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"If anyone's going to ruin your night, it should be you": Responsibility and affective materiality in *Undertale* and *Night in the Woods*

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Abstract

Affective materiality is a tool for exploring how engaging with textual structures shapes the affective experience of a story. The experience of video games is distinctive because their modes of engagement can lead to players feeling responsible for the decisions they make within the diegetic space of the game and its contextual storyworld. *Night in the Woods* and *Undertale* both use the perception of responsibility found in video game modes of engagement as an active storytelling tool, but apply it in different ways. Despite the differences in their contextual application, both games use affective materiality to encourage players to reflect on the consequences of their decisions in multiple arenas: within the context of the game, their engagement with other games and their engagement with the wider world. In doing so, both games apply storytelling techniques that distinguish playing video games from the experience of other media forms and encourage an empathetic engagement with fictional storyworlds.

Keywords

Affect, close reading, materiality, metamedia storytelling, modes of engagement, responsibility, transmodal engagement

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Introduction

Undertale (Fox, 2015) is a game about a child who falls into a world of monsters and who has to decide how they want to approach the beings they find there. *Night in the Woods* (*NITW*; Benson et al., 2017) is about a young woman who returns to her small Rustbelt town in America after several years at college to find that her family and friends have moved on without her and has to decide what, if anything, to do about that. Both games are fundamentally queer experiences (Johnson, 2017; Ruberg, 2018),[1] and both frame their experiences and narratives around the tools provided by the 'affective materiality' that makes playing video games distinctive from engaging with other media forms.

Affective materiality is a critical lens for understanding how engaging with textual structures shapes the affective experience of the stories mediated by those textual structures, and thus ways that textual structure can be applied as a storytelling tool. Negotiating video game texts always involves the player making decisions and taking actions in a context which they are encouraged to come to care about. Since their decisions have an impact in a storyworld they are invested in and the characters which are part of it, players can start to feel responsible for the consequences of their choices and actions, even if those actions are as simple as dodging or jumping (Veale, 2017b: 1–2). This perception of responsibility is one of the elements which makes the experience of video games distinctive from other media forms.

However, *NITW* and *Undertale* embrace this affective materiality of play in different ways for very different purposes. *Undertale* subverts what players typically expect of games to underline that the player cannot escape responsibility for their actions. It uses this emphatic responsibility to tell a story that simultaneously explores the impact of kindness and interpersonal connection, and savagely critiques the gameplay and narrative assumptions common to video games at large. In comparison, *NITW* does not subvert the fundamental mechanics of gameplay. Instead, it uses the very constrained context of its protagonist to tell a story that uses the player's perception of responsibility to explore themes of rural marginalisation under capitalism, mental illness, horror, desperation and hope.

This article explores how and why the affective materiality distinct to video games becomes associated with a perception of responsibility, and the ways that *Undertale* and *NITW* use these dynamics as storytelling tools to shape the experiences of the people playing them.

Critically engaging with affective materiality

Storytelling experiences have always been shaped by the labour required of the people engaging with a story, in terms of the physical and mental processes required of them as they negotiate the text that frames the story – and textual structures shape that labour (Veale, 2017a: 2). Something as simple as turning the pages of a book is relevant to our experience of the story mediated by that book – a dynamic familiar to anyone who has wondered how a given story will conclude in the small number of pages they are aware are left. Because of these dynamics, changing the underlying structure that a story is told through changes the mode of engagement required of the person negotiating the text, shaping their experience. This can be done on purpose, such as where the novel *House of Leaves* (Danielewski, 2000) gradually reduces the number of words per page down into single figures during a tense sequence, meaning the reader turns the pages faster and faster. It can also happen because of the contextual changes in how we engage with media over time. For example, Mark Stewart has noted that students can have favourite shows and be very aware of

current programming but insist that they do not 'watch television' (Stewart, 2014: 1). To them, 'watching television' involves modes of engagement connected with broadcast schedules beyond their control, specific hardware platforms and particular viewing practices. These practices are foreign to their experiences of engaging with on-demand streaming or downloaded televisual media. People think of their relationship with a media form differently based on how they engage with it, and the impact that engagement has on their experience, rather than any changes to the content or aesthetic of the texts it mediates. This highlights the importance of modes of engagement to the experience of storytelling.

N. Katherine Hayles developed medium-specific analysis to consider the ways that the people engaging with a text generate meaning from it during the experience. She argues that moving a document from a printed context into an electronic one has a large enough impact on meaning to call the process 'translation' (Hayles, 2005: 89). Hayles argues that the 'materiality' of a text is an emergent property produced by complex dynamics involving the text's underlying structure, the experience of engaging with that structure and the 'interpretive strategies' of the person doing so (Hayles, 2002: 33, 2005: 3, 103–104). One consequence of the dynamics which produce materiality is that the meaning of a text is produced by engaging with it, and thus cannot be known or predicted with complete accuracy before someone negotiates its structures. Since processes of engaging with textual structure produce meaning, understanding the dynamics by which textual structures shape how people engage with them is vital. Medium-specific analysis is designed to explore these dynamics, and the effect they have always had on storytelling.

