

### *Hades*

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*Hades*. Nintendo Switch version, Supergiant Games, 2020.

*Hades* is a rogue-like dungeon crawler from developer Supergiant Games in which the player takes on the role of Zagreus, son of the titular Hades. The plot centers around Zagreus' attempts to escape the underworld after learning that he had hitherto-unknown family—the Olympian gods—on Mount Olympus eager to meet him. Zagreus' discovery of this extended family, as well as the realization that his true parentage had been concealed from him for his whole life, motivate these escape attempts and drive the story forward, while also allowing for strong character development via conversations between Zagreus and the other residents of the underworld.



There is not much I can say about *Hades* as a game that hasn't already been said; critically, it has been incredibly well-received for its art direction, gameplay, music, vocal performances, and writing. While none of this is new for Supergiant Games, all four of whose games have been critically acclaimed, *Hades* broke into the mainstream in a way that the others did not. One underappreciated aspect of this game, however, and one which I believe contributed to its success in a more significant way than it gets credit for, is its incorporation of the ancient Greek mythology which underlies its setting. *Hades*' success as a work of classical reception—the way it modernizes the setting and characters, while simultaneously respecting the source material—deserves the same degree of notoriety as its technical successes.

A problem that any work of classical reception has to deal with is balancing the antiquity of the subject matter against the modernity of its audience. Much classical reception has fallen prey to embracing its antiquity too tightly and feeling, so to speak, dusty, though this has certainly been less of a problem in recent decades. *Hades*, falling in line with this progress, tells a story that feels acutely modern without ever deviating too far from the ancient materials that define its setting. Dionysus, for instance, remains the god of wine and revelry, holding the staff (specifically, the *thyrsus*) which was his symbol in antiquity, but he has become something of a Tommy Chong figure, calling Zagreus “Zag, man,” and encouraging him to hurry to Olympus so they can party together. *Hades* preserves the core character of each figure as traditionally conceived, including the various (and at times complicated) interpersonal dynamics among them all, but makes the whole ensemble feel more akin to that of a modern sitcom than the serious drama that adaptations of antiquity often become.

The lighthearted attitude of these interactions, though, does not prevent *Hades* from including more esoteric references to ancient material. Early in the game, Zagreus asks Hypnos, the divine embodiment of sleep, to put everybody in the house of Hades into a magical slumber so that he can sneak into his father's office—no background knowledge is needed to understand what is going on, and Zagreus' decision to ask Hypnos for sleep-related help is an obvious one. Those more familiar with the ancient canon, though, will see here an allusion to the fourteenth book of the *Iliad*, in which Hera asks Hypnos to put Zeus to sleep, so that she can sneak behind his back and aid the Greeks in their struggles against the Trojans. *Hades* is full of such references that, while they are not integral to an understanding of the game's plot and as such will not detract from the experience of those who don't catch them, nonetheless allow those with some familiarity with ancient mythology to see how much work the writers put into creating a faithful representation of the classical material.

In addition to its deep engagement with the ancient literary sources, *Hades* demonstrates a knowledge of contemporary trends in classical scholarship as well. The modern push against Eurocentrism in academic discussions of the ancient Mediterranean, the most well-known example of which might be Bernal's *Black Athena* (see McCoskey 2018 for discussion of the legacy of this work), is reflected in the varied skin tones of the game's characters. This includes that of Athena, whose skin, alongside that of her half-brother Ares, is darker than that of any of the game's other characters and may be a direct homage to *Black Athena* and its impact on modern discussions of race in antiquity.

There is, for me, one respect in which *Hades* as a work of reception missed the mark, however, and that is the game's ending. Early on, Zagreus learns that his mother is in fact Persephone, who left the underworld for unknown reasons and never returned. As the plot advances, the circumstances surrounding Persephone's initial departure from Olympus and her eventual withdrawal to the underworld are made clear, and they deviate from the traditional telling of her story. *Hades* exists in a modern environment in which several works of classical reception, such as Madeline Miller's *Circe*, reclaim agency for the many women of ancient mythology who in the original versions of the stories had very little (see Scott 2019 for an overview of the topic); Persephone's departure from Olympus, which in the ancient accounts was due entirely to her abduction by Hades, is made into her own decision in *Hades*. Her motivation for doing so, though, is placed partly on the shoulders of her mother, Demeter, for being too controlling of her daughter. While the reclamation of Persephone's agency is admirable, the reassignment of blame from her male abductor to another woman is disappointing. Up to this point in the game, the explicit alterations of traditional narrative and visual representations had been quite progressive. What a disappointment it was, then, to reach the conclusion to the mystery of Persephone's fate, only to learn that her male captor, who is traditionally held responsible for her disappearance, had been supplanted, in what could be read as a decidedly anti-feminist turn, by another woman in Demeter.

The absolution of Persephone's traditional, male captor and his replacement with Demeter was disappointing in its own right, but the accompanying transformation in Demeter's attitude toward Persephone's disappearance compounded the issue. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, she immediately senses that something has gone awry with her daughter, scours the earth for nine straight days in search of her, and spends years wandering the earth in sorrow in the guise of an old woman, neglecting her duties to the earth and its harvests and nearly destroying the human race as a result. When mother and daughter are finally joyously reunited, Demeter shudders in terror at the realization that Hades has bound Persephone to spend one third of the year in the underworld for the rest of time, though yields to its necessity. In *Hades*, however, Demeter reacts with no more than idle curiosity when she learns of her daughter's fate. Persephone's disappearance is said to have turned her cold and vengeful, rather than grief-stricken; humanity is, like in the *Hymn*, almost wiped out as a result of her actions, but here it is retaliation for humanity's perceived culpability, rather than grief, that drives her. After learning that Persephone is alive and well, it is Demeter who proposes that her daughter split her time between dwelling in the underworld and on Olympus, rather than begrudgingly accepting her unavoidable fate. The loving and heartbroken Demeter has been sacrificed and replaced with a cold spirit of vengeance, all in service of elevating Persephone; one is left wondering why both women could not have emerged from the narrative in a better place than their traditional portrayals would have them.

All in all, *Hades* is an outstanding example of a work of classical reception. It modernizes the material, providing a charming and accessible point of entry into the world of classical mythology, but never deviates too far from the source material. It treats its plot no more seriously than it needs to and, but for one misstep, seamlessly incorporates present-day ideas about classical antiquity. The game is at moments deeply learned, but that erudition never becomes burdensome or obtrusive. This combination of characteristics makes it an extremely appealing prospect for use as an educational tool—the amount of information that finds its way into Zagreus' conversations with the game's other characters, which are legitimately enjoyable in their own right, is considerable. The fact that this educational material is presented over the course of the standard gameplay (unlike something like the Discovery Tour mode in some of the more recent *Assassin's Creed* games, which disposes of all gameplay and allows the player to walk through game's setting as if in a museum) creates a situation in which an instructor might feel like they are 'tricking students into learning.' With *Hades*, Supergiant Games has found an extremely satisfying balance between being informative and entertaining.

## References

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