English 3010

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"The Rhetorical Situation" , "Terministic Screens" , "Semiotics" , and Escaping from Hell as an

Anime Boy.

In this paper I argue that in Supergiant Game's "Hades", the developers are trying to make a statement that without deliberate action and timely decisions, you will not be able to make significant progress or change within your reality. This argument closely aligns with many rhetoricians. In the first part of this paper, I will summarize three works of rhetorical theory, and then summarize Supergiant Game's "Hades" and apply the works of rhetorical theory to it.

In Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" he claims that rhetoric is only capable of being used when it is required. He proposes the idea that situations will come into being that require people to speak on them, and that there is something that happens before rhetorical discourse that sets up the *need* for Rhetorical discourse. Effectively, you can't make an omelet without eggs. The "eggs" being the situation that needs to occur, and the "omelet" being the rhetorical discourse. Bitzer also brings three "constituents" of rhetoric into play; exigence, audience, and constraints.

Exigence is the reason that rhetoric comes into existence; the "eggs" of the omelet. Exigence are things that can and cannot be fixed by Rhetoric. For example, a moral dilemma or the process by which a politician should approach an issue can be solved by rhetoric, but something like a natural disaster cannot. The Audience is anyone who can be influenced by the discourse. The willingness to act and the role of being in "the audience" is what sets it apart from any other type of discourse. Finally, there are the constraints; which are used to limit possible

responses from an opposing argument. These are effectively provided counterarguments to your claim and then rebutting them.

From each of these three constituents, we get the idea that Rhetoric is situational. It is not just historical context, nor just social content, nor just physical context. It is the combination of all of these three things plus many other things, such as interpretation, influences, and purposes of both the speaker and audience. This idea is summed up nicely in this quote from Bitzer in "The Rhetorical Situation",

> *...a work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.*(Bitzer 26)

To sum up all of Bitzer's main ideas, it's that the use of rhetoric is pragmatic, situational, and there must be a reason for Rhetoric to come into being.

The next piece we will look at is Roland Barthes - "Semiotics". Roland Barthes introduces the idea that language is arbitrary, conventional, and differential. He breaks down different terms that we use in languages; Signifier, Signified, Sign, and Symbol. A symbol is an object that represents an idea, for example a heart represents love, and the color red can mean anger or blood. A sign is a symbol which refers to something else. A great example of this is a stoplight. A signifier is the visible part of the sign (what it looks like, it's shape, text, etc.) and the signified is the meaning of the sign. So for example we can take a stoplight (sign) that has a green light showing (Signifier) and when we see that we know that it is okay to go (Signified).

It is through these different terms that Roland Barthes breaks down language and helps us understand fundamental concepts about how we as people communicate and relate to one another through our use of signs, symbols, language, and meaning.

Finally, the last piece of rhetorical theory that we will look at is Burke's "Terministic Screens". A terministic screen can be defined as - "The acknowledgement of a language system that determines an individual's perception and symbolic action in the world." (Burke 45).

Burke uses this metaphor to try and explain how different people interpret their world based on their use of symbols, meanings, and reality. Terministic screens could be created by genders, occupations, age, generations, political views, and many more other categories. Burke offers the idea that everything we say or do says something about the society that we live in, even if this is unintentional. Burke further divides language and rhetoric into three categories that defines how language Selects, Reflects, and Deflects. Language can Select by choosing to look at certain things. Language and rhetoric can Deflect by speaking on what it *isn't* speaking on. Finally, language and rhetoric can Reflect something in reality.

Burke's main ideas can be summarized in that people use special "screens" that can alter their perceptions of reality, and that language can both selectively choose to focus on and ignore certain aspects of reality and that it can choose to reflect it as well. I think both Burke and Bitzer would agree on the concept of situations coming into being that require Rhetoric. The use of that Rhetoric can be important, and can incorporate Burke's ideas of select, deflect, and reflect.

The reason that someone may use Rhetoric to try and convince or sway another person may be highly based off of that individual's terministic screens, and the arguments they use will almost certainly be influenced by them. These concepts of Burke also meld well with Roland Barthes concepts of

symbols, sign, signified, and signifiers, in the sense that by using a symbol and what that symbol means is an important reflection of reality and why people have chosen to Select that meaning for that symbol.

