

UNDERTALE

Undertale is a Role-Playing Video game, where the player plays as a human child who falls into a world of monsters under the earth, separated by a magical barrier. The player must find their way back to the surface but encounters several monsters through their journey. The player can either spare or kill the monsters they encounter. The choices made by the player affect the progression of the game. The player can either take the "pacifist" route to finish the game, where no monsters are killed, or they can kill all monsters and take the "genocide" route. If the player kills some monsters, but not all, they take the "neutral" route. The ending of the game varies for all routes, and subsequent gameplays are affected as well. The game gives the player the choice of not killing any monsters unless they absolutely want to. Thus, the player's morality acts as the cornerstone for the game's progression.

From the start of the game, the objective is apparent, and the mechanics are explained with ease. At the beginning of the game, the player is saved from Undertale's evil character, Flowey, by the ex-Queen of Undertale, Toriel, who walks the player through the game's basic mechanics. The tutorial is beautifully embedded in the game, and Toriel literally hand holds the player throughout the first few puzzles in the game (fig 1). The game beautifully eases the player into the mechanics, with the first few monsters being very easy to give the player an idea of how to play. Easing the player into the game with tutorials increases the player's engagement and the playtime by 16% and the game progress by 40%. (Andersen, et al., The Impact of Tutorials on Games of Varying Complexity, 2012, p. 1)ⁱ. The game also has frequent save points, which reduces the amount of rage quitting among players.

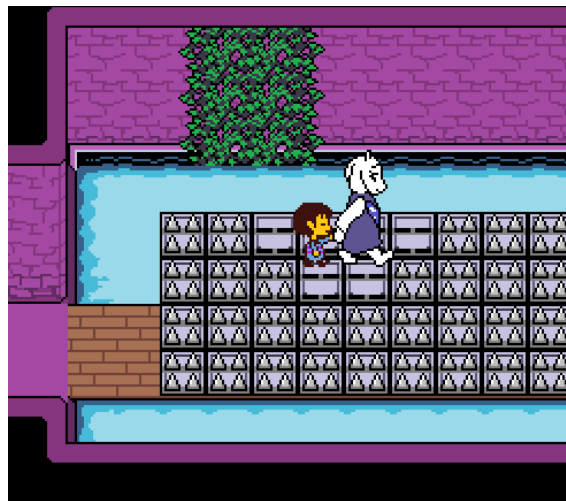


Fig 1: Toriel helping player with a puzzle

Visual cues are a great way to help players plan their moves and avoid enemy attacks. In Undertale, visual cues aid the player to dodge attacks. One such instance where this is pronounced is the "Undyne spear maze" part of the game. When Undyne, one of the bosses in Undertale, attacks the player, certain parts of the ground glow, and spears arise out of these areas within a few seconds (fig 2). The player can use this as a warning and avoid the spears. The cues are well pronounced, and there is proper feedback for actions with these elements (Dillman, Mok, Tang, Oehlberg, & Mitchell, 2018)ⁱⁱ, which allows the players to plan their moves. Thus, the use of visual cues in games increases the immersion of the players in the game. Another example of visual cues in Undertale is different colored attack types in the battle room. The different colors indicate the features of the attack. The white attack has to be dodged; if the player's soul collides with it, they will lose health. The grey attacks do no damage at all; the red attacks do no harm either but warn of upcoming attacks, the green attacks heal the player. The blue attack does no damage to the player as long as the player's soul remains motionless, and the orange attack does no damage to the player as long as the player's soul is moving.



Fig 2: Undyne spear maze

Ari Polgar (2018, pp 15-25)ⁱⁱⁱ speaks about how a story can be portrayed through the environment, space, structure, and cinematics. Immersion refers to the sensation of being both present within a game world, also called spatial presence, and emotionally invested in a game story, also called involvement. A game's ability to achieve such a conceit comes from player agency's believability and power to enact change within the game. This can be done by giving focus to the environment and allowing the player to interact with it. Throughout Undertale, we see that the player can interact with the objects in the environment. So much effort is put into the objects in the environment and those in the character's rooms. The player can learn a lot about the game and its characters by interacting with the surroundings. We see a lot of diegetic

elements in the game. Non-diegetic feedback is not visible within the spatial game space, like the progress bar. The feedback that is visible from both inside the spatial game space and the fictional game world can be termed as diegetic feedback (Li, Spek, Hu, & Feijs, 2019)^{iv}. The players must observe the environment to perceive information from the diegetic game elements. Diegetic elements can be found in *Undertale*, where the player can interact with the surroundings to learn more about the characters. An example of this is where the player interacts with the walls to learn about the past of *Undertale* (fig 3).

