ChatGPT

Rogue-lite Progression Systems in Auto-Shooter Games

Shop Systems

- **Mid-Run Shops:** Introduce in-run shops at natural breaks (between waves or arenas) so players can spend collected currency on upgrades. This adds strategic resource management to runs. *Example:* **Brotato** presents a shop after each wave, offering a random selection of weapons and items. Players can purchase items with materials, **lock** items to buy later, or pay to **reroll** the shop inventory for new options [1] [2] . This system encourages planning (e.g. saving currency for a crucial item or reroll).
- **Shop Scaling & Special Offers:** Design shops to evolve as the run or game progresses. Early-game shops should offer basic, low-tier upgrades, while later on they include higher-tier or more complex items. *For instance,* Brotato restricts high-tier loot to later waves – Tier 2 items appear only from wave 2 onward, Tier 3 from wave 4, and Tier 4 from wave 8 [3] . This ensures early waves stay manageable and new players aren't overloaded with complex gear, whereas veteran players get exciting options in late-game. Some games even add **special shops or vendors** in advanced stages (e.g. *Vampire Survivors* unlocks a late-game merchant who sells rare power-ups like Golden Eggs once certain conditions are met).
- **Boss & Between-Level Shops:** Consider placing shop interactions at boss defeat or between arenas. This creates a **reward moment** after tough fights. For example, *Hades* features Charon's shop rooms before bosses where players can spend obols on health or Boons, providing a breather and power-up before the next battle. In an auto-shooter, defeating a boss could open a shop or **reward chest**. (Notably, **20 Minutes Till Dawn** drops **Tomes** from bosses – special upgrades with big benefits and some drawbacks – and lets the player pick one of three [4] [5] . This injects a meaningful choice at boss milestones, much like a mid-run shop reward.)

Drafting Mechanics

- **Random Upgrade Draft:** Preserve the excitement of random level-up drafts, but add tools to make decision-making more engaging and less luck-based. Many games give the player limited **rerolls or bans** of upgrade choices. *For example,* **Vampire Survivors** lets you unlock **Reroll**, **Skip**, and **Banish** power-ups (via meta progression) which allow you to redraw level-up options or skip an option entirely [6] [7] . These tokens ensure players can chase synergies or avoid redundant upgrades, making each level-up choice feel more strategic rather than purely RNG.
- **Synergy & Combo Upgrades:** Introduce upgrades that only become available when the player has specific combinations, rewarding long-term planning. *For instance,* **20 Minutes Till Dawn** has **Synergy Upgrades** (marked with special icons) that unlock only after certain prerequisite perks are taken [8] . If you've picked the *Freeze* and *Burn* related upgrades, you might be offered **"Frost Fire,"** causing frozen enemies to also burn [9] . These combo perks encourage players to plan builds and feel a satisfying payoff when the combo appears. Similarly, **Hades** offers duo boons (combined god

powers) only if you have the right gods' boons, and **Soulstone Survivors** allows specific powerful skill upgrades if you stack related buffs (via its "Chaos" upgrades system).

- **Evolution & Transformation Mechanics:** A compelling way to enrich level-up decisions is to allow certain upgrades to **evolve** into stronger forms if conditions are met. The classic example is **Vampire Survivors'** weapon evolution system: if you max out a weapon and also possess its corresponding support item, the next boss chest will evolve that weapon into a superior version [10] [11] . This means a player's choice to take, say, the *Empty Tome* earlier might pay off later by evolving the *Magic Wand into the Holy Wand*. Such mechanics make players consider not just "Which upgrade is best now?" but also "What combinations can I build toward for late-game power?"

- **Trade-offs and Exotic Choices:** Offer occasional upgrades with **trade-offs** to spice up decisions. The earlier example of 20MTD's **Tomes** fits here – e.g. Tome of Elasticity gives +2 bullet bounce but -25% damage [12] – forcing players to weigh pros and cons. Another idea is a rare draft option that's very powerful *but* comes with a penalty (similar to Hades' **Chaos Boons** or **curse items** in some roguelikes). These high-risk, high-reward picks keep even veteran players' level-up choices interesting.

