There Is No Escape: Theatricality in *Hades*

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ABSTRACT

To date, the theatricality of videogames has been examined primarily through the lens of *performance*, a perspective that centers the liveness of theater and identifies the player with the role of the actor. However, another key facet of theatricality—the process of continuous reflective reinterpretation that characterizes theatrical *production*—has received less attention, despite its apparent applicability to the cyclical nature of many games. We conduct a reading of the narrative roguelike videogame *Hades* that emphasizes this reinterpretive process, and find that *Hades* is essentially structured around a sort of "diegetic backstage" that deliberately invites the player into the process of dramatic reinterpretation—leveraging the power of computation to prompt reflection on the game's core themes and repeated remotivation of the game's core gameplay. Our reading suggests that videogames, by shortening the reinterpretive loop that characterizes theatrical production and enabling players to experience many iterations of this loop within the comfort of their own home, can unlock a form of the pleasure that the members of a theater production derive from gradually bringing an initially flawed and disharmonious production into harmony.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → **Computer games**.

KEYWORDS

game studies, theatricality, interactive drama, narrative design

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1 INTRODUCTION

One ongoing strand of work in game studies seeks to advance our collective understanding of how videogames make meaning by analyzing what games share with theater. Many of these analyses have centered on the importance of *live performance* as a shared feature between both media. In these analyses, the player of the videogame is identified with the actors in a theatrical performance. But is this the only way to understand videogames as theatrical?

In our view, liveness and co-presence of the audience in the same physical space as the performers are certainly part of what makes theater unique. But we contend that, independent of live performance, theater is also characterized by its *production process*. The processes of theater are built upon the creation of a ritual to tell a particular story in a particular way [6]—a ritual that is necessarily repeated by the actors both prior to (in rehearsal) and during (in performance) the run of a play. It is on the construction of meaning through the theatrical ritual, and the continual *reinterpretation* of a play's meaning that this process implies, that we focus here.

With this in mind, we define *theatricality* as a property of creative works that repeatedly reinterpret and recontextualize a partially fixed performance over a period of time, in such a way that this continual recontextualization is at least partially exposed to the audience. This stands in contrast to most established definitions of theatricality, which tend to focus on what does and does not happen on stage during a single performance of a play. From a playwriting perspective, a script is theatrical insofar as it orchestrates the live performance of character action [24]. Meanwhile, from a dramaturgical perspective, theatricality "takes advantage of those qualities of the theater that no other medium can reproduce" to highlight and support, through performance, the moments of change defined within the script [6]. Under either of these conventional definitions, for something to be theatrical, it must be performed live and in front of an audience.

We argue, however, that a key aspect of theatricality—which these conventional definitions overlook—is the continual reworking of a play's meaning that takes place between the pre-production and production staff during the theatrical production process. From this perspective, much of the work of theatricality takes place between performances and over the course of multiple performances; what happens off stage, or on stage in the absence of a full audience, must also be considered.

By de-emphasizing the need for live performance on stage, we seek to instead call attention to an aspect of theater practice that often goes under-discussed when theater is used as a lens to analyze videogames: the work and pleasure of reinterpreting and recontextualizing a narrative over the course of interaction. This interaction can be a more traditional production of a script or, as we argue in this paper, a mode of audience interaction with an interactive narrative beyond changing the story structure or performing a role.

Videogames, which frequently adopt a cyclic narrative structure, seem especially prone to exhibiting this form of theatricality. However, not all videogames are created equal in this regard: though all games are subject to a degree of *external* theatricality imposed on them by repeated play in varying real-world contexts[1], some

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[1] As discussed in Mitchell et al's work on replay, for instance [17]. For example, playing *Freespace 2* [32] in the United States when it was released in 1999 and in 2019 highlight very different aspects of its thematic priorities.

games also make use of *internal* theatricality. These games deliberately present and re-present a core experience to the player in a gradually evolving way, allowing the player to sample repeatedly from the story volume [7] of possible playthroughs of the core experience and refine their understanding of the game's meaning through reflection on the variations they have seen.

To better understand how this internal form of theatricality operates in games, we perform a close, dramaturgical read of the internally theatrical videogame *Hades* [29]. By adopting a view of theater that focuses on the theatrical production process, we gain insight into how meaning-making strategies from theater beyond the use of live performance may operate in games. Additionally, this new perspective allows us to better understand the process of reinterpretation and recontextualization internal to the play experience of a theatrical game.