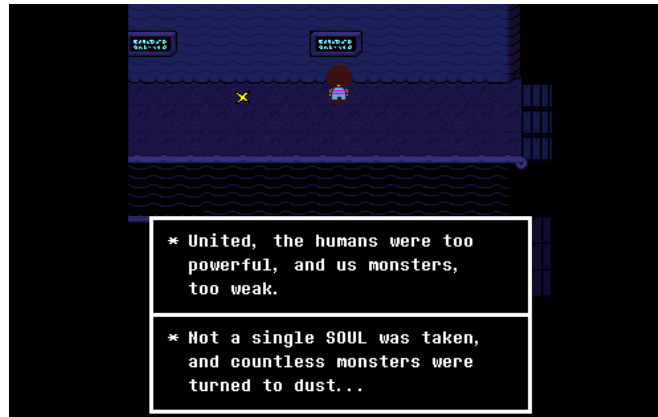


Fig 3: Walls narrate story in *Undertale*

We also see a great deal of humanness in the game. We are introduced to the notion that monsters are people too. Though *Undertale*'s narrative is consistently funny, it is incredibly touching as well. We get insights into the touch of humanness in the monsters through the environment as well. An example of this is the "echo flowers," which repeat the last heard conversation (fig 4). By listening to various conversations, we get a feel of the monsters and empathize with them better. One such conversation is of a monster who wants to climb the mountain that traps all the monsters underground and wants to see the world above, and another monster says it's their wish too. We get a perspective of the monsters and understand why the monsters are trying to attack the player. They want a better future for themselves. This shows the humanness depicted in games (Foulston, 2019; Piaget, 1999, pp. 110-113)^v. All monsters have personalities that are brought out through battles. They want to be heard. In *Undertale*, you win by understanding—by listening, learning, and empathizing. A crucial part of *Undertale* is experiencing the depth of the monster's hopes and dreams. Sympathizing with the monsters brings up a personal conflict within the player and questions their morality on each encounter with them. *Undertale* spreads the message of humanity, and this message hits hard each time the player has a conversation with the monster and is then made to battle with them.



Fig 4: Echo flowers

Though the game tackles a serious topic of the consequences of one's actions and instigates the player to question their morality in situations, it is well sugarcoated with humor. This increases the player's engagement and lightens the mood while conveying a serious message. At a certain point of the game, the player can enter into a snail race where the player has to click on Z to encourage their snail repeatedly (fig 5). When Z is pressed too long, the snail bursts into flames and the snail race organizer says that the pressure to succeed got to her. This is just one example where the developer tackles a serious topic through light humor.



Fig 5: Snail race

Another feature of Undertale that stood out to me was the gender representation of the protagonist. Frisk, the main character, is gender-neutral, which allows the players to decide

whether to interpret Frisk as a male, female or something else. Undertale is a perfect example where the gender identity of the main character is kept fluid, thereby representing all genders equally (fig 6) (Keren-Deter, 2016)^{vi}. This also allows the marginalized community to be represented in games and allows them to empathize better with the characters (Belair, 2019)^{vii}.



Fig 6: Representation of Frisk as gender-neutral

Inclusion is essential in games, and gender is not the only factor for representation. Displaying text on screens to make video games accessible to people who are hard of hearing is an excellent example of inclusion (Brook, 2017)^{viii}. Undertale is a good example of this as all the dialogues are displayed on the screen and accompanied by sound (fig 7). This enables people hard of hearing to play the game. Further, even in the fights with the monsters, the visual feedback allows these players to attack on cue.



Fig 7: Dialogues displayed on screen

We engage in activities that give us joy and those that we find fun. The same applies to games. We play games to have fun. Through games, we learn patterns and apply them to reality unconsciously. Once the player learns the pattern, and there is nothing new to learn, the game becomes dull. A game can also be boring to the player when it is either too easy to understand the pattern or too challenging to master it. Undertale hits the perfect balance of challenge and ease of play that allows the player to keep hooked on the game. According to Koster (2012)^{ix}, fun from games comes from learning, comprehension, and mastery. The best part of Undertale is that the player's every action changes the subsequent gameplay. This allows the player to be able to explore new gameplay of the game. Koster further explains that game feedback has a massive impact on the fun. This feedback includes art, animation, sound, music, movement, and story. A game cannot be fun because of its core features alone, i.e., problem, preparation, and core mechanics. It is the feedback that triggers dopamine and causes fun. We see that all the dialogues in Undertale change according to the player's action; i.e., in addition to the music and animations in the game, the dialogues of the characters change as feedback as well.

For years, games have been used as tools to understand humanitarian crises and educate people on the consequences of their actions. It has also been used to raise funds for NGOs and generate empathy and awareness of specific situations. Guardiola (2019, pp 2-3)^x speaks about games that give an idea about the refugee camps in Syria, the experiences of crossing the Mexican-American border, etc. Borders (Alvarez et al. 2017) proposes a game installation where the player must pass the Americano-Mexican frontier. The content is directly inspired by the story of the author's parents, and game mechanics include avoiding patrols in the desert or preserving water, etc.

