

A Review of *Hades*: How Supergiant Games Proved That Videogames are Art

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With the rise of video games as a form of entertainment in the twenty-first century, one common question has frequently been brought up: Can videogames be considered art? This is a common question every rising form of media faces, and videogames are no exception. Perhaps the fact that videogames have long been viewed as an activity primarily for children has not helped much when it comes to getting the general public to respect it as an art form, but— in the past decade— a number of games have been created that truly challenge the perceived limit of what a videogame can be: Games like *Mass Effect 2* or *The Witcher 3*, which tell deep and compelling stories on top of depicting expansive and immersive worlds. Those games were developed by the well-established companies Bioware and CD Projekt Red respectively. However, in 2020, a game from a far less likely source made an excellent case for video games being art: *Hades*, an Action Roguelike developed by a team of just 20 people at Supergiant Games.

Gameplay

But let's start in the beginning. First off: What exactly is a "Roguelike." A Roguelike is a specific genre of game— named after the 1980 game *Rogue*— that is defined by two key features:

Hades

Developer: Supergiant Games

Publisher: Supergiant Games

Release Date: September 17, 2020

Price: \$24.99

Platforms: P.C., Nintendo Switch, Playstation 4, Playstation 5, Xbox one, Xbox Series X/S

Genre: Action Roguelike

1. They usually center around some sort of “dungeon crawl” wherein the goal is generally to get to the end and defeat a final boss. This can describe many action games that aren’t considered Roguelikes, but what makes Roguelikes specifically unique is that:
2. Roguelikes are defined by random generation of levels, enemies, items, and upgrades for the player character. This means that every playthrough and attempt to get to the end is unique.

These two qualities create a somewhat simplistic but addictive gameplay flow, with players attempting over and over again for just the right mix of luck and skill to get to the end. However, getting to the end doesn’t even have to be the end for a player, with the random nature of the genre providing potentially limitless hours of fun.

Hades plays to these strengths of the genre— replayability and simple fun— excellently. On top of the typical randomly generated upgrades, enemies, and rooms, *Hades* provides further replayability with 6 unique weapons for players to choose from at the start of each playthrough— each of which has 4 different forms called “aspects,” making for a total of 24 possible weapons. Additionally, there are 25 unique “keepsakes”— each providing some unique beneficial effect— that a player can equip at the start of a playthrough, as well as 6 “companions,” providing the player with unique special attacks, *and* up to 12 upgrades to the player character from the “Mirror of Night,” each upgrade slot having 2 options to choose from. Added together, that makes for a total of *14,745,600* different possible combinations of weapon, keepsake, companion, and mirror upgrades that a player can choose from.

That is 14,745,600 unique possible play styles to choose from *before a playthrough even begins*. That might sound overwhelming, but another great thing about these different items is

that each of them is unlockable over the course of multiple playthroughs of the game. This not only makes it so that each of them is introduced slowly enough to let the player process each individual item and its function, but it also provides the player with further motivation to keep playing in order to unlock everything they can.

Even after unlocking each of these items and upgrades and beating the game multiple times, the player is provided with even *further* motivation to keep playing by allowing players who have already beaten the game to modify the difficulty of their playthroughs in a number of unique ways with a gameplay mechanic called “heat.” The player can increase the level of “heat” — up to a maximum of 60— by adding additional conditions to their run, whether that be increasing the health pool of enemies or making boss fights more difficult. This creates an infinite number of unique challenges for even players who have mastered the game.

All of this— combined with simple, action-packed gameplay— provides for one of the most addictive and replayable games I have ever played and is a testament to what brilliant game designers work at Supergiant Games. And yet, I would argue that this isn’t even the most special thing about *Hades*. What truly kept me glued to my screen for 155 hours of total gameplay was *Hades*’ unique and enveloping story.

Story

One of the most unique things about video games as a medium is the way they can tell stories. Some critics make the mistake of believing that games cannot tell great stories, or that story is simply less important than gameplay. That, however, couldn’t be further from the truth. Video games, as an interactive medium, have what may be the most potentially unique method of

telling a story: One which puts the player in the shoes of the main character. Many games have taken advantage of that opportunity to tell beautiful stories, and *Hades* does so brilliantly.

One might think that *Hades*' specific genre would be limiting to the story it could tell, and for most Roguelikes this is true. It's difficult to tell an organic and immersive story when the player is constantly dying and going back to the start of a randomly generated gameplay experience.

Hades— ingeniously— uses that gameplay loop as a *part* of its story.

If it wasn't immediately obvious from the title, the game's story is based heavily on Greek Mythology, being centered largely around the god of death and namesake of the game: Hades. The player character is Zagreus, the son of Hades who is rebelling against his father and attempting to escape from the Underworld. That's where the Roguelike element comes in the story; every time the player “dies” in an escape attempt they come back to life right at the beginning in the “House of Hades.” This makes sense in the context of the story, with Zagreus being the son of a god: immune to death, but not immune to being set back to square one.



Zagreus

The land of the dead is not a place that anyone, even a god, is meant to escape, and with the lord of the dead himself set against you, every struggle you face in the game makes sense. The enemies you face are the endless and immortal souls of the damned sent by Hades to stop you; the way the layout of the game shifts every time you start a playthrough is due to Hades flexing his power over his realm and shifting the layout to further complicate escape. Furthermore, other mythological figures show

up along the way to either help or impair you. This all mixes together to create an interesting story, but what makes *Hades*' story truly special is the ever-evolving world it allows the player to interact with.

Writing organic dialogue for a game can be exponentially more difficult than it is in a book or a movie. In those media, the writer has complete control over the world and the characters, and therefore can make the characters react to the world in a way that feels real and natural. In video games, the player is an x-factor over which the writers have little control, and so making the non-player characters react to the near-infinite number of things a player can do is nigh impossible. This leads to a lot of dialogue in games feeling stiff and unnatural at times, with characters only reacting to a few of the players actions. It's an unfortunate limitation of the medium, one which the writers at Supergiant Games easily overcame.

The characters you interact with in *Hades* seem to have a nearly infinite amount of potential dialogue for almost everything the player can do. Take for instance, the character Megaera, who is a boss fight you often encounter in your escape attempts. On top of seeing her while you're out in the underworld



attempting to escape, you often encounter her in the “House of Hades” when you are sent back there by a failure. In both places, she often has unique dialogue for: 1. if you beat her the last time you encountered her; 2. if she beat you the last time you encountered her; 3. if you’ve gone on a long streak of wins against her; 4. if she’s gone on a long streak of wins against you; 5. if you’re using a particular weapon, and the list goes on for far longer than I could possibly say. I cannot emphasize enough that that example is a *fraction* of the potential dialogue of *one character*. Every single character in the game is programmed as such, having a nearly incomprehensible amount of dialogue and reactions to things you’ve done and achieved in the game.

Moreover, every single character genuinely seems to change throughout the course of the game, even if in subtle ways. The way they react to Zagreus— what they say and what they do— it’s always evolving and changing slowly and organically.

Hades did something that I never thought was possible. It took me to an entirely different world: one that felt like I was really in it. Unlike any book or movie, *Hades* made me more than just an observer. It made me an active participant. It showed me that my actions— over the course of over a hundred hours of gameplay— mattered. In ways both big and small, I had an influence on the fantastical world of *Hades*. It’s something that I’ve never experienced before, and that I may never experience again. It is— in my opinion— undeniable proof that videogames are art. They are a wholly unique form of art, that do something that no other artform can.