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MDST 3704

Missing Chapter Assignment

Undertale

Pacifism

Abstract: Can a videogame change users' views of ethics? In *Undertale*, Toby Fox uses the branching Role Playing Game to make users reflect upon the consequences of their actions and lead them on a path of Pacifism that will continue into their everyday lives.

Video games allow users to leave one reality behind and enter another. The rules in these worlds are unlike those of our world. Surviving multiple bullets, resurrecting after a death, health power-ups — these are all phenomena impossible in our reality but normal in the game world. When entering these alternate realities, one common value often disregarded is morality. People “usually just dismiss morality” during game play (Sicart 149). Injuring or killing characters in games seem not only harmless but a necessity in order to complete the game — many games center their entire plot on fighting alone. However, in Toby Fox’s *Undertale*, players’ morals are challenged rather than ignored. The procedural rhetoric and mechanics in *Undertale* force users to face responsibility for their own decisions and direct them towards the practice of pacifism in order to succeed in both the game and in life.

In this Role Playing Game (RPG), the user plays as a child who has fallen into an underground, monster-filled world. They must maneuver through fights, puzzles, and enemies to escape the underground and bring freedom to the monsters. The choices made in *Undertale* are crucial to the dynamic of the story — each decision may alter the final outcome. Through play, users learn that to succeed in the game, a moral path must be taken. This means playing the whole game without killing one being. Only by learning to practice pacifism, even when difficult, can the users truly free the monsters. The player’s morals are represented by their soul, the “culmination of your being” (Sinistera 1). At the beginning of the game, after the player awakens, they run into a seemingly harmless, jolly flower named Flowey. He explains that the soul starts out weak but can be strengthened by gaining LV, or LOVE, and XP through battling. As a new user, I believed Flowey. As the story progresses, fights ensue with different creatures,

and a user's XP and LOVE increase as they beat these characters. It slowly becomes obvious that killing angers characters, causes guilt, and leads to an unsatisfying end to the game. Near the end, it is revealed that Flowey has deceived the user. LOVE stands for Level of Violence, and XP stands for Execution Points. Instead of strengthening the soul, they harm it. The player realizes that in order to reach the True Ending of the game, they must keep their soul pure by not killing anybody. This is not the only possible ending. There are three main paths of *Undertale*: the True Pacifist Route, the Genocide Route, and the Neutral Route. The Neutral Route is the path typically taken by players on their first run-through, like I did. At the time, I was clueless of the lasting effect killing had on my soul. In some situations, it felt as though ending the enemy was the only way out. The Neutral Route ends with Flowey destroying everybody and challenging the player to prove themselves by restarting the game, this time practicing only pacifism. In a second play-through, the player can successfully save all of the characters and open the portal to the human world for the monsters. This earns the True Pacifist ending, one of pride and accomplishment. However, players can also take the opposite route and follow the Genocide Route. In this case, players kill every character and end the game in a pile of destruction and loneliness. This route takes away most joys of the game — as the player progresses, frightened characters evacuate, dialogue disappears, and the aesthetic of the game changes to one of boredom and guilt. Nonetheless, each path is essential to experiencing the full effect of the game's moral rhetoric.



[Figure 1: Final Judgement during the Pacifist Route]

Rhetoric is the use of writing to persuade. Ian Bogost, in his paper *The Rhetoric of Video Games*, explains that games can be created for the purpose of educating a player about the real world. Bogost coined the term “procedural rhetoric,” which he describes as the “the practice of effective persuasion and expression using processes” (125). It is the actions of the game that tell us the meaning and persuade the player to change their own actions. Bogost claims that procedural rhetoric is a way to demonstrate how things work and make claims about the world. *Undertale*’s processes reveal to the user the importance of morality and the lasting impact of decisions. The dynamics in *Undertale* effectively use the player’s emotions to make them reflect on their ethics and how their decisions affect the world around them, ultimately making them choose a path of pacifism. This focus on practicing pacifism is not a message that should be forgotten after closing the game. Through the mechanics of *Undertale*, the game promotes non-violence and points out people’s instinct to pursue violence purely for the sake of a game. The Genocide Route in particular “serves as a lesson on the consequences of one’s actions” and makes players “think about [their] choices and actions in life” (Seraphine 4). The lessons learned extend outside of the gaming world. After seeing what may result from their decisions, many users may take their *Undertale* play as a learning experience and apply it to choices in everyday life. Through the imbalance of the act and fight buttons and guidance towards taking a non-violent route, the procedural rhetoric shows the player that pacifism will lead to a more positive outcome, in both the game and life.

In his paper, Bogost also mentions the “possibility space” of video games, the “configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the system work” (121). The possibility space represents all options open to the player within the confines set by the rules of the game. By exploring and interacting with this space, users can find the meaning of the game. In *Undertale*, the possibility space is directly linked to the game's meaning and the overall feelings provoked. At the beginning, the possibility space is vast. One has the freedom to be a pacifist, commit genocide, or play naturally through. However, once decisions start being made, the possibilities shrink. Once a character is killed, the pacifist branch is broken. If a character is spared, the Genocide Route disappears. Once a player makes their moral decision, they must stick to it. However, within these branches, there are still more possibilities. Certain fights can be avoided if specific pacifist actions are pursued. For example, one does not need to fight Muffet the Spider if they previously bought a donut from the Spider Bake sale.

