

FALLEN DOWN

Heartache & Compassion in Undertale



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For Julia

“I’m not ready for you to leave. I’m not ready to say goodbye to someone like you again. I just want you to remember me like this. Someone that was your friend for a little while.”

Undertale, “the RPG game where you don’t have to destroy anyone,” came out on September 15, 2015, bringing with it a relentless optimism, a ridiculous sense of humor, and a cast of characters that would go on to create homes in the minds and imaginations of its players.

A single human has fallen into the Underworld, the place where monsters have been sealed away. There, they’ll make their way across the underground confines of this world, meeting all of the creatures and beasts that call this place home, as they try to find a way back to the human world.

Being trapped in a land filled with monsters could be the start to just about any RPG or video game. It’s the loose premise for so many games, and largely a look at what many players willingly do to themselves when they boot up their console or PC. We look to throw ourselves, willingly, into these worlds of monsters and creatures, hoping to enjoy adventure, battle, and friendship as we work our way from one side of the game to another.

But players who were already readying their combat abilities needed to pause with *Undertale*. Rather than give players endless hordes of random battles against goblins, slimes, and irritable horses (Garland has nothing on a pair of enraged horses), they were instead given an opportunity to strike up a conversation with the creatures they came across. Yes, they could stab them with the game’s timing-based combat system, but talking to the monsters would allow players to end a fight peacefully.

“I always liked talking to monsters in *Shin Megami Tensei*. So I started programming a battle system where you could talk to foes and convince them not to fight. When I started making the game the idea that you could beat it without killing anyone just... evolved naturally,” said Toby Fox, developer of *Undertale*, in an interview I did with him back when the game came out.

Players didn’t have to kill every monster they came across as they played

through *Undertale*. Instead, players could take a variety of actions, from choosing not to pick on someone, laughing at their jokes, offering to pat them, joining them in song, or doing any number of things that wouldn't involve stabbing or clobbering anyone.

In taking these actions with the monsters, the player could get to know them. Find out what they liked or didn't like. Learn a little bit about the creatures that had stepped in their path, and maybe walk away from a random battle with something other than GOLD and EXP: friendship.

This system of actions paired well with the game's heartwarming, ridiculous cast. Motherly, goat-like creature Toriel, who takes the player in when they're in danger; the joking Sans, a skeleton in a blue hoodie who can't help but tease the player in a friendly way; Papyrus, the ceaselessly positive skeletal hero who provides even more humor when paired with his brother Sans; Flowey, a living flower that is a sinister (yet pitiable) foil for the player; and many, many more charming characters await the player, each one with their own opportunity to talk, bond, or fight.

Undertale's funny, cheerful cast of monsters were the type of characters players would want to know more of. Even if it was just to hear more silly things from these characters, players wanted to keep seeing them, and being able to talk to them or have fun with them in combat, rather than just fight them as standard video game bosses, helped encourage players to give peace a chance.

And who could really feel good about themselves killing Toriel after she took you in? In striking Papyrus down when he's been so kindhearted in his feeble attempts to capture you?

The great characters and the ability to end things peacefully with them form a powerful concoction, one that made players want to do better and be better.

Or maybe it didn't. *Undertale* also lets players lash out at the monster world like any other RPG, killing everyone in their path if they're not impressed at the depths of friendships available for their character. If they tried to do

that, though, a whole new story, along with an unsettling world and different looks at all the characters many would come to love, awaited them. The world shifted with the player's intent, adding the draw of being able to leave your mark on the narrative.

And if you screwed up in some way while seeking violence or peace, the game still changed. If you slipped up and hurt someone, characters in the game would make reference to it, even if you restarted your game or didn't save. Running contrary to every rule most players know of games, certain behaviors were permanent, even if you wanted to erase them. Some, frighteningly, would never, ever go away.

Undertale offered what appeared to be simplistic characters, but there was so much to learn about these characters by talking to them or behaving a certain way in a fight, or even just by watching their behavior in combat. The player could learn even more about these silly beings by playing the game in different ways, eventually reaching a point where they would learn the characters' darkest secrets in ways that broke free of the game world itself.