For this piece of the paper, I will apply the previously mentioned concepts of symbols, sign, signified, and signifiers to a popular video game known as Hades. In addition to applying Roland Barthes theories of semiotics to this game, I will incorporate how Kennith Burke's ideas of Terministic screens can be applied to this modern day artifact as well, hoping to show how rhetorical theory can apply to something as simple as a popular modern day video game. Finally, I will use Bitzer's "Rhetorical Situation" to examine the video game through the concept of rhetoric coming into being, as well as applying the synthesized ideas of each of these theories as well to examine this modern day artifact.

"Hades" by Supergiant games has sold over one million copies worldwide, and was nominated for several game of the year awards in 2020. This popular isometric rogue-like video game has you play as Zagreus, the son of Hades and the prince of Hell. You've had enough of being trapped in the underworld and have decided to hack and slash your way through the layers of hell to try and reach the surface world and discover the mysteries that everyone in the House of Hades has been hiding from you. You are guaranteed to die, being slain by the games hundreds of different enemies, unique bosses, or in the end by your father - Hades himself. Even when you defeat your father, you only have a few fleeting moments to learn more about the mysteries of the surface world, before the River Styx claims your soul and drags you back down to the underworld to begin the fight all over again. But luckily, you're not alone. Throughout your journey you gain assistance from the Olympian gods who have learned of your existence and want to do their best to help you reach the surface world. Along the way you'll also meet

notable Greek heroes like Achilles, Orpheus, Eurydice, Sisyphus, and many more. All of these heroes help you out along your journey, as you slowly unravel the mysteries of your birth and get stronger and stronger along the way.

First, we'll apply Semiotics to Hades. Whenever a "boon" appears in the game from a specific god, you will see a symbol associated with them appear. These symbols make sense for the gods they are referring to - a thunderbolt for Zeus, a trident for Poseidon, a heart for Aphrodite, a goblet of wine for Dionysus, a bow and arrow for Artemis, etc. The symbols are common depictions of things that those gods have influence over, or a recognizable aspect of that god. Poseidon is almost always depicted with his trident, and Artemis with her bow and arrow.

Because these specific symbols directly refer to the gods who offer them, they are actually Signs. These Signs can be recognized by their color and the symbol within, which is unique to each god, this is the signifier, the visible part of the power up. The blue trident, the yellow lightning bolt, the pink heart, etc. The signified of these symbols is pretty obvious; they each mean that you are going to get a power up from that specific god. This is really amazing how we can take these ideas and apply them to something as simple as power ups in a video game.

We also get lots of these different concepts throughout the game, with the idea of how the game chooses to present these things. Tartarus is depicted with green flames, dark crumbling walls, and is like a maze of endless stone The enemies that are here are mostly ghosts and skeletons. Asphodel has lava everywhere, it is black and charged and has lots of enemies that like to throw bombs or shoot projectiles to try and hit you into the lava. Elysium by far is the most pleasant of all the realms as it has beautiful hues of blue, green, and turquoise, and the enemies here are near-immortal heroes who will revive if you don't slay them before they do.

Finally, the most interesting aesthetic choice of the game is the surface, pure snowy white. It's a complete break from the intense colors and harsh tones of the underworld and truly makes you feel like you are in an entirely different realm. The way that the directors of the game choose to have these harsh colors and then just a sudden absence of them shows how they are selecting what they want to have emphasized in each of these realms. The use of pure white snow on the surface world is a great example of deflecting. As the pure snowy white and the lack of intense colors shows what the surface world is *not.* It isn't the green flames of Tartarus, or the bright orange magma of Asphodel, or the vibrant blues and greens of Elysium it's just… snow.

Taking Bitzer and Burke's concepts into consideration, the interplay of "The Rhetorical Situation", and "Terministic Screens" has a perfect example in Hades. With the idea of The Rhetorical Situation, by just playing the game and trying to escape the underworld as Zagreus, you are creating unrest in the underworld. Suddenly the Furies are forced to try and stop you, and you'll have to cut through them each time. Hades paperwork begins to build up more and more as you make the souls of the underworld depart each time you cut through its realms.