- **Ability Swaps and Replacements:** In later stages of a run, allow players to **pivot** their build if needed. **Soulstone Survivors** handles this by continuing to offer active skills even after you have a full loadout, giving you the chance to **replace** an existing ability with a new one [13] . Players can even toggle off further active skill offers if they're happy with their kit. This flexibility means a run isn't locked into early decisions; if a synergy opportunity or better skill comes along at high level, you can grab it by swapping out a less useful ability. It keeps the drafting phase alive throughout the run, not just until you fill your slots.

Meta Progression & Unlocks

- **Persistent Upgrades (Power-Ups):** Most rogue-lites feature meta-progress that lets players get a bit stronger or more versatile over many runs. The key is to implement this without undermining the core challenge for new players. One approach is small **stat boosts** purchasable with meta-currency (gold, soulstones, etc.). *For example,* **Vampire Survivors** has a PowerUp shop where you spend gold to incrementally raise stats like damage, speed, or magnet range for all future runs [14] . These boosts are capped and expensive, so a new player won't max them quickly. Additionally, VS includes toggles to disable certain power-ups (like the Curse boost that makes enemies harder) to maintain game balance [14] . **Hades** similarly uses the **Mirror of Night** to spend Darkness on talents (extra dash, more health, lives, etc.), but crucially *many abilities start locked* behind keys [15] . This gating means early-game players only access basic upgrades, preserving clarity, while deeper meta-progression (alternative talents, higher ranks) unfolds gradually as they gain experience [15] [16] .

- **Unlock Trees & Skill Trees:** A structured **unlock tree** can organize meta-progression and signal long-term goals. **Soulstone Survivors** uses a **Global Skill Tree** where players spend soulstones (earned from enemies/bosses) to unlock permanent perks like +damage, +health, extra dashes, as well as entirely new runes and mechanics [17] [18] . This acts as a roadmap – beginners might first grab basic damage or health nodes, while late-game players work toward unlocking advanced abilities or new modes. Some nodes unlock content rather than pure power (e.g. new runes or character-specific bonuses), so progression opens up more gameplay variety instead of just making the game easier [18] [19] . **Rogue Legacy** famously had a castle upgrade tree: buying an upgrade might raise your Knight's attack or unlock the Assassin class. Importantly, these systems can be tuned not to trivialize early runs; Rogue Legacy, for instance, scaled up enemy levels when you purchased lots of upgrades, keeping a balance. The goal is meta-progression that feels rewarding

without completely steamrolling the base difficulty – or at least offering an opt-out (like an optional "ascension" mode without meta perks for purists).

- **Alternate Characters & Loadouts:** Adding unlockable characters (or classes, weapons, etc.) is a **huge draw** for replayability, and it naturally integrates with progression. Many auto-shooter roguelites start with a few characters and let players earn more by meeting milestones. *For example,* **Brotato** has 62 characters total; only 5 are available from the start, and the rest unlock through gameplay achievements (e.g. winning with certain setups, reaching stat thresholds) [20] . Each character has unique stats or traits that drastically change playstyle (one might have bonus range but less HP, another might favor elemental damage, etc.), essentially offering a different "build" from the get-go. **Vampire Survivors** similarly provides a roster of characters each with a signature weapon and growth curve, unlocked by challenges (like survive 20 minutes with X character) or purchased with coins. Alternate characters serve as a form of progression (new content to use) that doesn't confuse the early game – new players can stick with starter characters, while experienced players gradually earn funky characters with novel mechanics. This keeps the game fresh and lets late-game players challenge themselves with "weirder" heroes.
- **Unlockable Content & Discovery:** Beyond characters, think of progression as a way to **unlock new items, upgrades, and features** over time. This is seen in games like Vampire Survivors and Soulstone Survivors where a lot of content is initially hidden and revealed via achievements. *Vampire Survivors* uses a list of objectives (e.g. "Survive 10 minutes with Gennaro" or "Defeat a particular boss") that unlock new weapons, items, or gameplay options. This means early runs have a limited item pool, which actually aids clarity for beginners. As the player masters the game, they organically introduce more complexity by unlocking new weapons (which then start appearing in level-ups) or new mechanics (like **Arcana cards** in VS, which are a late-game mechanic unlocked after reaching a certain level and finding a relic). **Soulstone Survivors** gates its advanced runes and even some character-specific skill trees behind achievements and high "Prestige" levels [19] , ensuring that a player first learns the basics of a character before tweaking it with special runes. This approach to meta-progression means *the game's depth grows in parallel with the player's skill*. Early-game remains straightforward, but as one's understanding deepens, the game introduces those layered systems (additional upgrade tiers, combo mechanics, more difficult weapons, etc.) – keeping things clear at the start and rich later on.