When *Undertale* arrived, it floored players with its simple, yet deep, charms. With its loveable cast of characters with intelligent stories. With the simple fun of an absurd situation and conversation. With character designs that could kickstart the imagination, or bring out a laugh on a difficult day. With its depths of expression on the nature of games and how we play them. It was a celebration of positivity – a reflection on the power of compassion.

But it also skulks in the darkness. It looks deep into the nature of the player in a world where consequences don't matter, or can be erased. It looks into how we act when we have a world at our disposal and no reason to behave ourselves within it. How we act when we come back to worlds we've already saved, playing through those old games again. It asks questions on our morality in digital worlds.

Don't you get it? This is all just a GAME. If you leave the underground satisfied, you'll 'win' the game. If you 'win', you won't want to 'play' with me any more. And what would I do then? But this game between us will NEVER

end,” says Flowey, our flower antagonist. Or just another victim of a power that will drain much of the joy out of this cheerful experience.

Undertale has inspired artwork, music, animation, cosplay, toys, and all manner of things across all different ages. Children and adults have fallen in love with this world that Fox has created for a variety of reasons, all of them charmed by that cast and the depths of the stories contained within. It’s a beautiful, wondrous world to spend some time in, and within that place, there is much that will inspire thought and contemplation.

And introspection, for good or ill. Because now, in writing this book, I know that Flowey was right about me.

And I will never, ever, come back to *Undertale* again.

1.

“When I was still developing the idea behind Undertale’s battle system, I was envisioning Toriel as some kind of overprotective humanoid goddess, similar to Myria from Breath of Fire III. In this original concept, killing Toriel would have been mandatory to proceed. But when I actually started writing the character’s dialogue, it felt ‘wrong’ to have violence be the only choice. That’s when I realized what Undertale was really all about...”(1) - Toby Fox

I killed Toriel.

I’m not proud of it.

Maybe you’re not, either.

Toriel may be the first real resistance the player meets while going through *Undertale* (unless you were likewise stomped by that grinning carrot, Vegetoid, after being told to ‘Eat Your Greens’). The charming goat mom who leads you through the game’s first dungeon, who holds you by the hand as she leads you through spikes, who calls you with cheerful words of encouragement and promised deserts, and who pats you on the head in what may be the most adorable use of pixels in existence, is also a ruthless fighting machine.

Well, maybe not ruthless. Not if you’re paying attention. Sadly, I wasn’t.

Toriel acts as a guide through the first act of *Undertale*, helping new players learn the ropes of the game, and even going far enough that someone new to games could learn much from her. She’s happy to introduce combat mechanics, show how switches can disable traps, and even take the player by the hand to guide them through how puzzles work.

Toriel isn’t just a tutorial meant to show players how the game works, though. After teaching the player how to survive on their own in the Underworld, she also offers players a place to stay, offering them a place in

her home, a warm slice of butterscotch-cinnamon pie (the game doesn't say it's warm, but I find it hard to believe Toriel would serve it to you at anything other than perfect temperature OH GOD I'M A MONSTER), and a life of peace and tranquility down here.

But we came here to play a game, and we're probably not going to be satisfied just sitting around Toriel's house. We crave adventure. Worlds to explore. There has to be more to the Underworld than this, right? So, as a player, we start pushing back when Toriel avoids our questions about the rest of the world. We ignore it when she asks us to put aside our need to go further and settle down with her.

Curiosity drags players into many game worlds. The desire to see more of what is out there, even if we have to kill a few hundred soldiers, aliens, or monsters just so we can reach the next city or cave or dungeon. We need to know what's beyond our current environments in these digital worlds, and so we push forward. Even if it hurts sometimes, we push forward.

Toriel has no intention of letting the player leave this peaceful place she has set up for them, and her reasons stem from that same compassion in her character that made her help someone she'd just met. "Every human that falls down here meets the same fate. I have seen it again and again. They come. They leave. They die."

