

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Stray Gods: The Roleplaying Musical

Platform: PC, PS4 & PS5, Xbox Series X & S, Nintendo Switch

Genre: Visual Novel, Interactive Musical

Release Date: August 9, 2023

Developer: Summerfall Studios

Publisher: Humble Games

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: David Gaider

Overview

*“Tell me about a complicated man.
Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost”*

Thus begins the classical tale of The Odyssey and its titular Greek hero. Stray Gods chooses to follow in this tradition, evoking the muse and the stormy sea the hero wandered. In an abandoned theatre, a band named Edge of Elysium hosts a series of lackluster auditions until all its members decide to head home, save one. Alone, Grace is left with her thoughts.

*“Like a boat, lost at sea
With no sails, not a breeze
I am drifting cold waters, no star to be seen”*

Unbeknownst to her, her song draws the attention of the muse Calliope, who coaxes her into a duet. Calliope’s empathy brings a ray of hope, but it doesn’t last long before the muse shows up at her doorstep later that night on the verge of death. Right before passing, she transfers her eidolon, containing her soul and essence as a god, to Grace. Left with no clue what just happened, Grace is whisked away to Olympus shortly thereafter where she’s judged by a Chorus of gods (now referred to as Idols) and sentenced to execution for Calliope’s murder.

A strange phenomenon occurs. While delivering her sentence, the goddess Athena, the head of the Chorus, starts to sing. She’s joined by two others as Grace’s newfound powers act without her knowledge. As the song grows in intensity, it overwhelms her until it’s interrupted by the god of music, Apollo. The opening gives her the chance to demand a trial, which the Chorus reluctantly grants. Now, Grace has a week to find the true culprit and prove her innocence.

Characters

- **Grace** – The protagonist, a young woman trying to find her place in life. Lost and dissatisfied, she’s inspired by the muse Calliope, represented in-game by a choice given to the player between three personalities to embody. This personality will be expanded as the player makes choices throughout the game, in both song and dialogue. As Grace is thrown into a new world, different sides of her character are revealed as the player builds her values and opinions. All of this culminates in the new future she devises for Olympus.

Her character borrows traits from both protagonists of *The Odyssey*, Telemachus and Odysseus. Grace starts off in the same position as Telemachus where both are stifled by helplessness, and both must mature and self-actualize from their trials. As she embarks on her journey, she resembles Odysseus, the master trickster. As a muse, Grace relies on the songs she inspires to gain the confidence of others. The player chooses different responses for each situation, mimicking the idea of Grace creating new personas.

- **Calliope** – The last muse. Calliope has long been estranged from her brethren due to her many disagreements with Olympus’ rules and stifling way of life. In actuality, on the night she met Grace, Calliope was equally at a crossroads in life, something she hints at in their duet: “Though I’m about to wreck, you have your life ahead of you” – likening herself to a ship heading to its doom. Until Grace inspired her, she feared dying alone and with her wishes unresolved. Passing her eidolon meant entrusting Grace to fulfill those dreams of a better future for the gods.

In ancient Greece, the muses were revered as the divine source of creative inspiration. Even classical poems were seen in the context of a muse speaking through the medium of the poet. Calliope’s role in the narrative of *Stray Gods*, then, seems a fitting homage to her role as the leader and muse of epic poetry. In the context of the game, however, what Calliope inspires most is change. With her death, Olympus can no longer prevent her wishes from coming to fruition.

- **Freddie** – Grace’s best friend and bandmate. Freddie is the player’s anchor to the mortal world. A supportive companion throughout their journey, she provides a contrast to the gods and their web of grudges and history. Freddie is open, enthusiastic, and content with her place in life. She grounds the narrative in a sense of reality, calling out the absurdity of the gods and parts of the narrative structure, such as when the god Pan appears offering to embody the wise mentor archetype. However, she’s also an essential source of information for players who lack knowledge of the real-world myths of the Greek Gods.

Her supportive narrative and gameplay roles encourage player attachment. They grow used to her presence in Grace’s journey. When Freddie’s attempt to protect Grace results in her own death, the player’s sense of safety is ripped away. With effort, Grace can find a way to resurrect her by passing on the eidolon. If she does, Freddie will become the new muse, signifying a rebirth and another step away from the pantheon’s long-held traditions.

