavy emphasis on narrative as well as its gameplay. Even if the player beats the game in a typical sense, there are narrative justifications themed on fixing various relationship between different characters to keep the player trying harder difficulties with different playstyles and advance the plots further.

To integrate narrative and gameplay even further, the game creates a delightful tone by fully embracing the ordinary occurrence of family discords among Greek deities. Zagreus is designed to be a rebellious son as well as a cheerful character who like to talk with others. His rebellious nature justifies his actions to go against his father’s order to find his mother and create a mayhem in the underworld. His outgoingness does not only allow him to quip with bosses in the game but also provide the player with the opportunities for the player to talk each character in the underworld as well as the Olympian Gods. The designers took the chance and put the majority of rewards, which can either change the gameplay significantly or allows the player to purchase decoration in his underworld home, behind the conversations. Only by having dialogues with various characters and sometimes gifting them with nectars earned during each run, those rewards can be unlocked. Furthermore, the opposite is true as well: certain dialogues can only be unlocked by certain gameplays. For example, an NPC will react and mock the way the player died during the previous run, which enlivens NPCs as a memorable family member of the underworld. Some hidden rewards require a series of conversations and gameplays to be unlocked, and the player usually need to spend time to talk to those NPCs during the course of numerous runs to gradually deepen the relationship with other NPCs just like in real life. This is not simply a way to force the player to cherish the abundance of dialogues in the game, but also for player to get to know each character as someone the player cares about. After beating the game several times and progressing through the story, the player will gradually realize the theme of the game: family. The ultimate goal of the game is not to defeat your own father over and over again, but to bring a sense of harmony and happiness to the huge family of Greek deities with everlasting quarrels through cheerful conversations and home decoration available between the runs.

1. Could have written ten more pages on this topic, but there is a page limit.