Hades is an isometric narrative roguelike game released by Supergiant Games in 2020. The player controls Zagreus, a son of Hades, as he attempts to escape the underworld using a selection of mythical weapons and boons granted by the Olympians. Like many roguelikes, *Hades* exhibits a cyclic structure and a process-oriented (rather than a results-oriented) gameplay focus: the player repeatedly tries, fails, and tries again to escape from the underworld, hopefully gaining ground on each successive playthrough as they acquire the skills needed to make further progress. *Hades*, however, goes further than other roguelikes in its embrace of theatricality. Its narrative meta-progression revolves primarily around a sequence of major recontextualizations of the core gameplay, and the player's motivation to keep playing is tied in part to this evolving narrative context. The structure of *Hades*, both in its narrative and its usage of procedural elements, draws on theatricality as we have defined it. At a high level, the structure of an individual escape attempt remains completely fixed from one attempt to the next—but the context and meaning of these escape attempts is shifted dramatically by two major turning points in the narrative metaprogression, and more subtly by the player's choice of gear, short-term goals, and recent interactions with characters in the House of Hades prior to the start of each attempt. As the game's main narrative unfolds, what begins as a story about family drama eventually becomes a story about the cast of a play discussing their thoughts on the show they are performing every night. With this shift in narrative focus, *Hades* repeatedly changes its answer to the production question of "why this play at this time" [6].

In this paper we use our definition of theatricality to examine how *Hades*'s design is informed by theatrical practice, as well as how theatricality fits within the broader relationship between computation and theater. However, while *Hades* is the focus of this paper, it is far from the first videogame to use this form of theatricality.

2 OTHER THEATRICAL VIDEOGAMES

Nier: Automata [19], an action RPG released in 2017 by Platinum Games, makes extensive use of theatricality. In Routes A and B, the player first experiences the events of a protracted war between machines and androids from two different characters' perspectives. Then, from the third playthrough onward, the game turns the idea of repeatedly replaying the same events on its head and continues the story with a much more rapid-fire shifting of character perspectives. Events foundational to *Nier: Automata*'s plot were written as a stage play in 2015 by Yoko Taro, the game's director, [21, 33] with newer versions slightly changing characters and events [20], foreshadowing the eventual game being built upon recontextualization of its narrative structure and environments. The game's focus on slowly recontextualizing character roles is at its most condensed in the form of the PODs, small rectangular floating robots with arms that accompany the player characters. They begin the game as rather innocuous communications-and-utility devices, later becoming justification for why resources are shared across characters, facilitating much of the perspective switching that makes up the latter parts of *Nier: Automata*'s narrative, and finally becoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern-esque [25] characters making sure the two protagonists do not cross each others' paths until the end of the game.

Pathologic [8, 9], a survival-horror game originally released in 2005 and remastered in 2015 by Ice-Pick Lodge, opens in a theater. Its three playable characters first discuss their approaches to dealing with the plague infesting a town, then set off and spend the next twelve days investigating its source. While the game's systems offer a fairly detailed economy and player state simulations, it is incredibly forward about how artificial everything is. Each in-game day ends with a brief theatrical performance foreshadowing future events, though how much these plays make sense is heavily influenced by which characters have been played up to that point. The choice of playable characters determines the player's relationship to the town, most importantly whether or not they are an outsider, drastically changing which parts of the town's culture they are privy to as well as the general arc of the plot they are participating in. This includes the answer to the source of the plague. Whether the town or the strange structure on its outskirts are the root cause depends on whose perspective the events were seen from. Even though each of the three playable characters' stories exist in parallel, whichever the player chooses has their perspective ascended to the reality of the plot.