One of the dimensions of storytelling currently not considered by Hayles's framework for medium-specific analysis, however, is that part of the meaning generated by engaging with texts is affective. Misha Kavka frames affect as 'potential emotions – emotions that have not yet been perceived as such and thus constitute a "primordial soup" of feeling' (Kavka, 2008: x). Zizi Papacharissi echoes this position by arguing: 'Affect precedes emotions and drives the intensity with which emotions are felt. Emotions may be understood as the *consciousness* of affect' (Papacharissi, 2015: 15). Affect requires investment from us and is very individual for the different facets of a given contextual experience – textual or otherwise – that we will become invested in. That affective investment is already part of the labour undertaken by people as they negotiate with texts, and different textual structures are affectively distinctive because of the different ways they shape the labour of textual engagement. Storytellers have been using the fact they can arrange different textual structures to shape the affective experiences of the stories mediated by those structures for as long as storytelling has existed. For a modern example, some people prefer to watch horror movies or embarrassment-comedy at home on DVD or streaming media because the modes of engagement allow them more agency over the experience: they can pause if they feel overwhelmed. Alternatively, some people have exactly the opposite preference because they *want* to be overwhelmed, and the lack of control provided by the modes of engagement found in cinema viewing fits the affective tenor they seek. Another example can be seen in *House of Leaves* as previously discussed: the experience of turning pages faster and faster due to a reducing number of words per page changes the perception of the pace of the story and makes the experience more tensely physical. The materiality that Hayles identifies is already affective because affect is part of what is produced by the complex emergent dynamics found when people engage with texts and their underlying structures (Veale, 2017a: 4).

Affective materiality is a tool for exploring how engaging with textual structures shapes the affective experience of a story. One of the distinctive dimensions to experiencing video game stories is that their modes of engagement can lead to players feeling responsible for the decisions

they make within the diegetic space of the game and its contextual storyworld. This perception grows out of a simple feedback loop, where players begin affectively invested in the idea that their decisions and actions will be meaningful within the space of the game. The fact that there are consequences to their choices within the storyworld both reinforces this ongoing affective investment and suggests that they are responsible for the outcomes of those decisions. As a result, players can come to consider how they *would* feel about possible consequences to choices they are weighing, treating them seriously within the context of the storyworld. Importantly, the choices which begin the feedback loop do not themselves have to be weighty or narratively significant:

> The interaction that supports this sense of responsibility does not need to be significant in order to reinforce investment in the world of the game: much of the gameplay in *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) consists of picking up and exploring objects within the space of the house. Every time you examine an ornament or object and then put it back reinforces investment in the house as a lived space, and the idea that the next time you want to pick something up, the action will work similarly to the real world. (Veale, 2017b: 658)

Mahli-Ann Butt and Daniel Dunne analyse affective materiality in 'Rebel Girls and Consequence in *Life Is Strange* and *The Walking Dead*' (Butt and Dunne, 2017). They argue the way both games frame the decisions that players can be responsible for communicates a utilitarian framework whereby outspoken, independent women should be sacrificed for the good of their communities. Their analysis engages with affective materiality because it considers how the textual structures of the two games produce specific modes of engagement which have affective dimensions. Since these are video game texts, the modes of engagement frame the player as responsible for events within the space of the game, and that responsibility is central to the affective experience of playing:

> When the player reaches the climax of the game, choosing to kill Kenny – the father figure – or to let him kill Jane, the method in which these choices are portrayed places one choice as more naturalistic that the other. Jane's death appears incidental, since what causes her death is for the player-character of Clementine to not act and let the game, and thus Kenny, run its course into the death of Jane. Choosing to do nothing (to not select an option but let the timer run out) also causes the death of Jane and thus presents her death as fated through the very game mechanics. (. . .) the lack of action suggests that Clementine (and the player) is absolved of guilt for not intervening, since it could be seen that the natural sequence of events was for Jane to die. (. . .)
>
> Contrasting this action with the alternative choice to kill Kenny, the player character must choose to act against Kenny and shoot him in order to prevent Jane's death. (. . .) shooting Kenny makes the player-character inherently responsible for their actions while choosing to do nothing allows the player-character to provide their own interpretation for what happens. Indeed, even in the choice presented, the two options are to "shoot Kenny" or to "look away." (Butt and Dunne, 2017: 9)

Butt and Dunne's work highlights that exploring affective materiality is a valuable critical tool, since the differences to how a game is structured, how the player negotiates that structure and how the affective experience is framed, all have significant impacts on the game's meaning and ideological implications.

Both *Undertale* and *NITW* are highly conscious of these dynamics and use affective materiality to encourage players to reflect on the consequences of their decisions in multiple arenas: within the context of the game, their engagement with other games and their engagement with the wider world. In doing so, both games apply storytelling techniques that distinguish playing video games

from the experience of other media forms and encourage an empathetic engagement with their fictional storyworlds.

