Hey there – this review took longer than expected due to some health concerns and a busier-than-expected schedule. While there's no crowd eagerly waiting, writing reviews helps me reflect on my gaming experiences, and **Astral Ascent** gave me plenty to reflect on – both good and bad.

Ahem, anyway – **Astral Ascent** is a 2023 roguelike by Hibernian Workshop, being just their second game released. And I can see why it took them so long – Astral Ascent is a stunningly beautiful game, with presentation that blew me away just from their preview – I wishlisted this game just from watching its first trailer, it's flashy visuals immediately grabbing my attention. But is it *good*? Let's talk about it below!

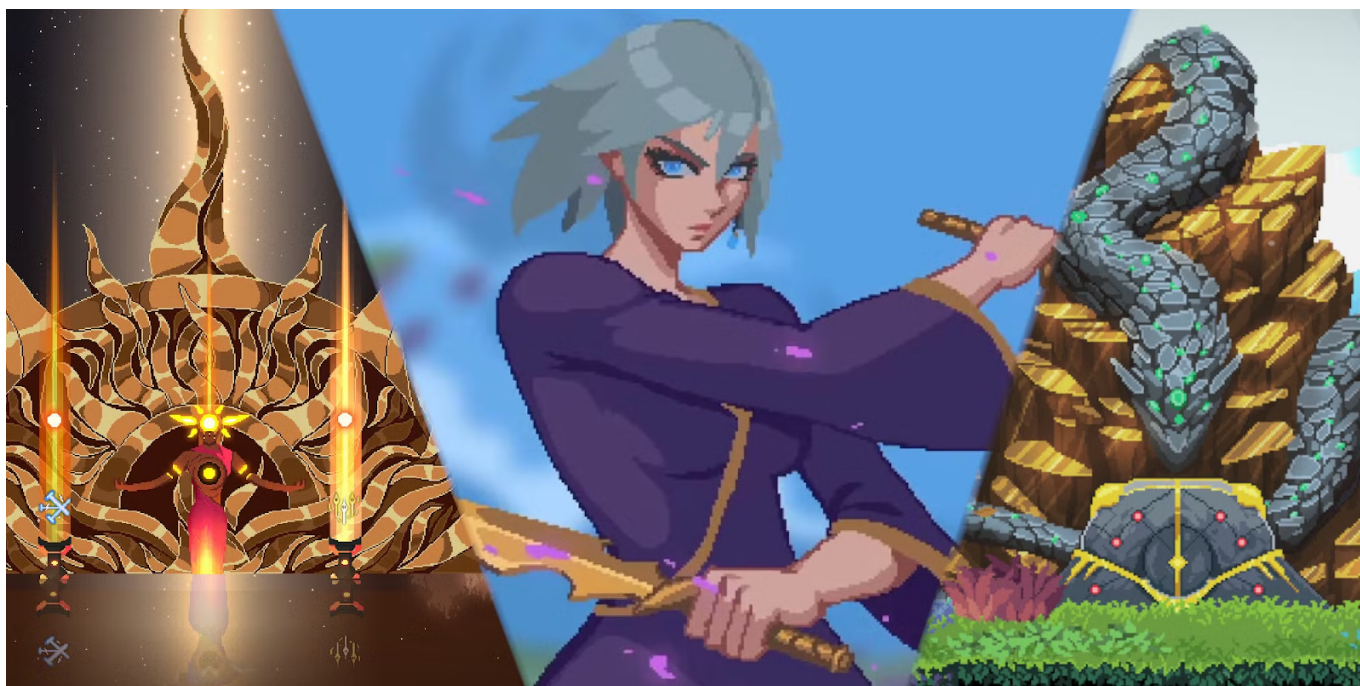Table of Contents

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Top-Notch Production Values

If there is one thing that this game absolutely nails over every other is its presentation. Everything is polished to a high degree – fully-voiced characters are brought to life with fluid animations (even the bosses!), and it has lush environments that feel rich with detail and atmosphere. The soundtrack is equally impressive, feeling [expectant and peaceful](#) when it needs to while becoming [tense](#) to match the gameplay's pace.

I could even argue that **Astral Ascent** is worth your money on this alone. There's a lot of passion but into it, and it makes it an immediately eye-catching game to want

to play in.

But how is it to actually play this game?
A seemingly smooth, customizable gameplay loop

Upon taking control of your character, you'll immediately notice how responsive the game feels. The visuals had me hooked, but once I actually grabbed my controller, I started getting hyped because how it feels to move a character is something critically important to a game that will have both platforming and combat challenges.