VA-11 Hall-A [26], a visual novel bar-tending game released in 2016 by Sukeban Games, may not have the direct, explicitly acknowledged theatrical influence of *Nier: Automata* and *Pathologic*, but its structure is built around routine in much the same way that *Hades*'s is built around performance. Every day for Jill, the player character, begins with her arriving at the titular bar before it opens, queuing up the day's music before both halves of her shift start, and ends with her relaxing in her apartment and potentially buying something for decoration. Even on the day the bar is shut down during an eruption of police violence, the flow of the day remains the same as the context of other characters visiting the bar shifts towards finding a safe place off of the street and not just somewhere to relax. While the routine *VA-11 Hall-A* establishes can be a source of comfort, once Gabriella, Jill's ex's sister, starts coming to the bar, the routine becomes a source of anxiety until Jill can no longer avoid having a painful conversation with her.[2]

[2] *VA-11 Hall-A*'s presentation of a comfortable routine being upended by personal drama is almost the direct inverse of *Hades*'s narrative recontextualization.

This selection of games serves to illustrate that some videogames (including *Nier: Automata* and *Pathologic*) have deliberately positioned themselves in conversation with theater, while even games that do not explicitly invoke theatrical influences can still use theatrically cyclic narrative structures to realize their aesthetic goals. In each of these games, repeated re-expression of the same narrative skeleton while varying some aspects of its content or presentation is essential to the creation of the intended player experience. *Hades* strikes something of a balance between having overtly theatrical inspiration and the slightly more common style recontextualization that comes from familiarity with a location or routine in a videogame. After *Hades*'s credits roll, its characters do talk about putting on a show for the other gods, but there is nothing quite so forward as the Greek chorus-style POD interruptions in *Nier: Automata* or the literal theater in *Pathologic*. That said, the game's usage of the House of Hades and the other realms of the underworld are reminiscent of a theater's layout, discussed in more detail in section 5.

3 RELATED WORK

Theatrically influenced analyses of videogames have tended to focus either on the player's role in shaping the narrative structure of an interactive story [14, 16, 18] or in their performance and participation within an experience [12, 30, 31]. Even when the way games can recontextualize themselves has been discussed [1, 13], the focus has been on the phenomenon present in the games themselves rather than on the act of recontextualization and reinterpretation the games are performing.

3.1 Performance

The common ground between our approach to theatricality and the work emphasizing performance that Tanenbaum [30, 31] and Junius et al. [12] have done lies with the understanding that reinterpretation and recontextualization are integral components of the theater production process as a whole [6] to avoid performance becoming an act of pure reproduction [15, 22]. Something that the above papers gloss over concerning Stanislavsky's work is the importance of an actor's ability to recontextualize themselves within any given performance, even if the role and the production itself remain the same, these are an actor's adjustments [15]. Both Tanenbaum et al. [31] and Junius et al. [12] focus more on the mechanics and emotional side of actor's adjustments being a part of a performance. While they discuss the collective nature of the way these adjustments function on stage to an extent, they do not take the perspective that these adjustments are interpretive work as much as performative.

The Viewpoints as described by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau have largely been used in computational system design to help mediate performance with a computer [10, 11] while one of the more subtle goals of the practice are ignored: collectively, as a theatrical production, being able to explore the question of "what is [the production]?" [3]. In other words, how does the production's understanding of what they are making change along with the collective context of that production? While the Viewpoints is largely focused on the rehearsal and training process, there is an understanding that interpretation and reinterpretation are integral to those processes and furthermore, should be a collective act, similar to the Levins' characterization of actors' adjustments must be made in partnership with the other actors involved [15].

While Junius et al. point out Zeami's focus on the audience experience as one of the reasons for inclusion in their theoretical basis for a game interface [12], they only briefly touch on what he says about a Nō performance's need to react to an audience's energy level while staying within the necessary theatrical structure [22]. Zeami uses the example of nobles arriving late to a show as one of the ways an audience's energy can become out of tune with the production. He goes on to describe the delicate navigation necessary to repair this disconnect and notes that there simultaneously must be a change in the performances to accommodate this while not allowing the show to slide all the way backwards into its initial state. This understanding of the audience and performers' symbiotic relationship is in contrast to the more the more commonly cited theatrical practices in computation show little concern for the audience by comparison. Zeami's discussion of altering a performance in response to the audience provides another potential avenue forward for interactive storytelling in treating players as someone to be in conversation with about details that exist within the larger game structure, fitting in with Brenda Laurel's view of the user of a computational interface as existing somewhere between an actor and a member of the audience. In fact *Hades*'s Pact of Punishment, a difficulty customization interface introduced after the first successful escape, is a vehicle for doing much of the kind of performance adjustments within a structure as discussed by Zeami, Bogart and Landau[3], and Stanislavsky.[4]

