HADES: A MYTH-CRITICAL APPROACH

Andrea Quero

"Imagine that Prince Zagreus experiences some sort of joyous outcome, for a change, in contrast to the arbitrary and unfortunately painful death he shall experience... now."

The Narrator

    Hades is a roguelike indie game published by Supergiant Games on September 17, 2020, for both PC and the Nintendo Switch. This game follows Zagreus – son of Hades – through his attempt to escape from the Underworld. A tale as old as time: *men vs fate.* The Greek understood destiny as an inescapable lifepath woven by the Moirae for each child prior to or just after their birth.[1] Such a vision implied that nobody could ever change fate, no matter how hard they tried. It is worth noting that the game's core mechanics are intertwined with the narrative that is presented to the player, displaying fulfilling character development through the lens of a genre that fits its narrative like a glove. The gameplay reflects the seemingly endless struggle of fighting against fate: the player must go through the same biomes – the Tartarus, Asphodel, Elysium, and the Temple of Styx – over and over, to help Zagreus overcoming his destiny of staying in the Underworld for eternity.

    All things considered, it is no coincidence that Zagreus and Sisyphus meet in the Underworld, since their stories mirror each other. There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the old myth about the man forced to roll a giant boulder up a hill only for it to fall every time, and Zagreus mythical retelling of the son of Hades failing to run away from the Underworld. However, Zagreus, unlike Sisyphus – who has accepted his fate, or as Camus said *one must imagine Sisyphus happy*[2] – has chosen to defeat this ancient notion. Our role as players is to help Zagreus endure what it takes to change his destiny. Each run, the hero obtains new permanent power-ups and keepsakes from several mythical beings, while also bonding with these characters and creating affinity with them. In this respect there is a sense of progression we experience as players, while the protagonist's fate is changing every single time we fail to successfully reach our main goal alongside him. It is not through success, but through failure, that Zagreus is becoming strong and emotionally mature enough to rewrite his own story.

    Nevertheless, through each successful run we also learn a harsh truth: Zagreus destiny is partially fixed. It is not possible for him to escape the Underworld. This does not mean his journey has been pointless, we also find out his circumstances are not

---

1   BARGDILL, R.: Fate and destiny: Some historical distinctions between the concepts. In *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 2006, Vol. 26, No. 1-2, p. 206.

2   For more information, see: CAMUS, A.: *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York : Vintage Books, 1991.

static or unchangeable. There is a way to reshape the world surrounding him in such a way that staying at the House of Hades stops being a tragedy. His soul may be bound to a place he feels he does not belong to, but rewriting his story was never about running away from the Underworld. During his journey, he learns how to make it feel like home by changing the conditions of his environment. For this to happen, Zagreus must change his attitude towards his life, his house, and his family. This mythical retelling was never a classical tragedy, but a coming-of-age story. By facing his emotions, bonding with his loved ones, and giving up on avoiding his issues, he manages to end his parent's vicious cycles and behavioral patterns. Persephone had been hurting her family by choosing escapism, while Hades was doing the same by concealing his feelings. Zagreus breaks away from the endless loop by embracing the opposite attitudes and accepting that the key to change his fate was changing who he was, never about moving from a location. The answer was within him all along, not in the outside world he had obsessed with.

Furthermore, the contrast between our modern vision of destiny coexists with the classical one: *free will vs the immutable fate*. Both the player and Zagreus must reconcile with the notion that we bear no control over certain aspects of life itself, while accepting that we must take agency over the traits we can hold accountability for. It must be emphasized that the charm of mythical retelling lies in how a creator manages to reshape a well-known myth to fit ideas from a different era. We know ancient Greek myths, but *Hades* is showing us a whole new version that is more fitting to our times: a modern myth about family, mental health, and growing up. Zagreus goes from the angsty teenager who defies his father's authority no matter the cost of his actions, to a full-grown adult who becomes the pillar of his family, actively seeking a healthier environment for everyone he loves.

In this way, this story shows the player a deeply flawed protagonist who is enduring everyday struggles, just like us, rather than an unreachable and idealized hero that seems morally above mankind. Zagreus is a lost soul searching for answers. Our mission is to enjoy the game while putting together the pieces of an intricate narrative puzzle that is hidden behind a beautifully crafted ancient Greek envelope. We are playing through a narration that is slowly building up through shards of dialogue and actions, carefully woven like the threads of fate. Zagreus is growing up every single run, while we are becoming better at the game alongside him. It is up to each player whether they unlock the final epilogue or not, by enduring all the hardships and trials Zagreus must face to reach a satisfying conclusion for his arc.

In the end, *Hades* is a modern tale told through the symbols of ancient times, throughout the dynamics of a videogame genre that confronts the player with the same sensations Zagreus is facing during his journey: both the frustration of failure and the gratifying feeling of success and growth. The bond the protagonist is creating with the world around him, is the same one that we are developing with the game. Thus, the creators relied on the analogy of our experience with the game's obstacles and rewards that are inherent to the roguelike genre's gameplay to design a compelling narrative, rather than exposing the main character's feelings to us. Every single time we play as Zagreus, we incarnate him during our playthroughs. His pain is ours, but also his achievements. We are also people who are endlessly failing over and over, hoping to eventually reach our goals. We are Zagreus.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BARGDILL, R.: Fate and destiny: Some historical distinctions between the concepts. In *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 2006, Vol. 26, No. 1-2, p. 205-220. ISSN 1068-8471.

CAMUS, A.: *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York : Vintage Books, 1991.

Author of the review

Andrea Quero, MA
University Rovira i Virgili
Faculty of Humanities
Av. Catalunya 35
430 03 Tarragona, Avinguda Catalunya
SPAIN
andreacarolina.quero@alumni.urv.cat