The next section will explore how *NITW* places the player in the same constrained narrative and affective context as its protagonist, and uses the player's experience of responsibility within the game as a distinctive foundation for storytelling.

'If anyone's going to ruin your night, Mae, it really should be you'

One of the tools *NITW* uses to craft an empathetic and personally powerful storytelling experience is the lack of affective mediation found in playing video games compared to other media forms. As the player, you[2] are the one who responds to events both affectively and through choices, rather than a protagonist who the audience ideally sympathises with (Veale, 2011, 2015: 144). Christy Dena's concept of 'eureka discourse' is one example of a lack of affective mediation. Discussing the context of Alternate Reality Games, she describes a 'language of discovery' where the person negotiating the text experiences epiphanies directly, since they are overcoming obstacles themselves (Dena, 2008: 53). To take advantage of these dynamics, *NITW* eases the player gently into the protagonist's context, allowing them to slowly put the pieces of her life together themselves. Mae Borowski is a young woman who has dropped out of college and returned to her small hometown of Possum Springs in America's rust belt. She is also a cat.

We enter the game on Mae remembering the circumstances of her grandfather's death entirely as text on screen. The page gradually fills in with information, and at points we can select which detail Mae remembers, prompting her to elaborate. Through this process, we learn about who she is, her voice within the storyworld and first experience our ability to choose options that are strongly framed by Mae's context. This contextual framing for choice and responsibility as part of the affective materiality of play is one of the *NITW*'s central storytelling tools.

The frame works because of the way the game gradually allows us to acclimatise to Mae's life, circumstances and identity through play. After the introductory memory, Mae finds herself with no one to collect her at a rural bus station in the middle of the night. Her voice and identity within the storyworld are reinforced by caustic, clever observations about her environment and circumstances. As we explore the space with her, these simple interactions start building a feedback loop: because basic decisions like jumping and movement lead to predictable outcomes, we start investing in the idea that future decisions we might make will also have consequences, and consider them with affective weight as a result (Veale, 2015: 138–139).

Without alternative options or a way to contact her family, Mae is left to hike home through the woods. On the way, she becomes trapped in a creek filled with long abandoned logs. The player is left to figure out how to get past the obstacle, which results in experimenting with the environment: in an example of Dena's eureka discourse, we find that if Mae climbs onto the pile of logs and jumps repeatedly on the edge of the longest one, it sends the pile spilling to the ground in a near-lethal avalanche. Mae and the player both realise she was nearly killed, which shocks and delights Mae, if not necessarily us, and means she is one step closer to home.

We learn a great deal from having our viewpoint and agency tied very directly to Mae's circumstances – and who she is as a person – within minutes of starting the game. She is intelligent, sarcastic and reckless to the point of inviting self-destruction. All of our potential decision-making will be framed by her perspective, and this continues across the rest of the game.

The broad arc of the story follows Mae as she tries to 'go home again', discovering that her friends and family have moved on without her. As Mae, the player is asked what they are going to do about that, and indeed what they are *capable* of doing about that.

The storyworld and experience of play manages to be both very gentle and very confrontational at the same time. The core action of the game is exploring Possum Springs, speaking to its inhabitants and finding ways to spend your time. In the background, there is something mysterious happening in the woods. Each day within the storyworld, you have the option of hanging out with one of two of your old friends, which opens up new chapters of the story linked to getting to know them better again. You cannot spend time with both each day, although there are other people you can hang out with without locking out the other options. Essentially the game plays out a few weeks in the life of Mae Borowski and asks what she does and who she reconnects with during that period. There is a definite narrative across the game with surprisingly high stakes, but it is very purposefully grounded as *Mae*'s story. As Trevor Strunk, game critic at No Cartridge, summarises:

> while NitW is an interactive story in some ways, it limits your choices such that you have to play the game as Mae. Bumbling, unable to really express yourself, constantly disappointing yourself and (not as often) those around you, but with the best intentions: the game itself is not difficult from a gameplay standpoint, but emotionally, there is a deep challenge in trying to *be* Mae Borowski. (Strunk, 2017)

The mechanics of the game make it very simple to make forward progress since there is only one skill-based challenge that acts as a gatekeeper and that is right at the start. As a result, even if you do badly, the game lets you proceed – although the fact that you did badly at something will be remembered. At the same time as the game encourages progress, it makes avoiding the consequences of your decisions very difficult. There is only one save slot for the game, and it autosaves upon exiting. The only way to avoid the outcome of a choice is to hard-exit by shutting the game down from the desktop and that will mean you need to repeat the entire chapter or day of the game the choice was made within.[3] As a result, it is very easy to make decisions and find yourself unable to take them back. We can find ourselves being prompted with choices resulting from previous decisions in a way that can feel out of control and without a safe end in sight. This is very appropriate for Mae's contextual position, both narratively and affectively.

