

# The Harmony of Escaping Hell: Ludonarrative Interplay in *Hades*

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Game narrative, ludonarrative harmony, enactive perception, focalization, movement dynamics

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This talk aims to contribute to the ongoing theoretical discussion on the relationship between narrative and gameplay, highlighting additional dimensions of the interplay between the two through a reading of the narrative experience in SuperGiant games' *Hades* (2020).

Clint Hocking's notion of ludonarrative dissonance (2007), an incompatibility between the "ludic contract" and the "narrative contract" that games may offer their players, became an early landmark that often defined the conversation on the importance of connection and continuity between story and gameplay. As previously argued by Roth et al., the predominance of this term can lead to a problematic understanding of this relationship, both in the sense that it implies a simplistic binary where a game is either afflicted with ludonarrative dissonance or it is not, and in the sense of broaching narrative and game mechanics as two wholly separate dimensions that interact favorably or unfavorably - rather than as inevitably entangled with and interwoven into each other.

Writings on "ludonarrative harmony" - the opposite modality to Hocking's dissonance - is often focused on games such as *Journey* (Thatgamescompany 2012) or *Brothers: a Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios 2013), that tell "wordless stories" (Sim and Mitchell 2017) entirely through the level of game mechanics. Thus, if we apply Craig Lindley's useful typology of the play experience (2002) into moments of "gameplay gestalt", focused on rapid action, and of "narrative gestalt", focused on language and allowing slower thinking, these games point-blank refuse any such binary and showcase the possibility of experiencing gameplay and narrative simultaneously.

The go-to example for ludonarrative harmony, then, is an utter breach of separation between ludic and narrative elements. This talk is interested in analyzing a wholly different exemplar: a game that absolutely maintains clear distinction between narrative and gameplay gestalts, and nonetheless excels at fashioning a uniquely powerful experience of ludonarrative harmony.

*Hades*, a massive critical success and instant indie-game classic set in a reimaged world of Greek mythology, follows the youthful rebellion of underworld prince Zagreus, as he repeatedly and hopelessly attempts to escape the realm of his stern father Hades. As many reviewers have commented, the game's defining innovation is channeling the

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core game mechanic of the rogue-like\rogue-lite genre – “permadeath”, where character death is permanent and players must start-over upon every failure – into a uniquely effective narrative engine.

The game is composed of two main parts: “runs” or escape attempts, where Zagreus fights his way through procedurally generated underworld levels, facing increasing challenges until his eventual demise; and “return home” scenes, where Zagreus navigates the house of Hades, converses with various characters and prepares for his next escape. This echoes the predominant structure of rogue-lite games, where players are given a respite in-between runs to recover and acquire new upgrades. However, while in other games this structure is narratively incoherent and the player just has to accept that the world essentially “starts over” upon every new try, in *Hades* the repeated dynamics of dying and re-trying are acknowledged at the heart of the story structure: for Zagreus, a native resident of the house of the dead, death simply means forced transportation back to the family home, which he is adamant to escape. Thereby, rather than resetting the timeline, the game is able to tell one continuous story: each escape attempt and every return is acknowledged, and becomes part of Zagreus’ story of perseverance, rebellion, bonding and eventually, of acceptance.

While the narrative gestalt of house scenes can be clearly counterposed to the gameplay gestalt of runs, *Hades* masterfully integrates the significance of either of these parts into the experience of playing through the other: house scenes are composed to process the aftermath of runs and influence gameplay, and runs are constantly imbued with a sense of narrative significance. Gameplay and narrative, tackled here predominantly at separate spaces and moments, nonetheless resonate with each other and seem to harmonically integrate in the player’s experience.

To better account for this powerful integration between moments of narrative contemplation and gameplay action, this talk will analyze *Hades* as an effective instance of enactive narrative focalization (redacted). This notion fuses the concept of narrative focalization as ways of seeing or looking formed by a particular story (Bal 1997), with insight from the enactive approach to cognition and perception (e.g. Noë 2004), according to which perceptual experience is constituted via implicit practical understanding of movement dynamics. Accordingly, the player’s experience of the gameworld can be understood as constantly informed by their understanding of both the narrative framing and the gameplay dynamics, which in some ways co-constitute each other. Accordingly in *Hades*, during the escape attempts, though the player’s immersion in the rapid action gestalt does not leave attentional space for conscious narrative reflection, narrative framing implicitly but powerfully focalizes the experience of fighting through the underworld as the meaningful unfolding story of Zagreus’ stubborn rebellion.

Finally, to account for the uniquely meaningful experience of enactive focalization taking shape in the course of playing *Hades*, I will briefly present a reading of the game’s narrative trajectory in relation to the myth of Sisyphus. The Sisyphean curse of infinite return, of striving to push his rock up the mountain every day, only to watch it fall back down and begin anew in the morning, mirrors *Hades*’ gameplay loop of repeatedly failing to climb out of hell. Sisyphus himself appears in the game as a side character, one of the friends that Zagreus meets along the way and attempt to aid his journey. Through discussing Zagreus’ in-game interactions with the surprisingly cheerful Sisyphus and the game’s broader narrative arc, I will argue that *Hades* offers a new and refreshing take on the Sisyphean myth, and compare and contrast the pleasure that Zagreus, Sisyphus and the player eventually find in the repeated, futile climb to the existential interpretation of the Sisyphean myth in the work of Albert Camus (2013).

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