- **Pan** – A satyr and trickster god, Grace’s ally. He first appears in her apartment after meeting the Chorus and offers his guidance. He introduces the player to the game’s choose-your-own-adventure style musical numbers, while further introducing Grace to the world of the Idols. His song serves as a tutorial and “I want” song for Grace by solidifying her response to her new situation and defining her convictions. It presents three clear paths attached to the different persona types – Grace can choose to follow his advice, stick with Freddie, or carve out her own path.

Pan is an elusive figure, much like his mythology. He’s an old god of the wild, though he seems constrained to the rooftop gardens of Olympus these days. He trades in information and favors – willing favors, according to him, and his gifts – as Freddie aptly warns – tend to come with strings attached. This results in a back-and-forth exchange between him and Grace that seems to be helping her progress but could also be toying with her for his own gains. However, despite their differences, he is genuinely remorseful when Freddie dies or when Grace feels hurt by his actions. However much the player decides to trust him can change their opinion of him fairly drastically.

Underneath all the secrecy, Pan cares about the state of Olympus. He agrees with Calliope’s ideals, though he takes a totally different approach. He builds up connections among the gods, seeking to change Olympus from the inside. When Grace shares Apollo’s prophecy with him, he’s delighted at the prospect of the Idols changing, a completely different interpretation from the other gods. He brings a fresh perspective, unafraid of the past.

- **Apollo** – The god of music and prophecy, and a reluctant ally to Grace. Despite being a member of the Chorus governing Olympus, he is reclusive and nihilistic. He neglects himself and his home, resembling a vagrant next to the polished appearances of the other gods. He hasn’t sung in years and refuses to look into the future. His reasoning is that someone’s future can only be changed while they’re unaware – knowing the future means it’s set in stone, and he can’t shake the idea that his prophecies are more curses than anything. Grace’s first test of her powers is convincing him to act; first by joining her in song, and then by helping her solve Calliope’s murder.

Apollo is characterized by grief. He is very self-aware of the role prophecies play in classical stories foretelling the hero’s doom. He tends to speak of the people he’s lost – the other muses, his children from ancient Greece, and his sister Artemis. Traditionally, Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, is associated with wild nature where Apollo is associated with civilization and culture. The devastation of human technology is implied to have triggered her disappearance, another reason for Apollo to feel cursed by his powers. As a result, he has totally rejected every aspect of his godhood.

The irony in his solution is that it has driven away one of the few people left who understand him. By the time of Calliope’s death, they’d been estranged for years. Apollo was sedentary, clinging to familiarity, and Calliope wanted to rush ahead. She eventually left him behind. As the god of music, Apollo leads the muses, but the last time he

revealed a prophecy, it said the idols couldn't continue so long as the last muse lived. This was the trigger for Calliope's death, and now it threatens Grace. This makes his character more interesting on subsequent playthroughs, as he knows exactly who killed Calliope but can't reveal it to Grace for fear of dooming her to the same fate. His comments and subtle guidance thus carry more weight.

- **Persephone** – The former queen of the Underworld, an antagonist-turned-ally. Persephone is the Chorus member most in favor of Grace's execution, but is eventually convinced to help her find the true culprit. Jaded and resentful of the Olympians, she is now a shadowy figure feared even amongst gods, Calliope having been her only friend. When Apollo's information leads to Persephone's nightclub, she provides Grace's first real challenge. Grace can respond by going head-to-head against her in song, winning the audience over, or diffusing the situation with compassion. Regardless, this would be the first step in drawing Persephone out of a single-minded focus on past wrongs.

This depiction of Persephone is heavily inspired by her worship in ancient Greece. Persephone was one of the more feared and mysterious gods, even above Hades. Having been trapped in an abusive marriage for centuries while Olympus refused to help, fearing war, and then losing the throne as punishment for killing Hades, she understandably feels abandoned by her brethren. Yet, for all the power she has since gained, she is still constrained within the pantheon and its rules. The player can glean a pattern in which Persephone is reined in whenever she becomes too prominent for Olympus to be comfortable. Deep down, she refuses to confront the hurt she feels, but it manifests in empathy for others in similar situations. Upon meeting Calliope after she left Olympus, she provided a place for her to stay.