3.2 Time, Structure, and Distance

Both Aytemiz et al. [1] and Kleinman et al. [13] are, at a high level, concerned with analyzing how games use time as an avenue of expression. When discussing changes in systems, Aytemiz et al. are primarily concerned with understanding how games can use these changes in a way endemic to the form and aid other designers in taking inspiration from the patterns observed in their case studies. Kleinman et al. build a taxonomy of rewind mechanics and are primarily concerned with understanding the affordances for both designer and player different approaches provide. Our work in this paper is also about how games can use time as a storytelling tool, as a way of building a context for players which can then be altered to give new perspectives on the narrative or even the entire game's structure and encourage reinterpretation through recontextualizaiton.

While Ben Samuel's usage of Brecht's approach to theater mostly focuses on shared authorship, his general discussion of those ideas relative to computation [23] are relevant to our own application of theatrical ideas to videogames, particularly using the alienation effect to further explain the workings of the theater or a game. When describing the general function of a *learning-play*, as apposed to more traditional Aristotelian plays, Brecht says "the learning-play is essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed)" [4], a sentiment our

[3] Even if the Viewpoints approach, when compared to other theatrical methods, deemphasizes the text associated with a production.

[4] Other Supergiant games [27, 28] have had highly customizable in-game difficulty systems, but these were not foregrounded in the same way as in *Hades*.

definition of theatricality shares. We can even go so far as to say that the alienation Brecht discusses is a common element of the games we reference in this paper as being theatrical, from the end credits marking *Hades*'s shift from family drama to performing for the Olympians to *Nier: Automata*'s eventual constant perspective changes to *VA-11 Hall-A*'s occasional conversations outside of the bar featuring dramatically different interfaces.

Brecht's usage of alienation, and by extension the changes in context we are discussing in games, falls under the umbrella of changes in *aesthetic distance*, how emotionally or critically engaged a person is with a piece of media [6]. Generally speaking, calling attention to the artifice of an experience will increase the aesthetic distance (and push a person to engage more critically) and powerful emotional moments and other methods of inviting suspension of disbelief will decrease the aesthetic distance (and push a person to engage more emotionally) [6]. Junius et al. describe the shifts in perspective (in their terms between the acting and editing levels of interaction), even within a singular character's perspective, as an inherently Brechtian move [12]. Not all changes in aesthetic distance or usage of Brechtian alienation will result in the full theatrical recontextualization we discuss in this paper but the games that engage with the part of theatricality we discuss in this paper use extreme swings in aesthetic distance to prepare their players for the eventual recontextualization of their narratives.

Aristotle, in his definition of what makes a whole and complete play makes an important distinction between the *story* of a tragedy and its *plot* [2]. The *story* can include events taking place outside of a play, for example Zagreus's mother's departure from the underworld in *Hades* or the initial war with the Machines in *Nier: Automata*, whereas the *plot* is only made up of the events within the play and their ordering. Also important to Aristotle is the idea that the playwright does not need to be responsible for creating new *stories* but is instead only responsible for structuring a *plot* and making the play understandable to someone who has never experienced the *story* before. It is through this view of playwriting we can further pry into what these theatrical games do and have some degree of harmony between Aristotle's and Brecht's views on the purpose of theater: that these moments of recontextualization and alienation in games are frequently facilitated by careful placement of exposition about *story* events, in other words, playwriting. For example the revelation about why Zagreus's mother is hiding from the Olympians (*story* information) drives the performative context *Hades* takes on after its credits roll.

Ultimately, the interpretive and contextual work done in theater must be done, and, as Chemers says, "the question is merely how it gets done, and by whom" [6]. Performance entails its own brand of this as Stanislavsky, Bogart and Landau, and Zeami describe. We argue that games can be a tool to bring players into this artistic conversation, some even have. *Hades* takes this one step further and allows players to participate in some of the interpretive adjustments in much the same way performers do.

