

# ***Cyber Discipline: How Roguelite Games Engage Players - A Perspective from Foucault's Discipline and Punish***

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**Abstract:** As an emerging game genre, Roguelite games rapidly gain a foothold in the market. This paper analyzes the relationship between the game and the player, using Foucault's theory to analyze the Roguelite game masterpiece Hades. In the process of playing the game, the game constitutes a discipline for the player. The characteristics of Roguelite games, such as permanent death and randomness, attract the player to play the game repeatedly to defeat the enemy and avoid defeat. At the same time, the narrative characteristics of Roguelite games show fragmentation and layer advancement, attracting the player to play the game continuously to obtain more information. Overall, Roguelite games discipline players to invest more time in the game, contributing to the genre's success.

**Keywords:** roguelite, hades, punish, discipline

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, a new category of games has emerged on the gaming platform Steam, Roguelike, and several new categories, such as Act Roguelike and Roguelite. Among them, Roguelite is very popular among players. As a category of RPGs, Roguelite does not need a good plot or excellent characterization to attract players like other games in the same general category. The best-selling Roguelite games on Steam China are Dungeons & Dragons, Dead Cells, and Hades, ranked 1, 2, and 4 on the best-selling Roguelite list.

It is necessary to briefly introduce Roguelite, a game developed in the 1980s on UNIX by Michael Toy and Glenn Wichman. These two software engineers were very popular with many players at the time. Subsequently, developers and players called games that played similarly to Rogues, and in 2008 the International Roguelike Development Conference proposed the "Berlin Interpretation", which clearly defined Roguelike games. A game can be considered a Roguelike if it meets the following criteria [1] random generated environments, permadeath, turn-based, non-modal, complexity, Hack and slash, exploration and discovery [2]. None of the most iconic Roguelite games are turn-based, but they all meet the rest of the criteria.

Hades is a highly iconic Roguelite game. Released in 2019, Hades collected awards, including the Hugo Award for Best Video Game and IGN Game of the Year 2020. It is worth noting that as an indie game, Hades beat out a series of traditional significant RPGs in the selection process. The success of Hades is no coincidence, as players generally agree that Hades excels as a Roguelite game, and this article will use Hades as a case study.

Hades draws on the ancient Greek myth and plays Sisyphus, featuring Zagreus, the son of Hades, and Persephone, the underworld queen. At the start of the game, Zagreus aims to kill his way out of Hell, find his mother, and discover the truth about Persephone's departure from Hell. On his way, Zagreus is stopped by the guards of Hell - for his actions are undoubtedly an affront to the authority of his father Hades - and accordingly, Zagreus receives the blessing of his relatives on Mount Olympus, which strengthens his powers [3].

Hades will be used as a case study in the research. Meanwhile, this research will attempt to look at Foucault's book "Discipline and Punish" to provide a new way of thinking about and understanding Roguelite and to explore the reasons for its popularity. Foucault examines three ways in which power has operated throughout history, with a focus on how modern mechanisms of power discipline individuals; Foucault suggests that power works not simply to suppress, exclude or deny but to create disciplined individuals. This paper will draw on theories of discipline to explore the reasons for the popularity of the game genre, starting with the field of Roguelite games on gamers [4].

## **2. Features of the Game Hades**

### **2.1. Permadeath and "Immortality" Subtitle**

In the previous descriptions of Roguelite games, permadeath is a crucial feature. Each death signifies the loss of all resources and abilities, starting from the very beginning. Zagreus' hellish adventure is no different, as he encounters various powerful enemies along the way, including the three sisters of Nemesis, the mythical Hydra, the companionship of Theseus and the Minotaur, and eventually comes face to face with his father, Hades. The battle is fraught with danger and uncertainty, and the slightest misstep will see Zagreus knocked into the River Styx by his opponents and returned to the palace of Hades.

Each time he is knocked into the River Styx, he loses his escape, and Zagreus loses all his divine blessings, weapon enhancements, and essential attribute boosts. All previous level progress is also lost. This is the presentation of the permadeath element in Roguelite games. Of course, Zagreus does not renounce all items, resources used to improve goodwill with NPC, and some props that have enhancements are not lost. This is a modification of the permadeath rule, where failure gives the player a penalty but does not leave them with anything.