Persephone shares many of the same sentiments as Calliope regarding the Idols, but where Calliope is driven to change them out of love for her fellow gods, Persephone has learned to be selfish. Her desire is to reclaim the throne of the Underworld and live free from the rules imposed by Olympus. This difference eventually caused their separation. Through Persephone's eyes, Calliope's destructive tendencies are expanded on, most notably her frustration with those who didn't agree with her, revealing new facets of her personality.

- **Aphrodite** – The goddess of love. Initially, she's presented as the most passive, though sympathetic, member of the Chorus. Unlike the others, she has no personal investment in Grace's trial and freely agrees to share her knowledge. However, her poise belies a long and arduous struggle with memories of being held captive by mortals during World War II, which only ended once her husband Hephaestus made a deal with the Allied Powers. As a result, she tries to lose her sense of self by passing her eidolon to a new host whenever the pain grows unbearable. On the surface, she fits the image people expect of the goddess of love – beautiful, sweet, and always throwing parties – but her actions carry a darker meaning.

This version of Aphrodite examines the psychology of a god ripped from her throne. The Aphrodite of myth is fickle, vain, and constantly involved in the lives of other gods and

humans. These qualities are still present in her character to a degree, warped by trauma. She is still the center of attention, but with the gods seemingly incapable of processing their grief, they wallow in the memories she dredges up. Aphrodite has changed hosts so many times that she has developed a ritual in the guise of a party. Her indulgence almost seems to border on vanity, reinforcing the pain she has experienced rather than helping her move past it. Unlike Apollo and Persephone, Aphrodite tries to abandon her grief and strives for a way forward. Yet in doing so, she arguably allows it to define her. This cycle echoes the wider experiences of the gods as a whole, fear keeping them hidden from the human world, unable to change.

- **Athena** – The goddess of wisdom and leader of the Chorus. With the loss of the oldest gods, Athena has become the head of the pantheon. Stern and responsible, she functions as the “eldest sibling” of the Idols as their protector. She imposes the strict rules that dictate their lives but keep them safe and hidden, and she takes on the burden of making hard choices for everyone’s benefit. In this case, it means executing the last muse.

Out of all the gods, Athena clings hardest to the past. Athena is perhaps synonymous with Greece itself – the namesake of one of its cities. Her domain encompasses aspects of ancient Greek civilization, including warfare, governance, and craft. She was a mentor to the heroes of old, but opposes Grace in the present when she perceives her as a threat to their way of life. Her inability to move on is reflected visually; she’s the only god who dresses classically, she retains her iconography of a Greek soldier with shield and spear, and displayed in her office are artifacts from the ancient days.

Her fear of change drives her to take drastic measures for the sake of preserving the gods, broken as they already are. While she’s responsible for their survival thus far, as her fears overtake her well-meaning care, she assumes the worst and will prevent it from happening at all costs. Because Grace is a potential murderer, she cannot be allowed to exist among the gods. However, this is a cover for her true motives – to eliminate the last muse so the Idols may continue. As her protectiveness is taken to the farthest extreme, Athena, believing that Apollo’s prophecy means the Idols would die should the muse exist, goes as far as to murder one of her fellow gods for everyone else’s sake. In this context, Athena embodies the worst aspects of wisdom and strategy, capable of straying into ruthlessness when not tempered by emotion. Her fear prevents her from seeing a different interpretation. In the end, only when all the gods demonstrate their capability of changing for the better does her resolve falter, and she recognizes how much harm her care has caused.

- **Eros** – The god of sex and the adopted son of Aphrodite. Long ago, she took him under her wing and pulled him out of trouble; millennia later, the roles have been reversed. Watching his mother suffer and disappear over and over has taken a toll on him. When he meets Grace at the party, he asks her to talk Aphrodite out of completing the ritual.
- **Venus** – A social worker and chosen successor to Aphrodite. Venus provides an external viewpoint on the Idols and what inheriting an eidolon means. She sees passing on the eidolon more like going to sleep for a long time and emphasizes its impermanent nature,

and she doesn't seem bothered by the idea of their two identities coexisting. She respects Aphrodite's wishes, whatever she decides.