Mae Borowski is a rare character within popular culture and particularly within video games, in that she is a young woman who is allowed to be a human disaster (Flores, 2019; Pane, 2017). She is a sympathetic character, but we are also very aware of the harm she causes to herself and the people around her.

For better or worse, we are offered the opportunity to invest in who Mae is and can come to feel responsible for the decisions she makes – even when all of the options we have to choose from are terrible. Games like Zoë Quinn's *Depression Quest* (Quinn, 2013) highlight that reasonable options for solving their problems do exist, but lock them away from being playable due to the protagonist's circumstances. In comparison, the options available to Mae tell us about her, including the ones we do not choose, because they are anchored to her identity and her experience of the world. For example, Mae talks to herself in a mirror before a disastrous party, and one possible choice she confronts herself with is 'People don't like you, clearly', compared to the option of 'Clearly, you don't like people'. She is tense and obviously insecure about herself, and effectively the player is positioned to decide *which*

insecurities to explore in more detail, rather than having the option to make Mae someone who is not insecure (Saas, 2017; Spencer, 2017a).

The key is that the whole experience is still anchored within Mae's agency as a character: players have discovered that although the game has fixed points which will be encountered in the narrative, there are surprisingly significant variations in the story caused if Mae simply does something else instead. For example, there is a morning where Mae and her mother will not be able to have a conversation without a horrific, hurtful argument from which neither of them escapes unscathed – if they talk to each other.[4] However, there is nothing stopping players from just leaving Mae's house that morning to go on with the day. That would mean that the disastrous encounter never happens, and lead to a fundamentally different affective experience of the text and its characters, complete with different conversational text to reflect that outcome. Players cannot make Mae into a less insecure or problematic person because her identity and context frame both her experience of the world and ours through her. However, we can shape her decisions within the context of who she is, including what conversations she has and which she does not.

The frame that Mae's context provides for *NITW* is so important that it extends to the game's paratext (Genette, 1997). All of the interface is presented as part of her therapy journal, which is visibly framed in her hands, giving us a first-person perspective of Mae holding her book. For example, there are plausibly asinine parables from local dentist-turned-psychiatrist Dr. Hank declaring 'Remember, when you feel out of control, you always have OPTIONS' as a title for the Options page. The only place where the game's paratext is not framed by Mae's context and circumstances is the title screen, which is explicitly detached from every character and just shows an overgrown patch of woods and fireflies.

However, the tight framework that Mae's context provides for affective engagement does not work for everyone. Some players of *NITW* find the characters engaging and affectively powerful, while others feel that since they are forced into situations where the only outcomes are bad – and since there is no alternative than to make what for them would be a 'stupid' choice – it is not their responsibility when things turn out badly. The perception that they lack agency disrupts the modes of affective engagement fundamental to video games and alienates those players from the experience. As always with video games, the perception of responsibility is very important for the experience, and since it is a very personal mode of storytelling, no responses are going to be universal. Cameron Kunzelman argues that there needs to be a space for pessimistic games which 'ask me to consider what I can't do' (Kunzelman, 2018), in comparison to the broader spaces of games which give the player extensive agency within the diegesis of the game's storyworld. However, it is worth highlighting that the exact processes which make such an experience so powerful for the people who can invest in it mean they will be a serious issue for those who cannot.

NITW is aware of the problem, and never attempts to tell a universal story: it tells a very specifically American one as approachably as possible. While the mechanics for making progress through the game are designed to be intuitive to encourage the kind of out-of-control developments that fit Mae's emotional world, the storyworld is deeply uncompromising and confrontational compared to the worlds typically presented by video games (Pane, 2017).

Possum Springs is a small rural town left crippled by the unemployment and underemployment symptomatic of late-stage capitalism in North America, filled with abandoned factories left to rust and derelict department stores. All of Mae's friends are part of the millennial precariat, moving between unreliable hours at multiple dead-end jobs, or in one case working themselves to the bone in what seems like a futile attempt to save the family business. The game provides a diverse, intersectionally marginalised cast who are dealing with issues we rarely see in popular culture at

all, let alone within the context of video games. Carolyn Petit, a freelance game critic and former editor for GameSpot and Feminist Frequency, highlights this dimension of *NITW*'s impact in her work:

> We talk a lot about representation, the power of seeing people who look like you as the focus of films, or the heroes of video games. Discussions about these issues often center on matters of gender identity, or race, or sexuality, and these are all essential conversations for the games industry to be having with itself and with players. But *Night in the Woods* reminded me that there are other kinds of representation as well: representations of class issues, mental health issues, and political viewpoints that exist in opposition to the capitalist status quo. Never have I seen my own political views manifested so explicitly and with such unwavering conviction in a game. *Night in the Woods* doesn't pull any false equivalency bullshit. It doesn't pretend that the truth is somewhere in the middle. It is unabashedly anti-capitalist and anti-fascist, and I love it for that. (Petit, 2017)

This is a game where it is possible to have an unexpected, pragmatic conversation with a neighbour about drug addiction and recovery. It is *dark* in a way that games do not tend to engage with, despite game culture's relaxed approach to stories where the protagonists can be expected to murder literally hundreds of people without a care (Hall, 2014).