You are also able to give certain characters bottles of Nectar and Ambrosia to form a deeper bond with them. Sometimes, you are incapable of increasing your relationship with a character until a specific situation occurs. A great example of this is Zagreus and Magaera, the first of the furies. It is clear at the beginning of the game that there was a harsh breakup between the two of them, but as Zagreus continually goes out of his way to reach the surface, he has to fight through her each time. Eventually she mentions that she is only trying to stop him because she has to, and eventually with enough conversations with her you are able to rekindle the relationship that you once had with her. This works with the idea of a rhetorical situation needing to be something that is pragmatic. There has to be a reason for it to come into being. You can't

just do this all at once, and you have to wait, step by careful step each time to try and progress your relationships.

Finally, Hades has a great example of terministic screens. Zagreus in the game is very frustrated that nobody will tell him what is going on. He kind of has the Terministic Screen of a rebellious teenager or twenty-year-old. His father, Hades, very clearly has a different viewpoint than him. Being much older and lord of the underworld, he constantly berates Zagreus, teasing him and making jabs at him every time he walks out of the River Styx and informing him about how futile his attempts to escape are. Other characters like Magaera the Fury or Thanatos, the god of death are frustrated and upset that Zagreus would try to escape. He has had relationships with both of them in the past, and they are upset that he would try and leave them. And yet there are others who want to help him like Achilles, Sisyphus, and Orpheus.

Probably one of the most interesting uses of Terministic Screens in Hades is through Zagreus' mother, Nyx - the goddess of Night. Nyx decides to keep the truth hidden from Zagreus, and only through repeated attempts to escape does Zagreus learn that Nyx isn't even his mother, that he is actually the son of Persephone instead, the goddess of the harvest that has escaped from the underworld. Nyx hid this from Zagreus because she knew that by discovering who his true mother was, it may upset the balance of both the underworld and Olympus. There is clearly unrest throughout all the characters in the Underworld when Zagreus attempts to escape, but if the Olympian gods found out that Persephone was on the surface there would likely be war between all of them. Despite knowing all of this, Nyx's love for Zagreus made her inform the Olympians about Zagreus' existence. Even though by doing this she might strike all-out war, she couldn't bear to hide the truth from her adopted son anymore.

This relates to the idea of The Rhetorical Situation, where the situation needs to present itself for action to occur. Nyx made the choice to inform the Olympian gods because she saw how much Zagreus was struggling with everyone keeping secrets from him all the time.

A major theme that occurs throughout Hades is that of broken relationships being mended. There is the relationship between Zagreus, Megaera, and Thanatos that has been damaged by Zagreus trying to leave the underworld, and his previous partners feeling jaded by his attempts to leave them and everything they had together behind.

There is also the broken relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. Achilles made the decision to leave his partner, and consigned his life to Tartarus to become an eternal servant of Hades so that he could help train Zagreus in the ways of weapons and combat, so that he could better fight his way out of the underworld when the time came. When Zagreus makes it up through Elysium, Patroclus has sunken into a deep depression that is hard to come out of, that of a lover leaving you. This same type of relationship is repeated through Orpheus and Eurydice - his muse's relationship as well. The tale of Orpheus and Eurydice is well known. Eurydice takes the role of a spurned lover who is trying to move on from a past jerk relationship, and Orpheus has fallen into deep sorrow from the loss of his muse and the horrible mistake that he made.

It is through Zagreus' actions, and his attempts to send messages through the different afterlives that these situations change, relating to the previously mentioned idea of the situation needing a call for action for action to occur. If Zagreus hadn't done anything in these situations, these lovers would grow farther and farther apart, and beautiful, loving relationships would be horribly damaged and forgotten.

Supergiant Games tells a beautiful tale with its use of idea's like terministic screens and rhetorical situations coming into being. Rhetoric is something that very much exists in the real

world, so the way that the developers were able to create such a deep and moving story that incorporates so many different ideas of rhetoric within it is fascinating and powerful. Clearly something that couldn't be done in real life with stories of eternally spurned lovers and awaiting reconciliation across ages and ages in the afterlife, and these are not the situations where rhetoric will normally occur, but the developers used this in such a deep and moving way to tell such emotionally charged stories.

Works Cited

1. Barthes-Elements of Semiology

2. Bitzer-The Rhetorical Situation

3. Burke- Terministic Screens