- **Orpheus** – An ancient Greek hero, now a shade in the Underworld. In Persephone's absence, he's claimed the throne of the Underworld to use its power to resurrect his beloved Eurydice, but failed. Like the gods, he's been left in the dark to wallow in the past, growing bitter towards the gods, especially Persephone. Yet unbeknownst to him, she was equally powerless as Hades' captive, and the two share more similarities than either wishes to admit.
- **Hermes** – The god of messengers. Hermes is the first Idol Grace meets after Calliope's death, responsible for bringing her to Athena's office. They're officially Olympus' messenger, but seem to work primarily for Athena. In addition, they've only recently inherited the previous Hermes' eidolon, making them another point of comparison for Grace. While a minor character, if Grace takes the time to talk to them, they'll end up supporting her in the trial.

Breakdown

Background & the Idols

Adapting the Greek Gods in a Western modern setting has always presented inherent questions. A story must justify the gods' displacement from their homeland and determine which character traits they pick out from a vast and often contradictory mythology. *Stray Gods* chooses to depict a world in which the Greek Gods live in decline, hiding among humans. In this reality, the gods' memories faded when the empire of their worshippers fell, only to return in the 1500s when the Renaissance movement revived ideas from ancient times and brought renewed interest in their stories. However, once they'd awakened, Zeus and many others had disappeared. Since then, the remaining gods have lived camouflaged among humans.

But the biggest shock to their way of life came with World War II. The god Ares stirred up war among mortals and gave them weapons which could kill gods. In the following years, many were killed until they were given passage to America by the Allied Powers. This has left irreparable wounds on their collective psyche. Now, as the gods continue to diminish, those who are left grapple with long-held trauma in a strange country. They live under strict rules and use magic to hide themselves from human eyes.

While most of the Idols languished, the muse Calliope insisted they needed to adapt to their new circumstances and change their ways. She believed the rules were stifling the gods and preventing them from growing. Unfortunately, she was never able to persuade the Chorus, and left embittered.

Years later, Apollo's last prophecy revealed a threat to the Idols' existence – "the Idols cannot continue while the last muse lives." Horrified, he rushed to tell Calliope, but neither could change the facts. Uncertain, she wandered without aim until she happened to catch Grace's song. In Grace, she found a successor capable of breaking through to the gods.

Grace's Odyssey

The narrative structure of *Stray Gods* echoes that of its classical inspirations, namely *The Odyssey*. While this could be unintentional on the part of the developers, the homage in its opening song suggests they at least looked towards epic poetry for inspiration, and the similarities are striking enough to be worth examination regardless. Another possibility is that *Stray Gods* was trying to follow the tradition of the Hero's Journey. However, many of the themes and motifs in the story are specifically drawn from *The Odyssey*, which would make it a more accurate point of comparison.

As previously mentioned, the opening song *Adrift* is an entreaty to the muse, and it uses the metaphor of a lost boat on the sea for Grace's aimlessness. While the imagery is a direct parallel to Odysseus wandering the ocean, physically lost, the feelings Grace shares are shared by Odysseus' son Telemachus. While at home, his surroundings are equally treacherous as suitors invade his home and plot to kill him. Despite being the rightful heir of Ithaca, he is helpless to drive them away. He feels less certain of himself than peers his age, and his journey forces him to mature into a worthy successor. Similarly, Grace, a college dropout, feels she ought to have figured out more of her life by now. Both are pushed into a quest by a god and return prepared to face the danger standing in their way.

Meanwhile, Grace's physical journey resembles that of Odysseus. With Calliope's death, she's thrust into an unknown world of gods and monsters. As her investigation progresses, she's further removed from the ordinary. Pan's unexpected appearance in her house subtly signifies that from here on out, the rules of the human world no longer apply to her. The only way through is by pushing onward and surviving the trial. Her distance from the mortal world and immersion in the godly one escalates until Freddie, her last anchor to the human world is killed by the Furies, a trio of mindless entities who've been given commands to hunt down the muse.