The characters of *NITW* have cares, and this shapes a great deal about the experience. We can see how incredibly limited and self-destructive the options that Mae sees around herself are, and she is not wrong about how few doors are open to her for a future. Likewise, we can make an affective bridge from Mae to everyone else in Possum Springs and see that they are all trapped by circumstances in different ways, often lashing out at each other, but also often trying to raise each other up to heights they might reach together but not alone (Saas, 2017; Spencer, 2017a).

Players of the game have also been able to extend the affective bridge encouraged by the game to themselves and others outside of the game space. The creators have spoken of being contacted by many people who had been dealing with the same lack of medical and social support as the characters in the game. They were able to recognise they were not alone in dealing with their problems (including mental illness, diagnosed and otherwise) because of playing it, and have been able to get help and potentially form communities as a result (Spencer, 2017a).

The fact that Mae's choices are closely tied to her personality and circumstances is not accidental. The game uses the affective materiality innate to video game experiences to encourage the player to become affectively invested in making choices within Mae's very specific, limited context in a way that inspires questions about that context. Learning more about the familiar and yet unfamiliar Possum Springs connects to learning about Mae's family and friends, and how their circumstances have changed since she left. All the while, we learn about Mae by the questions she asks, how she asks them, and what she refuses to interrogate about herself. The background question of what is going on for Mae that means she is such a mess, and why she dropped out of college, forms a central spine for the narrative (Spencer, 2017a).

NITW uses the distinctive affective materiality of video games to build a foundation that gives the player a very specific framework for decision-making. It uses these tools to explore themes of depression and mental illness in a context with no social safety net, alongside the grinding horror of poverty and what people can be willing to do to escape or prevent it. At the same time, it is a very human story of finding hope in dark places, that shines precisely because of how bleak a storyworld and personal context it constructs for us using these tools.

'Despite everything, it's still you'

Undertale shares NITW's approach of giving players a very specific and limited framework for decision-making, but it uses your responses to the problems it poses to ask what your choices mean about who are you choosing to be in the storyworld.

Undertale is heavily inspired by – and in conversation with – the role-playing game (RPG) genre, particularly those inspired by the subgenre which originated from Japan. Foundational examples of the genre that *Undertale* is inspired by include the *Dragon Quest* series (Nakamura, 1986), *Earthbound* and the wider *Mother* series (Itoi, 1989, 1994), *Brandish* (Kiya, 1991) and to an extent, the *Final Fantasy* series (Sakaguchi, 1987). In very general terms, the common features the so-called Japanese Roleplaying Games (J-RPGs) share are that they are relatively linear narrative experiences in which characters become stronger by raising their level through gaining experience-points (XP) by fighting monsters that randomly attack as you navigate the world. Often there are more challenging 'boss' monsters who are presented as having more personality than 'normal' monsters, which are mindless threats – or from another perspective, which present opportunities since destroying them gives you resources and XP. These games are often framed from a third-person perspective, often viewed from above and sometimes change into a more direct and specific viewpoint when combat begins. Although many of *Undertale*'s specific touchstones are historical within the context of video games culture, they were also very influential in establishing 'normal' conventions for games both within the role-playing genre and more broadly, and the assumptions that can be safely taken for granted in more modern games.

The protagonist of *Undertale* is a child who has fallen into a subterranean world of monsters. After a brief introduction in which we are told that the world down here is ruthless and cruel, we are instead rescued from a threat by a woman named Toriel who volunteers to be our guide. She teaches us that whenever we encounter a threat, we should talk to it until she comes to save us. The game gives us the option of fighting anyway, although Toriel is disturbed if we attack a practice dummy rather than speaking to it. Shortly afterward, Toriel needs to leave us briefly and asks us to stay where we are – even providing a phone to call her with if we need to. At that point, we need to negotiate the rest of the ruins by ourselves – although it is entirely up to us how we do so.

Mechanically, each potentially threatening encounter is structured similarly. We are presented with a simple animated representation of the entity confronting us, and the options to Fight, Act, use an Item or to seek or offer Mercy. The possibilities tied to Acting are contextual and can include examining your opponent or options such as Flirt, Compliment, Hug and others. You then take turns making your choice and dealing with the response from your opponent(s).

Talking our way out of potentially dangerous encounters is initially simple, since early creatures are unthreatening and often flee when confronted, but rapidly becomes more complicated. After each action you take, you will be attacked. Different styles of bullets and threats fly towards your heart within a bounded square, and you move the heart to dodge. At the same time, the creatures confronting you talk or react in ways you can read. Each different kind of creature in the storyworld presents a unique challenge, and often these challenges offer insights into the nature of who you are dealing with – and insight is key. The goal – if you are following Toriel's admonition not to harm anyone – is to figure out how to interact with a given creature by using what you learn about them so that they will allow you to show them mercy and end the battle. Early very shy creatures run away if you speak to them at all. A cockroach-like creature provides a more complex challenge: we learn they 'run with a bad crowd' and they attack you until you have persuaded their friends to leave or otherwise dealt with them, and then dance harmlessly once they are alone.