4 THEATRICALITY IN *HADES*

"There is no escape", *Hades* promises the player when they first start the game—and this promise holds long after the credits roll. This is not to say, however, that nothing changes in the story or the world. In fact, there are two key turning points at which the game significantly recontextualizes its initial promise: upon Zagreus's first successful escape and upon his tenth. When we first meet Zagreus, his anger is directed at his father and the fact that he is not allowed outside of the underworld. Finally defeating his father and meeting his mother, Persephone, for the first time reveals that Hades (both the game and the character) was right: Zagreus cannot leave, not because his father has forbidden him from departing, but because a still greater force binds him permanently to the underworld. Here, Zagreus acquires a new motivation for his escape attempts: each successful attempt gives him an opportunity to talk to his father, who only seems willing to say anything after being bested in combat, and his mother, who can only reveal so much in their brief time together. After besting his father for the tenth time, Zagreus is able to convince Persephone to return to the underworld, but introduces a new problem in the process. Through their brief conversations, it is revealed that the gods of Olympus do not know where Persephone is—and should they learn of her life in the underworld, they would exercise their wrath on the House of Hades. There is, however, a solution for this problem: to keep the Olympians, who have been assisting Zagreus in his escape attempts, from realizing anything is wrong, Zagreus must continue to attempt escape as he always has and put on a *show* for his audience. *Hades* keeps its promise: the player is stuck in the same loop they have been in since starting the game, only now, rather than attempting to escape for his own self-interest, Zagreus is doing so to allow the process of his family's healing to continue.

4.1 Starting a Save

Upon starting a new save file, *Hades* immediately drops the player into their first escape attempt. The player quickly surmises that Zagreus is in the underworld and attempting to leave, but no further context is given. On this first "table read" of *Hades*'s core experience, Zagreus and the player muddle through as well as they can, trying to learn the controls and contend with increasingly dangerous enemies until they succumb to the cumulative effect of many small failures. Jumping into group dynamics and feeling around for something to latch onto is very much a part of the Viewpoints training [3], and the cold opening of *Hades* implies a similar attitude towards experimentation and failure: what is ultimately important is growing an understanding of how everyone involved in a production works together.

It is only after this initial, inevitable failure that the player is allowed into the House of Hades—and to talk to other members of the cast outside the context of an escape attempt. Many of the game's characters reside within the house, and most can be engaged in conversation to learn more about the game's world and backstory, develop relationships, advance specific subplots, and acquire additional perspectives on the game's major themes. These characters' remarks tend to complicate the player's understanding of the game world, and through entanglement with these characters, the player can acquire additional short-term narrative goals [5] (such as learning more about a particular character, or deepening a particular relationship) that can help to shape the motivation of each escape attempt.

This is also where the player is allowed to start making longer term investments into their character. *Hades* offers two major outlets for metaprogression. First is the Mirror of Night, a character upgrade interface where the darkness resource (a room-clearing reward) can be spent making Zagreus slightly more powerful, provided by Nyx (Zagreus's supposed mother). And second is the house contractor, who can both make the House itself more pleasant (with various cosmetic upgrades) and alter the different areas in the underworld in small ways to make each area occasionally more forgiving. Spending darkness on Zagreus to make him more powerful may be a fairly standard videogame progression system in the abstract, but its placement within the house allows it to become a tool for theatricality as well.

Due to *Hades*'s nature as a roguelike, these more permanent upgrades can only be made outside of a run—yet the resources used to perform these upgrades are collected during an escape attempt. Every escape attempt allows the player to become slightly more familiar with the areas of the underworld and their denizens, and this knowledge can be carried forward into the next run, much the same way as rehearsal allows members of a production to familiarize themselves with group dynamics and collectively make interpretive decisions [3, 6, 15, 22]. We can then view the collection and spending of darkness in *Hades* as the game systems embodying and solidifying this element of theatrical production, in a gesture to make every escape attempt carry some amount of growth.

The courtyard Zagreus passes through to begin an escape attempt functions much like a prop table, being home to the weapons and keepsakes that can aid Zagreus in his fight through the underworld. Keepsakes are equippable items that grant small bonuses, ranging from extra health or damage to a guarantee that a specific god's boon will be the first one found in an area. They are obtained by giving gifts of nectar (another chamber reward) to any of the characters who can be spoken to. Only one may be used at a time, though they can be swapped out between areas if the contractor has been paid to install the necessary infrastructure. These keepsakes can then be used to pull an escape attempt in certain directions. One of the simpler strategic uses of keepsakes available early on in the game is to select keepsakes belonging to the Olympians whose boons the player enjoys using, in order to make these boons more reliably available. Keepsakes are one of *Hades*'s ways of allowing the player to make adjustments to their escape attempt in the same way Stanislavsky describes [15], and importantly, the possibility of choosing different keepsakes reinforces the idea that the game and player share the responsibility of deciding how a given escape attempt should feel. Even the simplest effects—like that of Cerberus's collar, which gives up to an extra 50 health[5]—can dramatically change the flow of a run by allowing a player to prioritize rewards other than health upgrades at certain points, potentially enabling the player to gather a much more powerful set of boons earlier in the run.

