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

Greek myth permeates *Returnal,* Housemarque's 2021 roguelike video game. The protagonist, astronaut Selene Vassos, repeatedly attempts to escape a hostile alien planet, called Atropos, where she has crashed landed. Whenever she dies, she awakens at the site of her crashed ship and must try again to escape the planet. In attempt after attempt, the player learns more about the strange planet and Selene's past, which have deep, inextricable, and disturbing connections to each other. What emerges is a psychological thriller in which players are confronted with using incomplete, unreliable information they receive to try to understand what Atropos is, who Selene is, and what she has done to end up there. References to Greek myth appear throughout Atropos and in the game sequences that reveal elements of Selene's past. This paper demonstrates that the fragmentary and often opaque points of contact with myth play an integral role in the game's approach to storytelling. I argue that as players encounter more mythological references, they are encouraged to engage in acts of *mythopoesis* themselves to attempt to explain the game's core mystery using the incomplete and often contradictory material with which they are presented.

I begin by surveying when and how players encounter Greek myth in *Returnal,* employing both still images and short gameplay clips. I show that the repeated, subtle references to Greek myth in the names of characters, places, and objects in the game's earliest portions prime players to notice later engagements. Beyond the references embedded in the names Selene and Atropos, players encounter myth in the name of the crashed ship, Helios, and the currency used to purchase upgrades, which are called Obolites, recalling the payment the dead must make to Charon to cross the river Styx. Eventually, players encounter mythological resonances in the

names of bosses (Phrike, Ixion, Nemesis, Hyperion, and Ophion), in audio logs left behind by other versions of Selene, and even in xenoglyphs, partially translated, epigraphical texts left behind on Atropos by an ancient, technologically advanced civilization. As players discover more of these materials, repeated references to the Titanomachy and the Greek underworld become deeply entwined with the game's narrative, highlighting both the intergenerational strife that underpins Selene's past and the unending cycle of suffering that she experiences over the course of the game.

I then explicate how a player might engage in their own process of mythopoesis to understand the game's story. Since the game resists any definitive interpretation of its central mystery, players are left to use whatever incomplete and contradictory evidence they have in order to piece together their own interpretation of the narrative in an iterative process that mirrors the game's structure. To demonstrate how this process functions, I outline one case study of how a player might engage in mythopoesis. Under this reading, Atropos *is* Tartarus, and Selene, like Tantalus or Sisyphus, is punished through a process of eternal repetition for grave misdeeds perpetrated against her mother, Theia, and son, Helios. After outlining how a player might come to this conclusion, I highlight the ways in which the game invites players to try new ways of understanding and to engage repeatedly in the mythopoetic process.

I end the paper by sketching how *Returnal's* deep engagement with myth illuminates the process of mythopoetic storytelling in the genre of roguelike games more broadly. I suggest that the inherently iterative gameplay of roguelikes lends itself to both mythological receptions, as in, for example, *Hades* (Supergiant, 2018) or *Rogue Legacy 2* (Cellar Door Games, 2022), and mythological modes of discourse as players experience and interpret the games again and again.