Difficulty Modifiers (High-Difficulty & Replayability)

- **Incremental Difficulty Tiers:** Most of these games implement optional difficulty modifiers that unlock once you've beaten the base game, providing a structured **"New Game Plus"** style challenge. For instance, **Brotato** offers **Danger Levels (0 through 5)** for each character. Beating the game on Danger 0 unlocks Danger 1, and so on up to 5. Each Danger level makes enemies tougher or adds challenges (e.g. at Danger 5, enemies have +40% health and damage, and even two bosses spawn at once on the final wave) [21] [22] . This extends replayability by giving skilled players new goals (e.g. "Beat Danger 5 with every character"). Similarly, **20 Minutes Till Dawn** uses **Darkness Levels (0–15)**: each step adds a cumulative modifier like more enemy spawns, reduced XP gain, or fewer upgrade choices [23] [24] . By Darkness 15, all previous modifiers stack up, making for a significantly harder game. These tiers are unlocked sequentially [25] , meaning a new player won't accidentally start on an insane difficulty – they're naturally introduced to harder modes only after proving mastery of the prior one.
- **Customizable Challenge Modes:** Some games let players dial up specific aspects of difficulty via a menu or "curse" system. **Soulstone Survivors** implements **Curse tiers**: before a run you can enable

up to 7 levels of curses, each level introducing new enemy behaviors or hazards (like faster spawns, enemy meteors, multiple bosses at once, etc.) [26] [27] . Each curse tier stacks on the previous, and higher tiers yield greater rewards as an incentive [26] . What's clever is that curses can often be toggled individually – e.g. you might activate just movement speed and spawn rate increases for a moderate challenge, or everything at once for a brutal test. **Hades** uses a similar concept with the **Pact of Punishment**: after your first successful clear, you unlock a menu of conditions (harder enemies, budget cuts in shops, boss upgrades, etc.) each worth a certain Heat level [28] [29] . You choose which to enable to reach a desired Heat, and in return you earn extra rewards (bounties) for completing runs at that Heat [30] . This highly customizable approach means players can tailor the late-game difficulty in a variety of ways rather than a single flat increase. It keeps the game fresh by allowing different combinations of handicaps, effectively creating new gameplay experiences ("What if enemies move 20% faster *and* I have one less revive?").

- **Rewarding Replayability:** The high-difficulty modes usually come with rewards or recognition that appeal to completionists. For example, Hades grants additional resource rewards (Titan Blood, etc.) for each heat level completed per weapon [31] . Brotato's Danger and 20MTD's Darkness display badges or icons on your character select to show you've conquered that level [32] , and they often unlock new characters or items when beaten. **Rogue Legacy** and its sequel push replayability by adding **NG+ cycles** where each new loop makes enemies stronger but also lets you find newer, higher-tier loot and *Burdens* (RL2's optional difficulty modifiers akin to curses). The design goal is to make overcoming higher difficulty feel worthwhile – either through tangible rewards or bragging rights on leaderboards. Crucially, these modes are **late-game content**: new players can ignore them until ready, so early-game remains focused on learning core mechanics, while late-game players always have another mountain to climb.

Each of these systems can be mixed and matched to enrich your auto-shooter roguelite. By layering in shops, interesting upgrade drafts, mindful meta-progression, and scalable difficulty, you'll cater to both newcomers (with a clear, simple early experience) and hardcore fans (with depth and challenge that extends long into the late-game) [15] [33] . The key is timing their introduction: tie new mechanics to natural milestones (level-ups, boss defeats, run victories) so that the game gradually blossoms in complexity as the player grows more comfortable with the basics. This way, the progression feels rewarding and the mechanics beyond movement truly shine in enhancing replayability and engagement.

Sources: Progression and design details referenced from *Vampire Survivors* [14] [10] , *Brotato* [1] [21] , *Soulstone Survivors* [17] [26] , *20 Minutes Till Dawn* [23] [9] , *Hades* [30] [15] , and other roguelite titles.

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