### **2.2. Narrative: Fragmentation and Layered Progression**

The best players may be able to escape the game on their first go, defeating Hades and meeting Persephone, who lives in Athens. However, it's impossible to present the whole thing in one pass, and thanks to the curse, Zagreus will also return to the River Styx shortly after meeting his mother and start the adventure again. Each experience is extremely limited in the information it can give the player. The player must continually kill their way out of the underworld to uncover more information.

Here Hades can be compared to traditional RPGs to show how different it is in terms of narrative. In the case of *The Last of Us*, for example, the focus of this linear RPG is on the narrative. The player only has to play the game once in its entirety to get the overall plot of the game, which is Joel's adventure across the entire United States with the fungus-infected but not mutated young girl Ellie, who eventually gives up saving the world to leave Ellie behind. Unlike in *Hades*, where Zagreus defeats his father Hades and briefly meets his mother on the first pass, meaningful information about the reasons for his mother's departure and the past of the Olympian gods and goddesses of the underworld is not provided to the player in this one pass.

To get a sense of the game's worldview, the player must also play the game consistently. Blocking background information on the game's monsters is conditional on killing a certain number of such anomalies. And in obtaining the blessings of the gods, Zagreus' conversations with his relatives vary, with each conversation potentially adding more information to the player - provided that the player needs to keep playing the game.

With multiple escapes, the game's plot progresses. After ten passes, Zagreus will pick up his mother and return her to the underworld. The motive for the flight then also becomes to help his father test the security of the underworld. Zagreus will then discover the rift between his father and the gods and try his best to bridge it. Although the nature and content of the game do not change, the plot will cascade forward as the player keeps escaping.

### **2.3. Randomness**

The levels in Roguelite games are unlikely to remain static, and the next room Zagreus enters is not fixed during repeated playthroughs. New rooms have different types of monsters, terrain, mechanisms, and rewards, and there is a slight chance that Zagreus will encounter Sisyphus, Orpheus, or Karon, the ferryman of the River Styx, who sells various goods. In addition, the rewards in each room are random, with Zagreus being rewarded for clearing a space of monsters, perhaps with the blessing of the gods (there are nine Olympian gods in the game who assist Zagreus), an enhancement to his weapon form, or an item to strengthen his attributes.

But the game is not entirely random; the bosses at the bottom of each significant level are fixed, and these bosses require a certain amount of practice and trial and error to defeat them successfully. These fixed bosses are placed outside of the randomness of the game, and this is what the player has a trail of gameplay to follow.

## **3. Theoretical Analysis**

### **3.1. "Player-Incarnation" Relationships**

The player participates in the game by taking on the role of the game's protagonist through avatars. The player has a dual function: on the one hand, the player and the character, their avatar, are fused, and both perform consistent actions; on the other hand, the activities of the avatar are controlled by the player, who is the controller of the puppet on a string. In other words, the player is both the manipulator and the manipulated in this set of "player-incarnation" relationships. At the same time, the player observes their own (avatar's) activities in the play space through the computer screen [5].

### **3.2. Watching and Being Watched**

At this point, Foucault's "panopticism" is introduced to aid our analysis. In the principle of the panopticon of Bentham, the watcher, looking around from the watchtower at the center of the circular building, can observe the various activities of the prisoners in the cell. Still, the prisoners are only the objects to be probed, not the subjects to be communicated. The player's perspective remains the same, no matter what the character does. The watcher in a panopticon focuses on a particular room, just as the player focuses on the screen to manipulate the surface. The human gaze has the power to construct. The screen the player is facing acts as a monitor at this point [6].

Coincidentally, the main stages in *Dead Cells* and *Hades* are all portrayed as prison cells. *Dead Cells* features a protagonist named "The Beheaded" who is constantly resurrected in his cell, and *Hades*' Hell is a giant prison for the dead. Both two settings indicate the presence of power mechanisms in the game.

### 3.3. Narrative Perspective

From a narrative perspective, the narrative device of Hades is not the linear time narrative that traditional RPGs are used to. As already mentioned, a single playthrough does not give the player a complete picture of the story; it takes at least 20 to 30 playthroughs before the player has a general grasp of the story presented in the game. During the game, the player goes through a continuous cycle of “escape - fight - back to the beginning - escape again”, with the beginning and end of each stage of the game being fixed. Still, the course of the game and the information received vary slightly. The new information received complements the storyline of the previous stage and leaves the player in suspense, prompting them to embark on another adventure.