Figuring out what each character wants is effectively a puzzle where you study the cues presented in their attacks, what they say when they attack and how they are described by the game. It can work as a purely intellectual exercise, but the game encourages affective investment as well, since successfully discerning what each character wants often involves understanding and negotiating consent, their desires and/or boundaries (Ruberg, 2018: 2.6). All of the characters are presented in entertaining ways, and successfully figuring out what they want is rewarded with both an end to the threat and comedic text describing their changed demeanour. *Undertale*'s Pacifist option is a complex and evolving challenge grounded in approaching everything in the storyworld, no matter how strange and threatening, with empathy and understanding (Lido, 2016). As Alexandra Müller argues, it requires an active practice and pursuit of non-violence (Müller, 2017: 6). As a result, it features more diverse forms of engagement than violence, which manifests as a simple, repetitive mini-game that inflicts damage when successful.

The end of the ruins section provides a final challenge which is even more difficult if your goal is pacifism. Toriel believes you will be killed if you leave and tries to destroy the exit to the ruins to keep you safe. If you repeatedly ignore her instructions to stay, she makes you prove your strength by attacking you. The battle consists of trying to avoid Toriel's dangerous attacks while repeatedly showing her mercy, refusing to either fight her or to run away because she does not want to seriously hurt you.[5] Toriel persists, becoming more and more upset and miserable because she is trying to save your life but hates the entire process.

This stage of the conflict can be misread if you approach it as a challenge in a game rather than a dialogue with Toriel as a person (Müller, 2017: 29). There is a period while you are repeatedly offering her Mercy where Toriel stops talking, offering nothing but silence. Since they are getting the same null response to their choices, some players conclude further dialogue is fruitless, move into combat and kill her. However, if instead you keep going, she opens up again and starts talking, ultimately deciding to let you leave the ruins despite her deep misgivings. Effectively, a central element to what qualifies as the first boss-fight of the game lies in trying to understand who Toriel is, what motivates her, and trusting that treating her as a person is the best option you have.[6]

Your escape from the ruins highlights one of the game's central storytelling techniques.[7] In addition to its notable approach to the possibility of avoiding conflict, *Undertale* is distinctive through being deeply aware of all of the decisions that the player makes. *Undertale* turns the player's awareness of how video game modes of engagement normally work into a storytelling tool in ways which go beyond intertextual references – although there are plenty of those – and become what I refer to as *metamedia storytelling*. Metamedia storytelling is where our familiarity with modes of engagement across different media forms is used as a storytelling tool by setting up particular expectations for how the text will be negotiated, in order to subvert them (Veale, 2017a: 11).

Undertale's central tool in this case underlines the player's responsibility: through a layered system of two save-files, the game remembers *everything*. Even if you load the game to avoid a particular event, *Undertale* will remember what happened originally, and it uses this information to manipulate the player's affective experience of the text. For example, there are different endings to your exit from the ruins depending on what the player has done. When you leave, your decisions are heckled by Flowey, the monstrous flower that Toriel saves you from when you first arrive in the cave. If you saved Toriel but killed anything else, no matter how seemingly small or minor, Flowey lists the names of everything you murdered and says, 'Just think: any one of them could have been someone elses' Toriel'. If you killed Toriel in the fight *and then loaded the game to avoid doing so*, Flowey mocks your regret (Mosselaer, 2019: 202–203). If you save Toriel initially and then load

the game to see what happens if you kill her, Flowey gloats that you murdered someone on a whim just to see what happened. The game incorporates this awareness to a deeper extent than simply one conversation with Flowey. If you load the game after killing Toriel, there is additional dialogue before the boss-fight: after saying that you will need to prove your strength, Toriel pauses and then says, 'You look like you've seen a ghost'. Likewise, the player's internal monologue as you are trying to spare Toriel changes to include, 'You thought about telling Toriel that you saw her die. But . . . That's creepy'. Effectively, the game does everything it can to startle the player with its 'secret knowledge' and tries to make them feel guilty about what they did.

Just as with *NITW*, these dynamics do not work for everyone. It is possible to want to spare Toriel (and other characters in the game) but be unable to figure out how, which players find frustrating and disrupts their investment in the experience (Muncy, 2015). A player misreading the situation has irretrievable consequences, since it is impossible to load a game that does not remember you once killed someone without restarting from scratch. It is very possible to complete the game after killing someone, and there are a wide range of different 'neutral' endings which some players prefer to the Pacifist conclusion to the story (Grayson, 2015). However, killing someone permanently locks the player away from the Pacifist ending, which actively changes the status-quo of the storyworld. Intuitively, the key to the Pacifist ending is that approaching the characters as *obstacles that need to be overcome* is conceptually already failing the challenge of completing the game as a pacifist through an active practice of non-violence (Müller, 2017: 6)

