Fractured Mythology: Classical Reception and Player Mythopoesis in *Returnal*

Returnal is a rogue-like (or, if we want to be specific, a rogue-lite!), bullet-hell, third-person shooter, published by Housemarque in 2021. At the risk of overloading the game with yet another opaque descriptor of its genre, this talk will consider how the game is mythological. On the one hand, the game's engagement with myth becomes obvious as the player fights through its six distinct biomes. As we will see, elements from Greek myth permeate the world of *Returnal*. But I want to go a step beyond cataloging the game's uses of mythological material and consider instead how myth informs the game's method of storytelling.

As a rogue-like, a core mechanic of the experience is an iterative gameplay loop (SLIDE). Players die, return to the start of the game, which has undergone some degree of procedural randomization, and use what they have learned (along with a small handful of persistent upgrades) to make their next attempt go further. The game makes no secret of its difficulty, advising players when they first boot up the game that "Returnal is intended to be a challenging experience. Each new cycle presents new challenges, rewards and changes to the world."

As Mary McMenomy has convincingly argued, "a game's use of received fiction cannot be understood separately from that game's rules and mechanics." To understand what use *Returnal* makes of its persistent engagement with material from myth, then, we must contextualize the use of that material within the framework of the core mechanics of the game. Doing so in the case of *Returnal* helps shed light not only on the game's approach to narrative but the unique narrative capacity of games in the rogue-like genre.

Today, I will first lay out how Greek myth shows up in the *Returnal's* world and then turn to exploring how the framework of mythological thinking, together with the iterative gameplay

loop, shapes the player's experience of the game. I argue that the presence of mythological elements, infused into the player's experience of the game through oblique references in characters' names, objects, and short, epigraphical texts, have an active role in the way that the player approaches the game's story. They prompt the player to use this fragmentary, myth-laden information to unravel the game's mystery in a process reflective of mythmaking, which I call "player mythopoesis." To demonstrate this process, I will provide an example of reading the game's story that leverages the mythological elements heavily, but I want to stress from the start that I present this *not* as a definitive reading (and not even as *my* preferred reading). My aim is, instead, to illustrate how the process of player mythopoesis works and why receptions of Greek myth are an especially fruitful way to encourage it.

My talk today will necessarily go into specific details of the game's plot and many of its surprising twists and turns, so I want to give a thorough spoiler warning now.

The general story of the game is this: the player controls, Selene Vassos, an astronaut with the Astra Corporation, who crash lands her ship, Helios, on the planet Atropos. She fights through the hostile planet in search of the mysterious signal called "White Shadow," in the hopes of being rescued. When she dies, however, she wakes right back at the site of her crashed ship and begins the process of fighting her way back to the signal again. Once the player manages to find White Shadow, we learn that even escaping Atropos and dying back home on Earth brings Selene back to her crashed ship, but on an Atropos that has undergone significant change. (SLIDE) Eventually, she seeks "an ancient pulse at the center of the world" in the hopes of finding "whatever… might be trapping me in the cycle." Simultaneous to this plot in the game's present, we learn about the planet's ancient past, during which a sentient race of aliens existed on the planet, and Selene's past, with an emphasis on the generational strife between Selene and her

mother, Theia, as well as her son, Helios.

Even from this brief description, a number of familiar names might pop out at you, but we encounter even more. Five of the game's six areas (called biomes) culminate in fights with bosses whose names are ripped from Greek myth: Phrike, Ixion, Nemesis, Hyperion, and Ophion. Outside of their names, these characters are not immediately recognizable as figures from the mythological tradition. Their traditional roles, however, bear importantly on the game's narrative. (SLIDE) Phrike, as a personification or abstract concept, invokes horror and tragedy, while (SLIDE) Ixion and Nemesis are both connected with retribution for a crime. (SLIDE) Hyperion is heavily implied in the game to be connected to Selene's father through the maddening recurrence of a musical motif derived from Blue Öyster Cult's 1976 hit "(Don't Fear) The Reaper." (SLIDE) His name helps drive home this connection since Hyperion in the mythological tradition is the husband of Theia and father of Selene, Helios, and Eos. (SLIDE) Ophion, the game's final boss, bears the name of the first Titan king, whom Cronos overthrew to begin a cycle of divine generational violence.