The six weapons (sword, spear, shield, bow, gauntlets, and machine gun) in *Hades* have some of the most obvious and profound effects on the way an escape attempt will feel. Much of the difference between the weapons lies in their move sets and by extension their effective ranges, with the gauntlets having the shortest range, and fastest attacks, and the bow the longest range, and slowest attacks. Though the player is making this initial choice, the game will offer its own alterations to the way weapons feel through the two Daedalus hammers available per escape attempt. Each hammer has up to three upgrade options which can be simple upgrades to the damage of certain moves to switching a move out entirely. For example the gauntlets have an uppercut by default but this can be turned into a medium range projectile. Again, these upgrades put the player and game in a conversation about how this particular escape feels, especially early in a playthrough when exactly what each upgrade does is a mystery and, like making a major change in the middle of a performance [22], carries with it a degree of risk.

All of these elements within the house give it a similar feeling to the green room and backstage of a theater, where the cast can celebrate or lament how the last performance went and then prepare to do it all over again.

4.2 A Successful Escape

The first successful escape attempt is much like the first off-book[6] run-through of a production. The play as a whole remains a work in progress, but the core structure is now solidified enough to permit a freer form of experimentation with its presentation. In *Hades*'s case, reaching this milestone requires the player to successively defeat each area's boss: Megaera the Fury (or one of her understudies) in Tartarus, the bone hydra in Asphodel, Theseus and Asterius in Elysium, and finally Hades on the surface. The first successful escape is also when the structure of the game is fully revealed to the player. The three main underworld areas (Tartarus, Asphodel, and Elysium) are generally between ten and twelve chambers long, with a required mini-boss fight appearing toward the middle of each area's progression and one of the aforementioned boss fights (followed by a brief respite) at the end. Unlike the previous three areas, which are linear successions of chambers, Styx is a hub branching off into five sequences of small rooms; one of these sequences offers an item that enables the player to proceed to the surface once acquired, while the others culminate in a mini-boss fight. However, the contents of each sequence are semi-randomized, making it unclear to the player which sequence holds the item needed to continue. Additionally, the player is returned to the hub after clearing each sequence of rooms—enabling them to delve back into the other sequences even after they obtain the item necessary to reach the surface, if they so choose. At some point, however, the player will inevitably either find the item or exhaust all the rooms, at which point they have no choice left but to proceed to the surface—where the grueling fight with Hades waits.

Upon his defeat of his father, Zagreus is greeted with a beautiful sunset before managing to find Persephone, his mother, tending to her garden. Their reunion is brief, as it is revealed that Zagreus cannot survive on the surface for long, and he is dragged back down to the House of Hades—but not before Persephone asks him to come and visit her again. When he walks out of the pool of Styx this time, Zagreus is given what passes for a congratulatory welcome in the House. What accompanies this victory is a sizeable shift in Zagreus's motivations: rather than wanting to run away from

[5]Keepsakes can be upgraded twice, with upgrades gated by how many rooms have been cleared with the keepsake equipped.

[6]When actors no longer need to reference the script during rehearsal.

home, he is now primarily motivated by the desire to understand what happened between Hades and Persephone that resulted in their separation.