Making a deal with Persephone, the two venture into the Underworld to reclaim her throne and resurrect Freddie. This is reminiscent of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, especially since Persephone doesn't actually know how to bring Freddie back. However, in the Underworld, Grace meets Orpheus, Freddie, and surprisingly, Calliope herself. Despite giving away her eidolon, enough of her remains that her shade entered the Underworld. In a battle of song, Grace either defeats or reasons with Orpheus, determining ownership of the throne. Calliope reveals Apollo's prophecy and thanks Grace for giving her hope. Freddie wishes her well, and the player is given the option to say goodbye or, with effort, revive her with the eidolon. Doing so will resurrect Freddie without killing Grace, a rebirth that's never been seen before.

The journey into the Underworld is another escalation (as the player goes from the Underworld nightclub to the real Underworld) and a parallel to *The Odyssey*. Odysseus descends to speak with the shades of a prophet, a series of famous Greek heroes, and his mother. They both learn key information, meet a famous hero, and talk to a loved one. But where Odysseus' Underworld is full of mighty heroes, Grace meets only one – Orpheus, one of the most tragic heroes of Greek myth. He serves as a foil to her character, an unrivaled musician and a warning of how humans can fall into the same trap of hopelessness ensnaring the gods.

Finally, Grace returns home, now armed with the truth. Like Telemachus, like Odysseus, she's prepared for a dangerous homecoming. The trial is set for the next day, judged by Athena.

Athena's role in *Stray Gods* as a shadow antagonist is similar to Poseidon's in *The Odyssey*. Neither has much interaction with the hero, but they're ever-present – Poseidon through the sea, his domain, and Athena through the eyes she keeps trained everywhere. Both manipulate events behind the scenes in their favor, but in the end must bow to the will of other gods.

The Need for Change

In other aspects, however, *Stray Gods* differs from its inspiration. The biggest subversion is found in how characters fit the roles laid out for them. Athena, of course, transitions from Odysseus' patron to Grace's executioner. However, most of the gods aren't very proactive anymore, and Grace must deliberately prove her worth as a hero to gain their respect.

While the gods in Greek mythology have always been fickle and temperamental, in *Stray Gods* this manifests as a consequence of lives lived far too long. They are survivors of war and perpetual refugees, unable to return to their temples and palaces. Trapped by their own rules, with all the time in the world to contemplate past mistakes. Throughout the course of the game, the player is exposed to different ways in which the Idols cope with their trauma. Apollo and grief, Persephone and resentment, Athena and fear – all the gods are ruled by their pasts. They sink into false convictions, unable to let go.

By contrast, Calliope's purpose is to inspire. She was determined the gods needed to change to adapt to their present circumstances. She challenged Olympus' ideals, particularly the idea that the status quo needed to be maintained forever. However, she was also hotheaded, stubborn, and dismissive of opinions differing from her own. Calliope became combative due to being repeatedly ignored, to the point where even those who agreed with her views, such as Persephone, couldn't stand her. In the end, perhaps she too was driven to this aggressive need for change by the effects of the past.

The muse's powers force the singer to express their true feelings. A common critique is that the game's songs tend to lack a defined hook or chorus to keep the listener drawn in, but the game is more interested in using song to deliver exposition, introspection, and develop an emotional dialogue between characters. Music is a powerful tool for character exploration – through it, Grace breaks through people's defenses. She can expose hidden vulnerabilities and reveal their true selves. Grace is free of the drama and history drowning the Idols and desperate, her life being at stake. Due to this, she can use her powers as Calliope's successor to shape the future of the gods.

Modernizing Greek Mythology

In adapting Greek myth for a modern story, *Stray Gods* demonstrates an understanding of the themes and structure of classical stories that goes deeper than borrowing characters and aesthetics. It pays respect to *The Odyssey*, but subverts fundamental concepts for the sake of telling its own story – consciously or not. This relationship mirrors the tension that exists within the gods. The game reflects on the same questions it posits to Grace – how do we carry on a legacy that's thousands of years old? When do we start changing the narrative?

Stray Gods utilizes world history beyond the Greek myths to inform the lore of the idols and their society. The narrative places them in the context of various historical events, which leave a

noticeable impact on the characters. This is far from mere set dressing, as the player is forced to confront how the past has shaped the gods into shells of their former glory. Changing their personalities also feeds the murder mystery at the heart of the plot, as even a player familiar with the gods can be caught off guard, making it harder to predict who actually committed the murder. Unravelling the idols' history provides a feeling of satisfaction as the connection is drawn between their myths and present appearance.