You may have noticed in the databank entries already that the information the game gives players is opaque and highly fragmentary. Multiple successful attempts at beating these boss characters reward players with new details. (SLIDE) Let's take a look at Phrike's second databank level (which I never got on my playthrough, because I am, as it turns out, not very good at the game) since it has specific reference to myth. The text of that second level reads: "Signal partially decrypted. "Smothered fire. Suffocating memories. Promised places. Terminal escape. Gehenna. Helheim. Tartarus."

So, each of the bosses drives home a deep connection between myth and the game's theme, but there is a lot more myth lurking on Atropos. I limit myself to a few illustrative examples. I'll

start with two Scout Logs, recordings left behind by other versions of Selene who died on the planet. The first is called Hostile Life and can be found in the first biome, the Overgrown Ruins (SLIDE). In this early Scout Log, the mythological resonances are highlighted for the player but so is Selene's connection to them. In the game's first-person sequences, which take place inside the crashed spaceship Helios and in Selene's house, we find a book that might be one of those that Selene mentions here called "The Abdication of Zeus" (SLIDE). Toward the end of the game's first act, Selene finds another scout log that employs myth to understand her own situation, but the content is quite a bit darker (SLIDE). Selene frames her fate in mythological terms to emphasize its eternal quality. In these Scout Logs, we learn that Selene has an affinity for Greek myth herself, but the world of Atropos itself, while seemingly completely detached from human life before Selene's arrival, also consistently calls back to myth.

(SLIDE) Xenoglyphs are another kind of material in the game where frequent reference to myth is found, but these epigraphical texts left behind by the planet's extinct race of sentient aliens *should* have no connection to Selene's personal attachment to myth. These texts are presented to the player gradually, with more information revealed as more "xenoglyphs ciphers" are found throughout the game world. On the right side of the screenshot, you can see the counts of xenoglyphs ciphers I have found in each of the game's biomes.

The two xenoglyphs we'll look at today are both found in the fifth biome, called the Fractured Wastes, a relatively late point in the game. The first highlights a generational conflict and has clear bearing on the specifics of Selene's life before we encounter her on Atropos (SLIDE). The final text reads "I was rejected from Olympus. Our family split apart. I rose from the waters of the Okanogan-Wenatchee Styx, but there was no room for blood up in the stars. I buried and left them behind, but the astronaut was always following me." The xenoglyph

incorporates references to both mythological material and the landscape of the north-western United States.

The second, likewise, connects back to Selene, but less directly (SLIDE). The final text (which, again, I never actually managed to get) reads: "Listen to the silence, deeper than Hades and blacker than Tartarus: the destroyer went into the darkness, and I must follow. The universal grave is where my release is found. I will pass through it to confront the astronaut."

Here, we encounter another figure who recurs in the xenoglyphs found across the planet: the creator/destroyer who resolves into just "the destroyer," a figure that seems to exist separately in the backstory of the sentient alien race who left these steles behind but begs to be imported into Selene's story as a reference to her mother, Theia. The first-person speaker of the xenoglpyh, too, appears to be Selene, enticing the player to reevaluate the connection between Selene and Atropos.

So far, I have given a sampling of the mythological references present in the game, all of which connect deeply to the game's themes and serve to heighten the tension between the seemingly completely foreign world of Atropos and its deep connection to Selene and her past. In the remaining time I have, I want to explore how the mythological elements of the text influence how players approach the game's narrative. The game presents data about Selene and Atropos in fragments and in a somewhat random order, encouraging players to combine elements and regularly adapt their understanding in light of new information. Like the gameplay itself, the player's process of creating a coherent narrative is iterative in a mythopoetic process.