Also accompanying the victory is the Pact of Punishment placed over the door through which Zagreus passes at the beginning of each escape attempt. This rather intricate difficulty adjustment system serves many purposes. The first is simply further emphasizing the magnitude of Zagreus's triumph over his father with a large, angry scroll. Second, the Pact allows the acquisition of more rare upgrade materials: titan blood for upgrading and altering weapons, diamonds for the more impactful and narratively important contractor projects, and ambrosia for further deepening relationships with characters, rather than the sizeable darkness reward for repeatedly defeating a boss. The catch is that, to continue earning these awards, the player must continuously increase the difficulty of the game after each successful escape with a weapon. With this system *Hades* encourages players to gradually experiment with the difficulty to make escape attempts novel each time, while also making each successful escape at a new difficulty level carry the same player and in-game progression that darkness was used for early on. The Pact's gradual, conversational attitude towards difficulty is, again, similar to members of a theater production encouraging each other to experiment and try new approaches within the structure of the show being rehearsed [3]. Finally, the Pact's introduction marks the point in *Hades* where all the pieces for the player and game to converse about the nature of an escape attempt have been introduced, making the subsequent escape attempts (until the game's credits roll) analogous to a production finally getting to make use of the actual performance space rather than the facsimile from early in the process.

By the first successful escape, Zagreus and the player have likely been able to build some amount of rapport with the other named characters through occasional gifts of nectar, mirroring the camaraderie built through the rehearsal process [3], though these relationships are far from settled. Megaera and Thanatos (if he's appeared) are still resentful of Zagreus's attempts to leave, and even the more helpful characters (such as Nyx and Achilles) are only as open about their thoughts as they need to be. But these difficulties are relatively minor, and can generally be solved with time and more conversations over nectar. The real problem, and why this portion of the game still feels like a rehearsal (in the context of an endlessly repeatable experience), is that any further conversation with Hades and Persephone requires Hades, and by extension Megaera, the bone hydra, and Theseus and Asterius, to be killed. Even then, the progress made during each conversation with Zagreus's parents is rather slow, and these conversations can be few and far between depending on how well the repeated escape attempts are going.

This is also the part of the game where the performative nature of each run lessens a little. For now, there is a pressing problem to deal with that both the player and Zagreus want to see resolved—and consequently, this is where the aesthetic distance between the player and Zagreus is at its smallest. The player is comfortable enough in the role they've been given that they are no longer just practicing the motions—and, as a result, they can now be caught up in the family drama. At this stage of the game, each escape attempt is motivated primarily by the goal to learn more about the story, rather than a desparate desire to be free of the underworld. As we now know, escape is impossible.

4.3 Reaching the Credits and the Performance

Persephone agreeing to return to the House of Hades is the sign for the game's credits to roll. While there are still tensions between the family members, and especially between Hades and Zagreus, they have now come to something resembling an understanding. There is another reason Persephone agrees to return and it is connected to the question of who each section of *Hades* views as its audience. The Olympian gods who have been helping Zagreus from a distance all this time do not know where Persephone is and when the player and Zagreus learn the details of how she came to be in a relationship[7] with Hades, this becomes a secret in dire need of protecting. The solution: to convince the Olympians that nothing has changed, Zagreus must indefinitely continue to attempt to escape the underworld just as before. In this way, the Olympians become the audience of this (now very well-rehearsed) theatrical production.

Who, then, was the audience for the other, pre-credits, version of the narrative? The player. We characterized the family drama as decreasing the aesthetic distance of the player and the game because at this point, even with its highly cyclical nature, *Hades* is still telling a semi-traditional game story with an ending of some kind being foreshadowed. The player attempts to escape and is rewarded with more insight into Zagreus's family drama or more conversations with the other members of the House of Hades, often consoling him in his failure. The player as the audience for this story in fact mirrors the way that the audience during rehearsals, and even to an extent during the actual performance, are the other members of a production [3, 22].

There is also the matter of motivation for the performance beyond the credit roll: after all, the lure of further family drama no longer exists. The Olympians, for all their help, do not dwell on the details, and as a result, the reason for Zagreus's very first escape attempt can once again become the basis for a show. The post-credits performance for the Olympians' benefit can then be characterized as highly polished, well-rehearsed versions of that initial clumsy attempt to simply run away from home to spite his father.

Everything that has happened up to this point—the family drama, the Pact of Punishment, growing closer to the cast—was all in preparation for this play for the gods. By now Zagreus and the player are comfortable, even happy to be in their roles, and adding new challenges becomes part of the reason to keep performing. Increasing the game's difficulty is no longer something in the way of a potential new revelation, it is just a part of maintaining the player's interest and growth in the performance, much like the care of the flower to which Zeami likens the art of acting [22].