A run is composed by 4 sections to complete, divided by "room". Every time you clear a room, you get to choose the difficulty and rewards of the next room based on a randomized selection. This should, in theory, make every decision of how and where to fight a good risk-and-reward analysis, so – well, we'll talk more about this later. Similar to **One Step from Eden**, **Astral Ascent** encourages players to gauge their power level carefully, balancing risk and reward as they progress.

Astral Ascent also has customizable spells. You'll get up to 4 spells that you can carry, which you need to each cast once in order to "reload" them, and you can further customize what they do with something called "Gambits" – I'll post a picture right now [from its wiki](#) to illustrate this.

So this player has the "Resilio" spell, and each of the four lines below it is one modification this player chose in their run for that specific spell. We'll talk more about this later, but the idea is that not only do you choose your spells, but how they turn out should be unique in each run.

Each run can also present unique character interactions because of something it learned from **Hades**.

Yes, Roguelikes can also have storylines

I have not played a bunch of **Hades**, but how every run has characters comment on your escape attempts and how it has some sort of plot following over that is a well-known thing about the game at this point, and the **Astral Ascent** devs certainly picked up on this – every run will have 4 unique bosses from a pool of 13 (one for each Zodiac Sign, the game's main inspiration), and will have unique interactions based on what you have done in the past.

So, for example, bosses will have different lines based on whether you defeated them the last time you saw them or not. Characters in the main hub will comment on your escape attempts, and characters will have small moments of monologue based on how long you've played the game (or at least that's what the trigger seemed to be for me – I'm not sure how exactly this works).

This means that while the overall structure of the story will remain simplistic, such as with any roguelike, there can be a fair bit of characterization from everyone involved, making the world feel more vivid.

With that said, a small gripe I have with the game is that a lot of its dialogue seems very corny. It's reasonably well-acted, and not something that took me away from the experience, but I did eventually start to feel like I should skip all my dialogue and just get straight to the action.

While all of this sounds pretty good so far, but we've yet to cover one of my biggest issues with the game.

How does Astral Ascent handle meta-progression?

Listen, I know roguelikes have a very well-earned reputation for being hard to get into, and meta-progression is one way developers address this. While there are degrees of implementation towards this, I simply do not ever agree with the idea that your character should straight-up be stronger the more you play.

This is, sadly, how **Astral Ascent** chose to tackle its meta-progression – it leans heavily on stat boosts, letting players unlock more damage, HP and resources every run. While this makes the game more approachable, it undermines skill mastery – the heart of what makes roguelikes rewarding. A system designed to ease you into the game instead shifts the focus from mastery to stat progression.

There is an extra meta-progression system after you first beat the final boss, but I won't get into it because that's spoiler territory. Suffice to say that I was drained with the game at that point and I did not wish to engage with it.

Sadly, this is not where **Astral Ascent**'s issues end.

Engaging at first, superficial later

At first, this game's magic system seems intricate, offering the promise of creative spell combos and on-the-fly synergies. Indeed, a spell-based game should make experimenting with its magic feel rewarding. However, this depth quickly fades the more you play it, revealing a system driven more by raw stats than meaningful choices.

 Many spells are uninspired, boiling down to generic projectiles or area-of-effect damage, often with no input other than being cast (aiming not required!) The most

interesting ones are always the ones related to movement, as moving your character already feels good, but it doesn't feel like the game is using their admittedly good base movement to make the spells feel more interesting to use.

Gambits, which are upgrades for spells, initially seem like an exciting way to customize your abilities. In practice, their differences often feel more aesthetic than mechanical – whether a Gambit burns enemies or summons an Ice Sword the result is always "do more damage".

Worse, the Gambits and Spells are actually elementally coded themselves, and Spells get bonus damage if the Gambits match their spell affinity. When I was in my last runs of the game, I eventually decided to stop caring about what the Gambits did and just started to pick them on elemental affinity, regardless of what they did.

Making the whole system worse is that your exciting Spells are mana-based, and you need to auto-attack in order to gain back mana. While this is a system that a lot of games have used before, in **Astral Ascent**'s case, the auto-attacks feel very bad to use. Dodging enemy attacks can feel good, but attacking them doesn't feel like that, it's just a way to get back to your spells which might or might not feel interesting to use.

Final Verdict

Despite all of this, would I say **Astral Ascent** is a bad game, not worth your time? Not really. I clocked 20 hours at this game, so I clearly must have enjoyed it at some level.

Astral Ascent is visually stunning and offers a captivating initial experience, but it lacks the staying power of other roguelikes. It's worth playing for its charm and production values, just don't expect it to hold your attention for long.

What do you think? Do you think **Astral Ascent**'s magic system is more rewarding, or do you think it handles meta-progression better than I gave it credit for? Let me know in the comments!