

Paradise found: 'Hades' maker takes on gaming goliaths

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Characters are based on Greek mythology in the hit video game 'Hades,' whose graphics are akin to an animated cartoon

No work email after 5:00 pm on Fridays, mandatory vacations: the outfit behind role-playing video game sensation "Hades" doesn't believe you have to go through hell to reach the top.

Yet the tiny, independent Supergiant's own-way approach seems to be

working as it gains on the goliaths of the multi-billion dollar gaming industry.

"Hades" snagged five honors this year at Britain's prestigious BAFTA Games Awards and is short-listed for a major Hugo science fiction prize.

"If what makes our games special is the particular people who work on them and how they work together, then the whole studio culture needs to be about supporting that over the long term," Supergiant co-founder Amir Rao told AFP.

In an industry slammed for punishing workloads and playing it safe with sequels to blockbusters, Supergiant has focused on a love of old-school games.

Unlike massive role-playing experiences with film-like graphics, "Hades" is a "dungeon crawler" that challenges players to fight their way through chambers rife with demonic adversaries to escape the underworld.

Graphics are akin to an animated cartoon, starring a rebellious son of the Greek god Hades intent on escaping his disapproving father's domain.

Characters in the [game](#) are based on Greek mythology, with Rao's dog providing vocals for multi-headed hound Cerberus.

'Office' in parents' living room

That kind of DIY ethic arcs back to Rao and co-founder Gavin Simon leaving their jobs at [video game](#) giant Electronic Arts in 2009 and moving from Los Angeles to San Jose, California to start Supergiant in the living room of Rao's [childhood home](#).

"My dad said we should start a company when we were young, just so if we failed we could find jobs two years later and it would all be okay," Rao quipped at a 2019 game conference.

Supergiant launched with four Ikea desks pressed together in mid-2009. Within nine months, seven friends were working on its first game, "Bastion," a hit that gave the startup traction.

The original cadre is at the heart of what is now a 23-person team, with policies crafted to keep the team's mojo humming.

"We try to do things to save us from ourselves, because we are the type of people who really like working with each other and the things we are working on," Rao said.

Supergiant bans workers from sending emails after 5:00 pm on Fridays, to prevent a domino effect of messages getting people involved in work on weekends.



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Employees have to take off at least 20 days a year, to make sure they get breaks.

The studio encourages accepting one's limits, and understanding life comes with unexpected challenges, according to Rao.

"For a lot of the people on the team it was actually harder when they weren't working," he said of the pandemic's impact.

"Because that was when they were confronting more of what was going on in the wider world."

Remote work was already a norm at Supergiant when the coronavirus caused it to stop using its San Francisco office last year.

'Adapts to your skill'

Members of the team finished "Hades" from home, leaving their city workplace to be hit by burglars in their absence.

The team is now enjoying a post-"Hades" respite, its next project yet to be determined.

In the meantime, gamers are still burrowing in to the intricacies of the game.

While immersive, big-budget offerings present stories in rich detail, the "Hades" narrative leaves much to the imagination.

And in "Hades," dying is part of the fun.

"If it's working really well when you die you are only very briefly disappointed because there's a whole bunch of other stuff that's about to happen," said Rao.

The game enables players to progress in their own ways, and battles vary with each engagement.

"It adapts to your skill," Lucas Garcia, a California college student studying computing, said of "Hades."

"It kept me feeling good at the game regardless of whether I sucked. It's definitely a big up-and-comer."

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