Part of the 'metamedia storytelling' that *Undertale* deploys is that the fact you can load game to explore different options is not something that just exists extradiegetically to the storyworld: it is a central part of the narrative, and there is an explanation for why you have the power to essentially travel through time. Additionally, the game spends a huge amount of effort to ensure that the player's available options fit their context as they negotiate the storyworld, but refuses to let the player off the hook for taking any of them. For example, in many games, if the player has chosen a peaceful method of problem-solving, that will lock out the ability to attack, but *Undertale* offers the ability to attack at all times. If you attack Toriel after convincing her to let you go, for example, she is slain instantly, skipping the normal routine for wearing down her health – but she lives long enough to react to your betrayal of her trust.[8]

The game uses its awareness of your decisions to draw attention to your responsibility in negotiating the text through your choices, and frames the entire experience through that lens (Boyne, 2016b). While *NITW* clearly anchors you in the affective position of Mae Borowski and asks you to engage with the storyworld from that position, *Undertale* provides you with a protagonist who is more of a blank slate[9] and then starts interrogating what your actions say about who you are choosing to be within the storyworld. The game uses this framework to present a savage critique of what is taken for granted and normalised within broader video game and fan culture (Brewis, 2016), alongside telling an ambitious story. Given there are always alternatives to combat, killing anything – no matter how small – means that the player is sealed away from the most optimistic ending because achieving it requires empathy, self-sacrifice and bonds with other characters within the world.[10]

Inversely, if the player approaches *Undertale*'s storyworld as if it were a typical video game RPG by deliberately triggering randomised encounters with monsters to kill them in combat – what is commonly seen as an efficient way to become stronger – then soon all of the monsters hide from you. There are signs that civilians have been evacuated as you approach. Rooms that would be filled with non-player characters are empty because everyone who would be there is dead. The descriptions of the world that you are provided lack colour, since the only thing such a character is

framed as caring about is violence. Such a character is presented as an affectless, unfeeling sociopath. Descriptions of characters you encounter are replaced with statements like 'Forgettable' or 'In my way'. The game becomes as boring and repetitive as possible because there is literally no one to communicate with, and the rare exceptions are designed to be affectively challenging and miserable. Some characters make heroic efforts to convince you to be a better person, while others become the hero they have always wanted to be – and fail anyway. Trying to play through a No-Mercy run is hard to do because the game makes the experience into a monstrous one – similar to how affectively challenging John Walker found trying to choose every evil option available in *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare, 2003; Walker, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). *Undertale* does everything it can to make the player *feel bad* about what they are doing, particularly given it is unlikely to be their first experience playing the game, and they are confronted with how the consequences of their actions impact characters they have some prior affective investment with ('Gaming Pixie', 2016; 'Problem Machine', 2016). It can become hard to proceed because the storyworld honestly reflects how horrible your actions are, and every new encounter is an opportunity to reconsider if you want to keep going or to change your ways. The end of the game uses metamedia storytelling to critique the player's actions, particularly the idea that they 'had to' choose this path if they wanted to 'see everything' and points out how empty and miserable such a deferral of responsibility has been (Brewis, 2016; Walker, 2015). On the other side of things, taking the effort to engage with all of the creatures and characters within the storyworld as worthy of empathy and communication opens the door to a powerful narrative about how kindness can save and reshape the storyworld.

People who have finished *Undertale* have discussed how hard it is to go back to other games which do assume that it is valid and neutral to unthinkingly kill your way across the storyworld, because they are affectively invested in feeling that random characters have value and an interior-life within the space of the game (1Up Culture, 2016; PBS Idea Channel, 2016; Repperger, 2015). Studies show that although only a minority of players apply reflective lessons learned from having their perspectives challenged through gameplay, the numbers that do are still higher than anticipated (Whitby et al., 2019). Some players have said the game prompted them to change how they were engaging with their friends outside of the storyworld (Grayson, 2015). Others say it gave them tools that helped them in their own lives (Isaac, 2015), such as with grief ('toolsoldier', 2018) or depression and attempted suicide (Boyne, 2016a). The community surrounding the game has many faces, ranging from helping people to feel comfortable as they develop new skills and share their early work for constructive feedback, to harassing people for 'playing the game wrong' because certain pathways are considered to be more 'correct' than others (Spencer, 2017b).

Undertale's story is framed so that the player and protagonist share an initial context, narratively and affectively: you are a lost child in a world of monsters, looking for a way home. It uses the affective materiality innate to the video game experience to focus on the choices the player makes in negotiating that story. Its metamedia storytelling ensures the story reflects on player behaviour that is taken for granted across most games, particularly role-playing games of the genre that *Undertale* belongs to. As we choose who we are going to be within the space of the game, we learn more about who the monsters underground are as a diverse, marginalised collection of people – particularly the boss monsters we spend the most time with. Part of the story lies in deciding what you are going to try to do about their current circumstances.