The game's central mysteries—who is Selene? Why is she stuck in this cycle? What is Atropos? What happened to its sentient inhabitants?—all have no clear answers. No grand reveal

awaits players who defeat the game's final boss. In fact, even more fragmentary information about Selene's past is all that awaits players who play beyond the game's "main story" (to use a common, but not entirely appropriate term). Players, then, are enticed to create their own narratives, using the information that they happen to find, rather than wait for some totalizing, complete reveal. The iterative gameplay loop encourages players to look for new fragmentary bits of data to puzzle over and incorporate, creating an ever-changing narrative that is unique to their own experience of the game.

We can imagine a player who has an affinity for Greek myth, and so uses the game's engagement with it a good deal in building out their version of the story. Our putative player might piece together the game's story in this way: Selene participated in a cycle of violence with her abusive mother, Theia, and (SERIOUS SPOILER) purposefully recreated a car accident that killed her and her son, Helios. For her wrongdoing, she is punished on Atropos, an instantiation of the Greek underworld, where she strives endlessly to escape but can only ever accomplish returning to her eternal torment.

(SLIDE) Under this reading, the details of the world of Atropos are only a reflection of Selene's own mind, designed to torment her. We can read the landscape of the planet, with its overgrown forests, plunging waters, and rock formations eerily reminiscent of fractured human spines, as entwined with Selene's violent past with her mother and child. (SLIDE) The persistent message at the start of each journey: "HELIOS ABANDONED" is a condensed reminder of the horrific wrongs for which Selene is eternally punished. The planet's ancient history of sentient aliens who warred against a faction called the "severed" becomes a metaphor for the generational violence of Selene's life. Even the very fact that Selene is an astronaut can be understood as a part of the punishment since a good deal of the fragmentary data suggest that her attempts to

become an ASTRA scout were unsuccessful.

Myth, then, *could* be integral to a player's interpretation of the game, rather than simply a thematic recurrence. This interpretation, which is especially informed by the recurrent references to Greek myth, has satisfying elements; it resolves several apparent discrepancies that contribute to the game's mystery, and it provides a coherent and comprehensible (if difficult to accept) reading of the game's main character as eternally punished for unimaginable horrors. At the same time, it necessarily flattens other story elements by making them simply a side effect of Selene's complicated psychology. *Every* reading of the game will necessarily have such compromises.

Myth's more important function, though, is as a primer for players to think in mythological ways about Selene's story; no matter the particulars of how a player answers the game's central questions. Even if a player were to reduce the recurrent emphasis on myth, making it the side effect of Selene's past, its nagging presence encourages them to think in broadly mythological terms about the game's story and to create a series of flexible, shifting narratives through their iterative experience with the game.

In the last couple minutes of my time, I'd like to suggest that while this use of myth is both central and highly visible in *Returnal*, it is not unique to the game. Rogue-like games, where the gameplay loop is inherently iterative, are especially well-suited for employing player mythopoesis. Even in games that have more traditional stories, in which there is a clear ending that players consider canon, the nature of the iterative gameplay loop it takes to get there permits (or perhaps even encourages) players to understand the narrative journey of the game in terms of their own specific playthrough.

(SLIDE) Two other rogue-likes, Supergiant's *Hades* and Cellar Door Games' *Rogue Legacy*

2, engage in mythological reception to varying degrees. While both of these games have much more stable stories than *Returnal* (with things like endings!), the iterative gameplay loop encourages players to map those stable plot points on their own personal experience of playing the game. The major story moments remain the same across players, but the narrative of those events, built out from the specific player experience, varies infinitely. Each game has an internal mechanism to help capture that variance; in Hades, there are records of the player's escape attempts that capture the path taken to the game's "ending" and in *Rogue Legacy 2* a series of character portraits memorialize the player's history of attempts.

Rogue-like games, because of their core mechanic of cyclical gameplay, have a unique opportunity to engage players in the mythopoetic process. We have seen how *Returnal* uses myth not only for thematic resonance but as a primer to help players recognize their own role in creating combinatorial, flexible, and highly personalized narratives.

Thank you.