How Hades Uses Death To Create An Interactive Experience

by Daniel Acevedo

Hades is a video game originally released in September 2020 by Supergiant Games. *Hades* is a roguelike game, a genre of games typically characterized by a dungeon crawl through randomly generated levels and permanent death. The player controls Zagreus, the son of Hades, who is attempting to escape the Underworld. The game's essence lies in the repeated cycle of attempting to break free, only to meet death and return to the House of Hades, the game's starting point. In contrast to many games where death is typically seen as a failure, *Hades* masterfully utilizes death as a central element to create an interactive and engaging gameplay experience.

In many games, like Naughty Dog's *Uncharted* series, death is often inconsequential, merely serving as an inconvenience to the player. The player will just respawn at the nearest checkpoint, and continue until they get things right. This approach can sometimes break immersion and disconnect players from the story. *Hades* takes a unique approach by actively encouraging players to die and treating it as an essential element of the gameplay.

Figure 1. Screenshot taken from *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2020)

Each death in *Hades* is a chance to collect resources and currency that can be used to enhance Zagreus's abilities for subsequent attempts. Furthermore, players can make aesthetic changes to the House of Hades and interact with its inhabitants, including characters like Megaera, Achilles, and Hades himself. This interplay between life and death adds depth to the game, transforming death into a valuable gameplay mechanic rather than a failure.

One of the most remarkable features of *Hades* is its effective use of callbacks to previous gameplay experiences. These callbacks, tracked through boolean flags, allow non-playable characters to reference Zagreus's past failed escape attempts (Figure 1). This is in stark contrast to games where a character's death resets the narrative entirely. In *Hades*, characters acknowledge and comment on Zagreus's deaths, making each attempt an integral part of the ongoing story. For example, characters may mention how Zagreus previously met his demise, creating a strong sense of continuity and player engagement (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Screenshot taken from *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2020)

Upon dying, the player is met with the death screen that reads "There is no escape" (Figure 3). This message reinforces the game's core concept: Death is not a failure, but an integral part of the journey. Zagreus's relentless pursuit of escape, despite numerous deaths, reflects the seemingly insurmountable challenge he faces.

In conclusion, *Hades* stands out as an example of how games can utilize death as a central element to create an interactive and immersive experience. By embracing death, *Hades* encourages players to accept failure and learn from it, and ultimately become immersed in a narrative that thrives on the cycle of life and death.
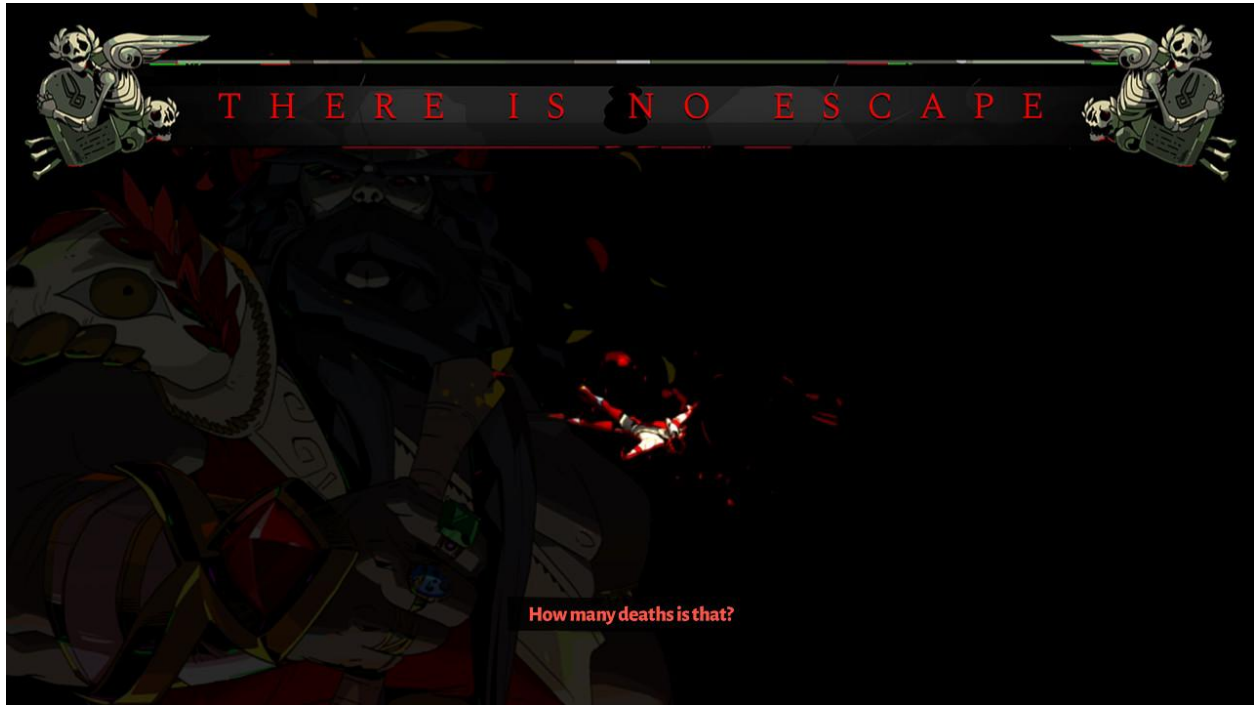
Figure 3. "There is no escape". (*Hades,* Supergiant Games, 2020)