Undertale's textual structure means that there is a broad and substantially distinct range of 'neutral' tracks through the text which complete the protagonist's story but leave the storyworld without closure. The Pacifist and No-Mercy paths each both use mechanical and affective

challenges to make them harder to complete than the neutral outcomes, precisely because they do reach closure. The Pacifist arc balances the player's desire to actively avoid harming anyone within the storyworld against the fact doing so is challenging and frustrating – dangling the possibility of just using violence to get past an 'obstacle' at all times. Meanwhile, following the No-Mercy path means enduring a mechanically and affectively empty experience, punctuated by affective reflections on your choices that are designed to make you feel horrible. Everything comes down to who you are choosing to be, and the game introduces entirely novel mechanics to ensure you cannot get away from the consequences of your choices.

Conclusion

Textual structures function as a metaphoric 'coal-face' where members of the audience labour to generate meaning from texts. Different textual structures require different forms and modes of labour to negotiate, and different modes of labour have an impact on the meaning of the experiences produced from negotiating those textual structures. N. Katherine Hayle's 'media-specific analysis' considers the ways that different textual structures require different modes of engagement to negotiate. Authors are able to influence that labour through shaping textual structure, and thus influence the meaning generated by the people engaging with a text in the process.

Part of the meaning generated as people negotiate with texts is affective, rather than aesthetic or associated with semiotic signification. As a result, materiality is innately affective because there is an inextricable affective dimension to the meaning that we generate from engaging with texts and their underlying structure.

Affective materiality is a tool for exploring how engaging with textual structures shapes the affective experience of a story. The experience of video games is distinctive because their modes of engagement can lead to players feeling responsible for the decisions they make within the diegetic space of the game and its contextual storyworld. *NITW* and *Undertale* both use the perception of responsibility found in video game modes of engagement as an active storytelling tool, but apply it in different ways. *NITW* anchors the player's experience of the game's storyworld to the specific contextual position of its protagonist, Mae Borowski, both narratively and affectively. As a result, we become invested in marginalised characters and a social context that are very rarely represented in media, particularly in games. *NITW* uses that investment for telling a powerful and personal story anchored to Mae's circumstances and identity. In comparison, *Undertale* shapes the player's experience by framing the story around the choices they make in very visible ways, and folds any attempts they make to change those decisions into the story being told. It then uses the responsibility associated with video game modes of engagement as a central pillar of its storytelling, to reflect on who the player is choosing to be within the diegetic space of the game's storyworld.

Medium-specific analysis that studies affective materiality by exploring modes of engagement provides a better understanding of how the labour of engaging with texts is shaped by their structures. It thus offers insights into elements that have always helped make the experience of playing video games distinctive.

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Notes

1. This is an important conceptual lens to place upfront for both games, narratively, ludically and thematically. I want to highlight this since although I have attempted to mitigate the issues that Ruberg critiques regarding analysis which 'straightwashes' games like Undertale, I may not have avoided them completely.
2. I use 'you' throughout this article as a way of framing an experience in general terms, on the grounds that it is simple and direct. However, it is also a frame that can conceal many fundamental assumptions and biases in the same way that textual analysis renders the reader and their social position invisible. In this case, I believe it's worth situating the researcher within the practice by addressing who the 'I' who experienced these games is, given I am drawing on my own experiences and context and that the person engaging with the materiality of these games matters to the experience of playing them. I am a White, cisgender, able-bodied, largely straight man in my early 40s employed on a limited-term contract. I played these games on a combination of PC and Nintendo Switch over an extended period, sharing the experiences with my spouse – trading off so that we each took different 'runs' through the games. This means that we experienced both games from a variety of positions and discussed them together as we played.
3. Even this option may not be possible on some consoles.
4. Once the conversation starts, there is no way to back out of it before it all goes wrong – reflecting that by the time Mae realises what is happening, she is already lashing out and an active participant in an uncomfortable, painful disaster.
5. This is telegraphed by the fact it is impossible to die in the boss fight without making a mistake because Toriel avoids hitting you when you have low health. It has become even harder to die during the fight after patches updated the game.
6. There are several boss-fights later in the game that could be taken to subvert this 'lesson' the game teaches you, since in those cases further dialogue *is* fruitless, but the consistent point is that figuring out what action is needed to peacefully disengage comes from understanding who you are dealing with. Different people need different responses.
7. The soundtrack is a separate significant tool that *Undertale* uses extensively to shape the affective experience of the player (Dyason, 2017; Yu, 2016a, 2016b).
8. Anecdotally, I have spoken to players horrified by outcomes such as this one who 'didn't think it would work', whereas *Undertale*'s position is 'you tried to murder someone who was vulnerable, what did you think was going to happen?'
9. The protagonist is not entirely blank: for example, they are either nonbinary or are otherwise never directly gendered by the text (Ruberg, 2018: 2.2).
10. Although as noted, it can be successfully completed as an intellectual exercise in puzzle solving, and the affective dimensions do not work for everyone, or can be actively frustrating when someone IS invested but cannot figure out how to proceed.

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