

English 230 Worksheet for Week 9

Undertale, by Toby Fox and Temmie Chang

Wikipedia provides an accurate description of *Undertale*, and I'll tweak it just a bit here to get us started: *Undertale* is a 2015 2D role-playing video game created by Toby Fox and Temmie Chang. Players control a child who has fallen into the "Underground": a large, secluded region under the surface of the Earth, separated by a magical barrier. The player meets various monsters during the journey back to the surface, and some of those monsters engage players in fights. The combat system involves navigating through "bullet hell" attacks. Players can opt to pacify or subdue monsters to spare them instead of killing them. These choices affect the game, with the dialogue, characters, and story changing based on outcomes.

Some characters in the game: the player character (Chara) plus non-player characters (NPCs) such as Sans, Papyrus, Undyne, Alphys, Toriel, Asgore, Asriel, Flowey, Gaster, and Mettaton

Two key themes in the game: 1) the fallen child (who could be the villain, the narrator, or even "you" the player) and 2) determination / re-animation (the desire continue living and which characters possess this desire or "soul"). These two themes are grounded in a conflict between humans and monsters as well as the player's goal to escape the Underground.

Some historical context for the game: *MS Paint Adventure* forums, the *Homestuck* web comic, the GameMaker engine (the software used to make the game), pixel art and nostalgia for it, and inspiration from games like *Mother*, *EarthBound*, *Brandish*, and *Shin Megami Tensei*

The narrative: the game is character-driven and relies heavily on dialogue. A lingering question is, "Who are you?" The backstory is steeped in a war between humans and monsters, and the game is set after that war. The opening sequence does some expository work for us:

Long ago, two races ruled over Earth: HUMANS and MONSTERS.

One day, war broke out between the two races.

After a long battle, the humans were victorious.

They sealed the monsters underground with a magic spell.

The monsters populated the Underground, making it their home, and they blame the humans for the war and its aftermath. This means that humans who fall into the Underground will likely face substantial conflict.

The loop: *Undertale* encourages players to experiment with numerous runs that may follow (or attempt to follow) particular paths, often referred to as the "neutral," "genocide," "no mercy," "redemption," "pacifist," and "true pacifist" runs, for example. The gameplay loop is basically "encounter NPC," "negotiate (and bullet hell) with NPC," and "resolve encounter" or "die." Encounters (called "FIGHTs") randomly trigger a shift in the game's visuals, audio, and interface. Players face monsters, and they no longer see the player character. (The camera isn't exactly a first-person view, but it's similar to one.) During encounters, players are presented with a menu of options, allowing them to kill, spare, or flee. The encounters do not happen in real-time; they are turn-based (i.e., protagonist turn then enemy turn).

The media: *Undertale*'s soundtrack is considered to be among the best in games. Its songs help to establish conflict, they affect the game's pacing, and they shape the atmosphere. They are also memorable ("earworms"). *Undertale*'s images are not meant to be photorealistic; they are purposefully pixelated. The game also experiments a lot with text: characters are named after typefaces, verbs in an NPC encounter are expressed as text ("act," "spare," "mercy"), and acronyms are used unconventionally (EXP means "execution points" not "experience," and "LV" means "level of violence" not just "level"). Text in the game corresponds with a player's stats and gives them a sense of progress or location in the Underground.

The following links might be useful for our discussions of *Undertale*, especially since we'll focus on the game's use of text as a medium:

- A "text dump" of *Undertale*'s script: <https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/pc/180989-undertale/faqs/72468> - great for grasping the notion of text as a script but also useful for analysis, including narrative analysis
- "How *Undertale* Was Made . . ." (by ThatGuyGlen): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIlx3gmLdpA> - mostly good for context and reception studies
- *Undertale* "dialogue dump": <https://hushbugger.github.io/dialogue/> - useful for finding dialogue in the game; however, I believe it excludes (some) speech bubbles during battle mode
- Exact *Undertale* fonts: https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/4bydoz/the_exact_undertale_fonts/ - there's a lot of discussion about the fonts used in this game, and many fans have reproduced the fonts; my experience studying the game suggests this list is accurate (more accurate than most online)