In contrast, traditional RPGs are non-repeatable. The player cannot return to a previous area in a short period and experience the same storyline again (unless they restart the game). Hades allows the player to reach all areas of the game repeatedly in a relatively short period while gaining new information during somewhat repetitive exploration and combat. For example, the dialogue between Zeus and Zagreus will differ when Zeus’ blessing is chosen multiple times. At the same time, Zeus will also give Zagreus more information about Hades, the underworld king, to enrich the player’s understanding of the game’s plot.

Overall, suppose a traditional RPG is a one-way road. In that case, Roguelite’s narrative is more like a labyrinth with limited entrances and exits but multiple routes inside, where each journey differs from the previous one and offers new rewards and discoveries [7].

In this sense, the game cedes some of the power of narrative to the player. The player is both the experiencer and the narrator of the game’s plot, while at the same time gaining a degree of power over the narrative itself. In contrast to traditional linear RPGs, the plot of a Roguelite game is co-created by the producer and the player.

### 3.4. Theory of Discipline

There is a ‘conscious and continuous state of visibility in the prisoners in the panopticon so that the power mechanism works on these visible prisoners and disciplines them. The two prisons in the two games also present mechanisms of power, but the means of energy are not discipline or control. The emphasis on Hack and slash, exploration, and discovery in Roguelite games dictates that violence and killing are bound to occur. But these elements, which Foucault sees as part of the punitive dimension of the classical period, do not mean that discipline does not exist; the discipline in the game is directed at the player, the manipulator of the game’s characters, and this discipline is accomplished through an avatar that is connected to the player. Because of this connection, the player receives a variety of feedback from the character they are manipulating, including attacking, dodging, being attacked, killing, and being killed. The mechanics of Roguelite games dictate a particular discipline from which the player is disciplined.

Unlike other RPGs that have an archive/read-access function, the Permadeath setting makes the player careful to face the enemies that appear, and if he misses, the protagonist returns to the camp he was in at the very beginning of the game and loses all the items, skills and money he was carrying, starting a new adventure with nothing again. Good, or relatively fair, Roguelite makes the player realize that death is his fault and that his inexperience, carelessness, or, more commonly, overconfidence has led him to make the wrong choices that have led to such a tragic outcome. A Permadeath leaves a lasting impression on the player, helping him gain experience and increase his chances of success in the next game. The mechanic of permadeath here becomes a form of punishment within the discipline of Roguelite gameplay, with the ashes of the incarnation forcing the player to reflect and avoid repeating the same mistakes in the next adventure. The body of the “remotely present” player is disciplined in failure after failure[8].

If all the game's content were fixed, players would need to repeat the exercises by spending a certain amount of time getting through the entire game smoothly. On the contrary, the random nature of Roguelite games complicates the situation - each time the game begins, the player and their avatar are faced with an unfamiliar world where the next weapon, the next ability, the next room, and the enemies within it are unknown. This requires the player to learn to improvise and try to go further with the available props at hand. Because of this, Roguelite games invariably set a norm for players - for players of average skill, a specific combination of weapons or abilities is a safer bet. In Hades, for example, the most appropriate blessings for bow and arrow weapons come from Dionysus, Artemis, and Aphrodite. If one can obtain a double blessing from these three gods, the protagonist's attacks will deal extremely significant damage.

This example illustrates that, given the randomly generated environments of the game's characteristics, paring combinations that are less difficult to manipulate and more forgiving tend to form a norm - one of the means of discipline. The particular genre that becomes the model will lead the player to take the initiative to make the relevant combinations, or even to "kill themselves" if the appropriate conditions are not met, and to continue the search in the next adventure [9,10].

#### 4. Conclusions

Through two mechanics, permadeath and randomly generated environments, players are disciplined. The Permadeath mechanic requires a significant investment of time in practice, trial and error, and time spent on multiple adventures. In contrast, randomly generated environments need the player to be skilled in various genres (to be able to conform to numerous specifications) to improvise, find the optimal solution to changing situations, and reap the great joy of success. Replay value is deeply rooted in the discipline of the player through the web of discipline woven by the logic of the game; as Foucault says of discipline: "Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)." Game discipline achieves a similar effect: it both strengthens the power of the player from the player's technical point of view and weakens it by making the player invest more time into the game.

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