One of the appeals of the Greek gods is how messy and complicated they are, creating parallels with humanity. In this story, the gods have been metaphorically brought down to earth, no longer roaming grand palaces of marble. Classical stories have always dealt with human emotions, but they can be inaccessible to some. *Stray Gods* uses these emotions in its own story as a grounding tool for the unbelievable, mythical world of the Idols. It deals with heavy topics that have elements that are out of this reality, but their impact on the gods is clearly understandable.

Player as God

This blend of tradition and modernity extends to the positioning of Grace and the player itself. They aren't quite a hero like the protagonists of old. Grace follows in Calliope's footsteps, meaning she has just as much power as any god. *Stray Gods* tells them to break free from the pantheon's rules and forge a new path in defiance of The Odyssey's teachings of obedience to the gods. The game utilizes choose-your-own-adventure mechanics in its songs to empower the player. As Grace navigates the world of the gods, her actions ripple outward, changing the fates of those around her. Those fates aren't always unequivocally happy, which is typical when a god meddles with people's lives. A player might not realize they can revive Freddie, for example. And other fates remain vague, leaving the correct path up to player interpretation. *Stray Gods* tries to respond to the player's choices realistically, which means sometimes consequences have yet to make themselves known within the story's timeframe.

But at the end of the day, Grace is also human in the ways that matter. The player directs not only how she affects other gods, but the ways in which she grows. *Stray Gods* emulates her character development through the dialogue and song choices the player makes according to the three personality types. Depending on which persona the player chooses at the end of *Adrift*, specialized dialogue options will be available to Grace. However, there's no restriction when it comes to the songs, letting her personality be fleshed out in nuanced ways instead of sticking to one path. Despite its name, *Stray Gods* isn't an RPG (at least not a typical one) and there are no stats for the player to invest in. But it allows the player to immerse themselves in *intrinsic* roleplaying – to picture Grace as a full-fledged person with wants and opinions, and in turn has the world respond when she takes action.

Strongest Element

Stray Gods is marketed primarily as an interactive musical, so naturally that's the focus of its gameplay. Undoubtedly the first game to blend musicals and video games to this extent, its lengthy development has focused on fleshing out the complexity of the musical numbers as much as possible. Each song is determined by the player's choices, using a choose-your-own-adventure style system. Whichever option the player picks results in unique lyrics, musical themes, and tones, but they never exist in a vacuum. Choices build upon each other, creating an evolving dialogue between Grace and her song partners. Oftentimes, switching between the three

personality-coded options won't be as simple as transitioning from one theme to another, but a combination of both. As the song grows, so too does this complexity. As a result, it's almost impossible for one player to have the same experience as another.

The music supports the experience of playing as a muse. Grace is responsible for directing the flow of song, choosing how to let characters express themselves. The player is incorporated in the songwriting process, making it feel almost like improv. While they may only be picking from a list of options, this simplicity still includes remarkable depth as choices from the beginning of the song and even previous events in the game can affect what they'll end up hearing. Furthermore, these choices will result in long-lasting consequences for the other characters. The game pushes Grace and the player into difficult situations, forcing them to make the choice they think will have the best possible outcome; something made even harder by the time limit on picking song options. Players may panic and make choices they regret later, as the time pressure imitates the stress Grace experiences. But that's also the point – gods aren't perfect.

Overall, while not perfect, the musical system contains a tremendous amount of work, care, and dedication for something the player is unlikely to ever experience the full breadth of. *Stray Gods* is one of, if not the only game to have attempted this concept, and the fact it exists – let alone that it has delivered such a complex experience – is noteworthy.

Unsuccessful Element

While the game's musical numbers explore the depths of characters' psyche, the rest is straightforward. As Grace moves from place to place, characters are often left behind. The player doesn't really see the effects of the changes they've inspired until the trial and the epilogue, where the main cast discusses everyone's situation. While this is understandable given the in-game and external time constraints, it clashes with the psychological appeal of the musical numbers. The songs feel like a journey for the characters and it's disappointing to see their development halt abruptly for the sake of the story's pace. Players might not find the brief appearances of the characters they've invested in satisfying enough, and they may feel like they've made a wrong choice somewhere when characters disappear, even though that's how the game functions.

