

When I tell people about my focus in games being on the use of mechanics to influence emotion and present narrative, I am frequently asked for examples of games that exemplify these qualities. Without a second of hesitation I respond that the most profound example that I know of a game that successfully uses mechanics to this effect is *Undertale*. Many things can be said about the good qualities of *Undertale*, such as the well-written plot, nostalgic art style, and the astounding soundtrack, but what sets *Undertale* apart is the use of the game mechanics to present the narrative and the way all the other qualities are integrated around the mechanics.

The fight with Toriel is the best example in the game of characterization through mechanics, using the mechanics to affect player emotion, and manipulating player expectations. This fight occurs at the end of the first level, throughout which the player has been shown that the game will feature monsters with murderous intent, but most of the monsters are friendly and can be peacefully dissuaded from combat. Leading up to the combat encounter, the player has been shown the extent of Toriel's motherly characteristics as she attempts to care for the player who has fallen far away from home. There is a short sequence of dialogue after the player tells Toriel he wants to go home, during which time Toriel has an obvious shift in demeanor. At first she is saddened, thinking about the danger to the player surrounding that decision, but this quickly turns into determination to stop the player from leaving the safe place that is her home. Based on the dialogue, most players immediately recognize this as exhibiting the threshold guardian trope. Seeing no obvious way to end the fight peacefully, which Toriel had used considerable effort training the player to do, the only option is to fight. The more Toriel attacks the player the less her attacks seem intended to actually hit, and when the player's health is low her attacks even move away from the player. This is the best example of characterization through mechanics in the game, as it shows that even in combat she wants to avoid hurting the player. Most players will at this point have built up an emotional connection with Toriel, and wish to avoid killing her. Many players know that it is common in the threshold guarding trope, within games, for the guardian to yield once its health is low enough; the player has also been told that some enemies can only be spared if their health is low. Players often expect Toriel to step down after that point, but instead once her health has reached a certain low point the player deals ten times as much damage in one hit. The exciting boss music stops, and everything is slowed: the animation of her taking damage, the speed of her dialogue, her body disintegrating, and her soul snapping in half. All slowed to give the player time to let it sink in and to milk the emotion that comes while you realize that you, the player, have killed her, and it wasn't a decision made by some character you're reading about.

When Toriel takes the player to her house, leading up to the fight described above among the most obvious instances of the many components of the game being integrated as a cohesive whole is. Toriel insists that the player be comfortable making a new home here. This is communicated in the dialogue by telling the player she has made a bed and baked a pie for the player to feel welcome. The music playing in the background is calm and soothing, like a lullaby. A distinctly warm color palette is featured across the entire house and is each room drawn to reflect a well-kept family home. Mechanically, the only things the player can do are explore the house and examine the furnishings; this conveys a sense of boredom to the player, like a child at home with nothing to do but look around the house. Everything about the design in this house is deliberately intended to make the player feel a childlike sense of comfort and security. Everything except the basement, which Toriel has told the player not to enter. The color palette is cold and dark, and there is no music playing in the background. Once the player goes down, Toriel follows and makes the player go back upstairs. The basement is designed to feel dissonant with the rest of the house, and this dissonance is key to setting the mood as the player approaches his fight with Toriel.