Returning to the weapons and their relationship to the Pact of Punishment, there are three unlockable versions of each weapon. Two are only tied to the amount of titan blood required, which can be significant when upgrading the final levels of each. The final, secret version is only unlockable after certain named characters

[7] In *Hades* Persephone already wanted to leave Olympus and Zeus, in an attempt to help his niece and show some gratitude towards Hades, sent Persephone to be Hades bride in secret.

tell Zagreus a specific phrase and also costs a significant amount of titan blood to unlock and upgrade, requiring time investment and skill to accumulate the necessary resources. Importantly, the game also requires Zagreus to have working relationships with other cast members to fully open up the possibilities and variation present in each weapon, in a way reminiscent of the Viewpoints conception of collective growth during rehearsal and performance [3]. When discussing performance goals for an actor, Zeami is quite adamant that an actor should seek to master all roles available and can only do so through practice and willingness to continuously grow [22], in much the same way that *Hades* hides the weapon versions behind an increasing number of runs all at increasing levels of difficulty.

5 CONCLUSION

Past discussions of theatricality in games have tended to emphasize the *performance* dimension of theater practice, with a particular focus on the liveness of performance. Though some aspects of *Hades* can certainly be understood through this lens, we find that what makes *Hades* stand out as a theatrical game instead lies in its presentation through gameplay of a process of continual reflection on the core themes of the plot, akin to the theater *production process*. The first arc of *Hades* can be viewed as a facsimile of the rehearsal process, providing players with a window into the gradual development of a shared understanding between the cast and crew (i.e., the various characters) of what the play is about. Once the player successfully escapes from Hades for the first time, the focus shifts to an investigation of the central mystery in the game's backstory: what exactly happened between Hades and Persephone? Finally, once this uncertainty is resolved, the focus shifts again to the gradual revision of the play throughout its run for its new audience: the Olympians, who must be simultaneously appeased and gradually brought to a new understanding of past events through theater.

All throughout, the cast dynamics and other behind-the-scenes aspects of the play continually shift and evolve. The player is encouraged to take on a slightly different gameplay goal for each run: sometimes to advance the main narrative, sometimes to advance a particular subplot, sometimes to complete a prophecy, sometimes to acquire more resources, sometimes to overcome a self-imposed Pact of Punishment challenge, and so on. A particularly ambitious, grueling and flawed run may be followed by a relatively safe "breather" run at the player's discretion, allowing players to deliberately negotiate how hard they want to push themselves on each performance. Yet despite the shifting context of each run, every run ultimately exhibits a relatively fixed overall *shape* as the player journeys through the various regions of the underworld in an unchanging sequence.

Notably, the narrative of *Hades* feels dynamic and responsive despite the lack of any branching structure. Dynamism is instead achieved through the recombination of fixed elements within a fixed high-level structure, exposing a slightly different selection of dramatic elements to the player on each run. As in theatrical rehearsal, the player comes to understand the story volume of the production as a whole via repeated sampling of individual performances and reflection on how the different elements of the performance all hang together—or, in some cases, fail to do so.

Through its identification of the play process with the process of theatrical production, *Hades* demonstrates an intriguing potential future direction for deliberate theatricality in games. In the context of a conventional theatrical production, the process of reflective reinterpretation through which a production's members continually revise their collective understanding of a play's meaning and purpose can span many weeks, months, or even years. Moreover, this process almost inevitably involves dozens or hundreds of participants in a wide range of roles. As such, participation in this process is demanding and unapproachable. Obviously, a videogame cannot recreate this process in its entirety—but, through game and narrative design strategies like those used in *Hades*, games *can* provide players with a distilled form of some of the play-pleasures of reflective reinterpretation.

For Zagreus, as for the cast and crew of a long-running theatrical production, there is no escape from the process of continual remotivation: no final resting point that brings all the elements of the production into total, timeless harmony. Every run of *Hades* brings a slightly different context, a slightly different motivation, and slightly different obstacles that must be overcome. But for Zagreus, as in theater, there is an eventual pleasure and harmony to be found in the cyclic process of revision itself. The process, far from being an obstacle to the realization of a final, "perfect" performance, is the beating heart of theater as a medium: the reason both we-the-audience and we-the-performers find it so persistently compelling. There is no escape—yet in the end, one must imagine Zagreus happy.

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