With recurring characters, most of their conversations focus on delivering more context to the world. The gods have a lot of history, and while it's relevant to explaining why they are the way they are, it may verge on too much exposition. Because of this, characters can come off as static as they must either direct Grace and forward the plot or flesh out the worldbuilding. Due to the game's linearity, characters' actions during gameplay don't really change no matter what the player does – Persephone will always lie about the Underworld, Apollo will always hide his prophecy until it's revealed by Calliope. This can feel jarring depending on how the player has responded to them thus far. Unless the player has chosen to romance certain characters, they lack moments where they demonstrate the development Grace had inspired in her songs. Even Grace herself spends less time introspecting outside the musical numbers. The music and the rest of the gameplay seem to have conflicting goals; one wants to interrogate the characters as much as possible, while the other wants to make progress solving the mystery. This ludonarrative dissonance hurts the story's pacing and devalues the work the player put into making thoughtful choices. Both plot and characters suffer as a result.

Highlight

*“Since the beginning, we were hidden. We held court from up above
T’was the golden age of reason
And I, the queen of love.”*

One of Grace’s best potential sources of information comes from the goddess Aphrodite. The goddess of love is hosting a party, and there’s a standing invitation for the muse. Despite their brief introduction at Grace’s sentencing, she’s an enigma compared to the others. By talking to the other gods, the player gets the sense that something’s wrong with how cagey they are about her. Grace also meets Eros, her adopted son, at Persephone’s nightclub, seemingly bothered by something.

Upon her arrival, Grace learns that Aphrodite’s party is meant to celebrate her passing to a new host. All of a sudden, the awkward hesitance surrounding her is made clear. The current Aphrodite is going to die. Her eidolon will pass on to a new host, who’ll take her place. Apparently, this has become a recurring event as the trauma of being held captive during World War II has clung to her, growing over time until it becomes unbearable. Her only escape is to forget, at least for a time. She disappears within the mind of her new host, but her identity will resurface, given enough time, and she’ll relive the pain once again.

*“Before we fell to our knees, begging
We fell from the sky.”*

Aphrodite is delighted to see Grace, asking only that she’ll provide a song in exchange for information. However, the other gods are somber, Eros even requesting that Grace talk his mother out of completing the ritual. Grace also gets the opportunity to meet Venus, Aphrodite’s chosen successor, who views the situation with empathy, wanting to help. The player is left to grapple with the moral implications of her intentions. While it’s natural for Idols to pass on, they typically do so as a last-ditch instinct when dying. Aphrodite isn’t truly suicidal... but her actions bear uncomfortable similarities that the player, without an exact frame of reference from the real world, must contend with. Added to that are the personal stakes affecting Grace. By accepting Aphrodite’s death as either permanent or temporary, Grace must come to terms with how inheriting Calliope’s soul her changes her identity.

Soon, it’s time for the ritual. *The Ritual* is one of the most intense songs in the game. Hearing Aphrodite recount the events that led to the deaths of so many Idols, her captivity, and her husband’s sacrifice, all in a slow funerary dirge that crescendos as her voice gains more emotion, the player is given the full weight of the losses suffered by the gods. They see different facets of her pain, grief, and her regret for her husband. As Aphrodite trails off, Grace responds, transforming the song. Whatever the player decides from thereon out will determine the outcome of the ritual. In the end, there’s no unambiguously correct choice. How Grace’s actions will affect Aphrodite, Venus, and Eros would take longer than the scope of the narrative to be made clear. The lack of clarity leaves an open ending for the player to reason with. The decision stays memorable even on subsequent playthroughs and promotes replaying the game just to know if Grace could’ve or should’ve done something different.

The Ritual takes everything that makes *Stray Gods* compelling and polishes it to a shine. The song contextualizes why the gods have changed so drastically without over-expositing, serving mainly to express Aphrodite's pain and her reasoning for wanting to forget. It's deeply personal, but the moment also forces Grace to confront parts of her own godhood in a way the plot otherwise doesn't have the time for. She's forced to acknowledge, even if subconsciously, that she's been changed by her experiences in the past few days. The time limit put on the player's choices and the raw intensity of the song's emotions adds pressure to the player's decision-making. This moment leaves a profound impression that lasts for the rest of the game, even after the player puts it down for the final time.