Similarly, several games have been created to educate the players that killing other beings is terrible and that there is always another way. This closely relates to the genocide run of Undertale, where the NPCs continuously remind the player that there is still good in the player and he does not have to kill. The player is also constantly reminded that he is traveling a dark path but can always turn back.

Undertale is a game about consequences. The gameplay differs depending on the player's actions. If the player chooses the genocide path, they gain immense power and can kill bosses very quickly. The towns are deserted before they arrive. The player can even walk into shops and then take all the money. The music becomes extremely distorted and strained, and the game has a very dark setting. Some of the characters warn the player that they are going down a dark path and insist that they stop killing all the monsters.

Unlike many other games, very little of Undertale's backstory is revealed at the beginning of the game. Instead, towards the end of the game, when the player reaches the King of Undertale, Asgore's house, the player is encountered by numerous monsters that narrate the past to the player. They give the player a glimpse of the story of Asriel, Asgore's and Toriel's son. They narrate how Asriel was attacked by the humans when he went to the human world upon his best friend's tragic passing, the first human who had fallen to Undertale (fig 8). At this point, the player finally understands why the monsters dislike humans. Revealing the backstory towards the end of the

game makes the narrative very useful and moves the player. In Undertale, this backstory is revealed right before the boss fight with Asgore, which can lead the player to change their mind to spare Asgore and spare Undertale.

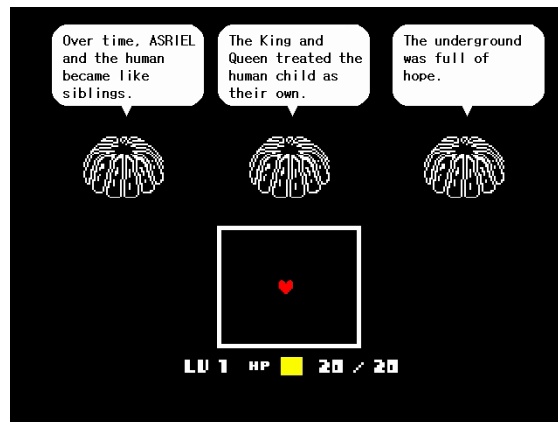


Fig 8: Monsters narrate story at Asgore's castle

The flow of the game is to point. In all routes of the game, the player is kept at the edge of their seats from the beginning. The transition between the different gameplays is also flawless, and the narrative holds the game together very well. The game does an excellent job with foreshadowing. At the beginning of the game, Flowey tells the player that the motto of Undertale is kill or be killed. In Asgore's fight, we see that this concept is applicable as he destroys the option for mercy. Hence the player can neither spare Asgore nor flee from the fight. However, if the player beats him, the choice is visible again.

One of the game's common motifs is the reminder that the player is just playing a video game and the theme of repetition. In the boss fight with Flowey, Flowey takes control of the save files and saves and reloads the game when the player is almost dead just so that he can kill the player over and over again.

The beauty of Undertale is that there are different endings according to how the player progresses through the game. To get the true pacifist ending, the player must finish some side quests. Along this sequence, it is also revealed to the player that Flowey is the manifestation of Asriel and the first child who fell underground. Towards the end, Flowey absorbs the six humans and six monsters' souls and becomes Asriel, the real boss of Undertale. The final real ending allows the monsters to have the lives they all dreamt of, life in the human world. When the player restarts the game to play another route, Flowey warns the player that by playing again, the player is undoing all the good lives the monsters have now. And when this is done, most of the monsters are removed from the game. This leads us to the next route of the game, the genocide route. Two of the most challenging boss battles are in this route. Sans is the toughest boss the player encounters, and he keeps a record of every time the player dies and reloads a save file. This is why in the true pacifist ending, Sans is not thrilled when he reaches the surface; he just returns

to his home since he knows it can all be reset and reloaded. This is again another excellent example of subtle foreshadowing.

Undertale remembers everything; who the player killed and who they spared. The playthroughs are recorded as well, and subsequent reloads are altered based on the player's actions. A simple reload or even starting a new game won't reset the gameplay. All playthroughs will still be changed.

Finally, after beating the genocide route, if the player tries to restart the game, the screen turns black for a long time till the player is prompted to sell their soul to continue playing; i.e., the player will no longer be playing as Frisk anymore. Once the player goes through the genocide route, the game will never be the same.

In terms of art, Undertale is very lacking. However, in the final boss fight with Flowey, the change from normal pixelated art to photorealistic art gives the players a shock value (fig 9). The primitive art style is compensated for by the excellent narrative and gameplay.



Fig 9: Flowey boss fight

The excellently written characters, genre-bending battle system, and solid soundtrack put Undertale at the top of its game among RPGs. Ultimately, Undertale is a masterfully crafted experience that can keep the players engaged and make them want more.

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