Boasting that these treats are “Made by Spiders, for Spiders,” it seems as though supporting this local spider business is the morally correct thing to do. On my first run of the game, I did not buy a spider donut and ended up being stuck fighting Muffet the Spider for two weeks. On my second runthrough, I immediately bought a donut and avoided the fight in a matter of minutes. Sicart says that “ethical gameplay is not the act of choosing between options but of traversing the possibility space of a game with moral thinking” (Sicart 155). While only one path is possible to pursue at a time, the game highly encourages the user to play again and experience all the possible routes. To experience the power of pacifism, one must feel the guilt of their previous decisions and make a change, or take the Genocide Route to feel the full force of harmful choices. Guilt, a main theme of the game, is the “drive that pushes them to play the game again in a different manner” (Seraphine 12). It is from this guilt that players find the need to redeem themselves and set the world of *Undertale* right, exploring more of the possibility space of the game as they take different routes.

Undertale is a game where “the rules of play and its mortality system are profoundly intertwined” (Sicart 152). Through the games characters and mechanics, the focus on morals is uncovered. A main mechanic that emphasizes the importance of morality is the fighting. The strategy of fights is explained, quite differently, by Flowey and Toriel. At the beginning of the game, they give two contrasting ideas of what the game’s dynamic will entail. In the player’s first battle, Flowey shoots “friendliness pellets,” which turn out to be harmful bullets. Flowey’s turns from his enthusiastic self to an evil monster. In this new world, it is “kill or BE killed” (Sinistera 1). What seemed like a light-hearted game changed to a seemingly fight-or-die dynamic. Luckily, he is knocked away by a fireball from Toriel, your new caretaker. She walks the user through the Ruins and explains the *actual* mechanics of the game.

When in battle, there are four action buttons: FIGHT, ACT, ITEM, and MERCY. The FIGHT button lets the user attack. ACT allows for varying actions like Talk to, Console, or Hug the opponent. ITEM allows the user to access various items, like food, armor, or weapons. MERCY allows the user to either flee or spare the opponent, when possible. Toriel explains that during these fights, one should try to “strike up a friendly conversation” instead of fighting, despite Flowey’s advice. The user must choose between taking Flowey’s advice and killing to win, or testing Toriel’s theory that every encounter can be subdued with words and actions. Game worlds “frequently present us with ethical dilemmas that we don’t encounter in our

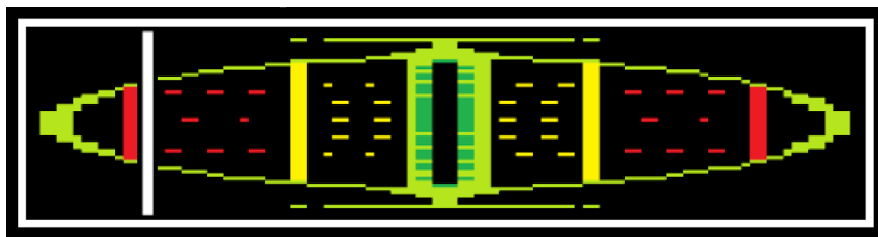
everyday lives: to kill or not to kill an enemy” (Sicart 149). It is up to the user to decide which path to take. Luckily, the game's mechanics tend towards Toriel's attitude, especially during the fights. In battles, the user's avatar is represented by a heart. This heart must maneuver around a white box to avoid attacks from the opponent. When choosing between actions buttons, the user selects with the heart icon. The fact that the heart is used both during opponent attacks and when picking an action emphasizes the “equal importance of choosing the right action to do and staying alive” (Seraphine 5). In this way, the avatar represents both the physical and spiritual soul of the player, and the actions made with this soul will be remembered.

After Toriel walks the player through a few fights, she leads them to her house. However, The user quickly realizes that her house is a dead end and that to continue the game, the player must walk through the barrier guarded by Toriel. This confrontation with Toriel escalates to a fight, in which the user is faced with the devastating option of killing their motherly figure. During my first play-through, I did not know there was a way to spare her. I felt as though the game was forcing me to kill her as a kind of test. I thought that once I lowered her health, she might let me pass. This fight was Toby Fox's critique on classic RPGs. This moment mimics that of a “mentor fight” in RPGs, normally ending in the approval of the mentor (Seraphine 10). However, after a few low-damage shots are given, one blow ends Toriel's life completely, a cruel death by the designers. Toriel disintegrates, and although the barrier is now open, the user is left feeling guilty.