Critical Reception

IGN 7/10

Shannon Liao praises the boldly innovative niche *Stray Gods* has carved out in gaming, but criticizes the story. "I was a bit underwhelmed by the overly safe interpretation of the characters. If you're going to explore Greek mythology, I want to see something new done with characters like Athena, Pan, and Persephone," she states, her biggest issue stemming from how the story often must prioritize plot over character depth. The character introspection that's shown is heartfelt and relatable, however. "I found myself wondering if these songs might reflect the feelings of some of my own relatives who are nearing the end of their lives."

Gaming Trend 75/100

In his review, Richard Allen calls *Stray Gods* "a game, a musical, and a concept for what could come to be." He considers the game itself unpolished in many aspects, with the pace of the story dragging too long and the tone shifting from moment-to-moment, but finds the song choices to be an exciting mechanic. "I had a great time watching my choices unfold in song form and seeing how they impacted the storyline, and I can't help but wonder what songs or events may have occurred had I made different choices," he says. He does note however that he found many audio and technical issues that disrupted the experience.

RPGamer 4/5

Sam Wachter praises the breadth of choice present in the game, transforming the story. He notes flaws with the music, writing "sometimes actors are straining their voices to fit with some perplexing lyrics," which create "moments of awkward dialogue and song lyrics causing a change in the overall flow and tone of the game." He also points out several audio bugs. However, overall the musical performances are compelling and unique from playthrough to playthrough. "There is no game out there like *Stray Gods*, and while its execution has some flaws, its originality shines through."

Lessons

- **Examine what makes inspiration meaningful** – *Stray Gods*' adaptation of Greek myth goes beyond names and aesthetics. The game uses the structure of *The Odyssey*'s plot as a framework to tell an original story, without being afraid to deviate from the original and make adjustments to better fit the medium you're working with. Engaging with the themes of classical stories, like a young person's need to mature or how humans'

disobedience of the gods leads to preventable tragedy, provides a deeper understanding of the characters you're adapting and why stories are written. Given the prevalence of adaptation in stories today, critical analysis of the original text(s) goes a long way in understanding what makes an old story great.

- **Respect the player's choices in storytelling** – If players are given agency over how the story plays out, the game must recognize their choices. The interactive nature of video games is one of the medium's greatest strengths. Clicking one button over another during a song might be a simple action, but *Stray Gods* can make the player agonize over these choices. Showing the player that their decisions have an impact on characters and story gives them a feeling of accomplishment when their choices turn out well and responsibility when things go wrong. However, the impact can feel superficial if it's only addressed briefly within the game.
- **Story and mechanics work best with a common purpose** – A game's narrative and gameplay shouldn't be fighting each other. Ludonarrative harmony helps the player stay immersed throughout the game, and using the premise of playing as a muse to justify the musical nature of the experience clearly signifies what the game's focus will be. However, the storytelling during musical versus non-musical sections causes friction due to their differing priorities. Because one wants character introspection and the other wants to move the plot, players can get frustrated that the pacing is too slow or too fast. In the end, neither priority will win.
- **Use ambiguity with discretion** – Leaving some story beats open-ended can enhance a narrative. Ambiguity is a storytelling tool that should be applied carefully, as too much can leave a player frustrated. However, when dealing with difficult or morally grey situations, sometimes there's no right or wrong answer. Withholding from players whether their actions were correct forces them to sit with the result and come to a conclusion themselves. Done well, an ambiguous conclusion can leave a far greater impact than a definitive ending.

Summation

Stray Gods is an undeniably unique game sitting in its own genre. While this means some of the ideas it pioneers require refinement, the development team has put an incredible amount of effort into creating an interactive musical with meaningful variation, all revolving around a muse. The story shows equal dedication in exploring Greek mythology in its adaptation, while not overshadowing the writers' original ideas. There's unlikely to be another entry in this fledgling genre of gaming anytime soon, but it'd be a delight to see more video games push the bounds of what can be done. *Stray Gods* is a bold idea brought to fruition, but more than that it's an emotional exploration of what it means to live as the world changes around you.

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