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

Returnal is a rogue-like, bullet-hell, psychological horror, 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."

(SLIDE) 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 myth, then, we must contextualize the use of mythological 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.

(SLIDE) Today, I will first set out some examples of how Greek myth shows up in the *Returnal's* world. Then I will explore how the framework of mythological thinking, together with

the iterative gameplay loop, shapes the player's experience of the game. I show how classical

mythological material is infused into the player's experience of the game through oblique

references in characters' names and short texts found in the world. I argue that this material has

an active role in shaping the way that the player approaches the game's story. Players must 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.

(SLIDE) 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 finds herself back at the site of her

crashed ship and begins the process of fighting her way to the source of 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. (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 when a sentient race of aliens existed on the planet. We also learn about 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 few familiar names might pop out at you, but we encounter even more. Five of the game's six biomes culminate in fights with bosses whose names are ripped from Greek myth: Phrike, Ixion, Nemesis, Hyperion, and Ophion. (SLIDE) 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. Phrike, as the personification of Horror, invokes terror and tragedy, (SLIDE) while Ixion and Nemesis are both connected with concepts of retribution and punishment. (SLIDE) Hyperion is heavily implied in the game to be connected to Selene's father through the recurrence of a musical motif derived from Blue Öyster Cult's 1976 hit "(Don't Fear) The Reaper," which we can hear in this clip of Hyperion playing a creepy organ-like instrument. (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 that the information the game gives players about these bosses 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 since it has a specific reference to myth. It 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 themes, 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 previous 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; Play audio). In this early Scout Log, the mythological resonances are highlighted for the player but so is Selene's connection to them. (SLIDE) In the game's first-person sequences, which take place inside the crashed spaceship and in a replica of Selene's house, we find a book that appears to be one of those that Selene mentions here, called "The Abdication of Zeus". 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; play audio). In this log, Selene frames her fate in mythological terms to emphasize its eternal quality.

We learn from these logs that Selene has an affinity for Greek myth, but the world of Atropos itself, while seemingly completely detached from human life before Selene's arrival, also consistently calls back to myth.

(SLIDE) We can see this in Xenoglyphs which are epigraphical texts left behind by the planet's extinct race of sentient aliens. These *should* have no connection to Selene. Surprisingly though, players find that these texts have frequent references to myth. The xenoglyphs are presented to the player gradually, with more information revealed as more "xenoglyph ciphers" are found throughout the game world.

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. (SLIDE) The first highlights a generational conflict and has a clear connection on the specifics of Selene's life before we encounter her on Atropos. 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, which reveals Selene's influence on Atropos beyond what is logically possible.

The second, likewise, connects back to Selene, but less directly (SLIDE). The final text of this xenoglyph 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 sometimes resolves into just "the destroyer." This is a figure that seems to exist separately in the backstory of the sentient alien race who left these writings behind but begs to be imported into Selene's story as a reference to her mother, Theia. The first-person speaker of the xenoglyph, then, appears to be Selene, inviting the player to reevaluate the connection between Selene and Atropos.

(SLIDE) Keeping these receptions of myth in mind, I now want to explore how the mythological elements of the game influence how players approach its story. Players are presented fragmentary data about Selene and Atropos in a somewhat random order throughout their playthrough. They must use that data to craft an understanding of the story and regularly adapt it in light of new information. Like the gameplay itself, the player's process of creating a story is iterative.

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 or even go so far as to reach its "true ending." Players, then, are enticed to create their own narratives, using the information that they happen to find, rather than waiting 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 story in this way: Selene participated in a cycle of violence with her abusive mother, Theia, and (SERIOUS SPOILER) purposefully recreated a car accident from her childhood that killed her and her son, Helios. For this crime, 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, like Sisyphus or Ixion.

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 attempt: "HELIOS ABANDONED" is a displaced 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 that underpinned Selene's life.

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 main character. At the same time, however, 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. Even if a player were to minimize the use of myth, treating it as a 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.

To end, 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 player mythopoesis. Even in games that have more traditional stories, the mechanics used to tell that story permit (or perhaps even encourage) 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 games have much more stable stories than *Returnal* (with things like satisfying endings!), the presence of an 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 narratives of those events, built out from specific player experiences, will vary infinitely. Each game has an internal mechanism to help capture that variance; in Hades, there is a "Security Log" that provides detailed records of the player's escape attempts. 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.