The mechanics and dynamics continue to lend to this feeling of guilt as the player explores the game world if they do not stick to pacifism. After each monster I killed, I felt more and more guilt. I was faced with enemies that I believed I had no choice but to end, even if I did not want to. I noted in one of my first battles that when combatting Whimsun, I earned no XP or LV for “consoling” them, but gained 2 XP and 2 LV for killing them. It seemed as though the game was rewarding me for killing them. Games tend to “allow participants to feel ethically detached from their decisions” (Sicart). In *Grand Theft Auto*, I feel no remorse stealing a car and mowing down groups of people or robbing a bank. However, *Undertale* forces users to face their ethical decisions. In *Undertale*, I killed my own motherly figure for the sake of continuing the game, and I *did* feel guilty. The constant feeling of guilt is utilized in *Undertale* as a reminder that it is the player choosing to kill each opponent, not the avatar. Guilt and taking responsibility are emphasized further when the player looks in mirrors. If taking the Pacifist Route, looking in

a mirror will result in the response, “Despite everything, it’s still you.” However, when committing genocide, the mirror says, “It’s me, [the player’s name].” By placing the player’s name on the screen, it makes them accountable for their actions. This is one of the only moments the player sees their name on screen.

Another mechanic in the game that lends itself towards the emphasis on pacifism is the imbalance of the fight and act buttons. The user’s attack, no matter how far into the game, is always the same. There is a target shown with a moving, vertical line which the player tries to aim at the center. The closer to the center, the more damage is dealt. The maneuvers of this attack are simple, boring, and unchanging. It is easily masterable and consistent. On the other hand, the actions available for the user vary depending on the battle, and are often hard to figure out. Opponents’ speeches give hints about what actions might result in the ability to spare them. Some of these actions, like “mystifying” Froggit, I discovered on my own. However, more complicated sequences of actions, like fighting the two Royal Guards (which involved cleaning Guard 2’s armor twice and then whispering to Guard 1), required a bit of Googling. This imbalance of buttons represents the works of mechanics at play and “illustrates the procedural rhetoric of Undertale at work” (Seraphine 6). The player realizes that the correct path, using the action buttons in order to spare each opponent, is the more complicated yet more rewarding one.



[Figure 2: The user’s never-changing attack]

The higher difficulty of using the Act button may lead to more frustration, but this must be done to stay moral. The player uses their determination to continue on the Pacifist Route, even through hardship. During their explorations, the player stumbles across many checkpoints where they can save their game. Each time the save point is clicked, a dialogue box says the user is “filled with determination.” Similarly, after each of the player’s deaths, the screen displays the message to “stay determined.” As I played, I was confused by this message. I wondered if the game was trying to keep me playing no matter the guilt I felt. At many points, like during a fight with the robot Mettaton, I felt very discouraged, but that message did indeed encourage me to

keep trying. Near the end of the Pacifist Route, the player is led to the True Lab, where they find the secret of what makes their soul so powerful. The player realizes that determination is not just a phrase to keep them playing, but a characteristic of the soul that only humans have. Although pacifism is a more difficult route to take to win the game, the reminder to stay determined tells the user that they should keep going on their righteous path. The word can be broken down to “de-termination,” or the act of un-killing. It is a reminder that although they may have taken the Neutral Route in their first game and killed a few characters, it is always possible to correct that wrong. Notably, when a player chooses the Genocide Route, the save point text changes from a message of determination to a counter of how many enemies are left to kill in each area.



[Figure 3: Example of Save Point text]

Toby Fox uses *Undertale* not only to comment on the morality of humans, but as a critique of games that normalize violence as a solution. A popular theme of the game industry is the fighting game. Games like *Dragon Ball Z*, *Street Fighter*, and *Mortal Kombat* all revolve around battles. Even games aimed at youths, like *Pokémon* and *Super Smash Bros.*, require the mechanic of fighting to progress. In *Super Smash Bros.*, if a player refuses to fight, they simply lose. There is no benefit in taking a Pacifist Route in these types of games — morals are pushed aside upon entry. Fox uses *Undertale* to show that fighting games do not need to be violent. He shows that ethics should not be forgotten when playing a video game. Especially by making the player enter their own name upon beginning the game, he shows that the users themselves are

responsible for the actions they take even when in a virtual world. The incredibly powerful impact caused by the game, with its deep message of morals and responsibility, was the creation of solely Toby Fox. He worked on the game independently, with the artistic help of Temmie Chang. When *Undertale* was released, Fox was only 24 years old. This speaks to the power of the broader community of independent games as a whole. Many games created by major companies, like *Battlefield* or *Call of Duty*, center around violence without a much deeper meaning and charge about \$60 for a single game. *Undertale* differs from these games — while made by an independent developer, it asks for only \$10 on Steam and has a much stronger emotional impact on players. Similar indie games also retail for around \$10 like *Lisa: The Painful*, a game which also makes users reflect on their choices' consequences. Although small, the production of *Undertale* proves that indie games are a powerful market for video games trying to make a lasting impact on players.

Undertale uses its mechanics of fighting, player's name use, and character interactions to impress the message of non-violence on its users. The procedural rhetoric in the game successfully makes users not only reflect on and change their choices in the games but think about their decisions and impacts in the real world. Toby Fox places responsibility on the player, successfully using his creation to show that games can be just as successful using pacifism rather than violence, and that one's morals should not be left behind when entering another reality.

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