She knows that pain awaits the player and character should they leave. A great deal of potential pain, and even death, is lurking out in the Underworld, and she has no intention of letting the player pass unless she knows they can survive it.

And so, she attacks the player. Not that this is unusual for a game. Games attack the player with kindhearted characters all the time. Just a little scrap and we'll be on our way.

But Toriel hits like a truck for this period in the game. Her array of fire and crushing attacks left me dizzied and frightened, so I started hitting back. Cutting into her with that toy knife I'd found lying around outside her home. It didn't feel good to strike her back, but what could I do? In the turn-based,

dodge-focused combat, I was getting pounded. I was going to die. I was going to fail. The GAME OVER was looming close.

I'd liked Toriel, though. I can feel a pressure and warmth in my chest when I see her patting my character's head. It's a physical sensation, telling me there's a bond forming with this clutch of pixels and code. Within moments, she's shown how much she cares about the player character. The way she made sure they were safe as they walked through the ruins. Helped them learn so much in so short a time. So much different than Flowey.

"In this world...It's kill or BE killed!"

That's what Flowey had said to me in its introductory moments. This grinning flower had seemed like it was being kind to me as the game opened up, offering me helpful advice on the world and how to collect 'friendliness pellets' in combat. After I'd found that those pellets were far from friendly, and that this flower was out to kill me, there seemed like nothing I could do. Then, Toriel saved me, and I would soon find myself wandering ruins filled with other creatures that meant to do me harm.

I had brushed it off. I was better than that. I knew the game was about being good to the other characters and monsters. I didn't have to kill anything or anyone. I was going to be better and play the game correctly. Get the True Ending. Be a Good Person, as far as the game was concerned.

But then came the beating at Toriel's hands. The viciousness of her attacks, compared to anything else I'd run into previously, floored me. Frightened me, in that way only a player can be scared. Not of anything truly important, but of Losing. I was about to lose a game where I was supposed to be friends with everyone. Where I was supposed to talk my way through combat.

"While you are in a FIGHT, strike up a friendly conversation."

That's what Toriel had said to me, back when I was first figuring out what combat even was in *Undertale*. It went against everything Flowey had said about the place. And Flowey had tricked me and hit me. Toriel had saved me there, giving the rude flower the boot.

Then she'd told me that combat could be resolved by conversations. Every battle was simply a misunderstanding that could be resolved through chat. Every fight, a chance to walk away as better, closer people.

It's a novel approach until someone is kicking your head in. So I fought back. I'd like to say I was thinking of Flowey's words clashing against Toriel's, how I'd felt betrayed by the person who'd told me to talk things out, but who now refused to speak, but I didn't. It hadn't even occurred to me. I just didn't want to lose.

So I started to hit back. Over and over again. My life dropped, but hers was dropping faster. Then, I killed her.

"Do not worry. I did not leave you," she said earlier, when I thought she was gone. Now, silence. She really was gone.

Still, how many games eventually have you sacrifice someone in order to move the plot along? Have you shoot a loved one in order to progress the plot, or kill an old friend who has turned on you and become a BOSS BATTLE? How many times have we hurt and maimed those characters we once loved so we can CONTINUE?

My guts churned. It felt wrong. Not the wrong you feel when you know there was NO WAY OUT. That this good person had to die for VIDEO GAME STORY REASONS. This was not a PLOT DEATH. I got a sense that I had done something INCORRECTLY. That I could have saved her had I worked harder.

It's kill or be killed down here. But I don't want it to be.

I restart. I want to try again. I want to save Toriel from my own hands. So I hold that escape button until what I have done has vanished, erased from existence. Failure and success drawn into the void that is the unsaved game. Now, my actions are nothing but air and memories. The world is as it was before.

This is the appeal of these digital playgrounds, to some extent. It's why I

understand the popularity of games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty*. They're action without consequence. If I crash my car and fly through the windshield, there is no penalty. If I shoot and punch my way down a city block in my underwear while riding a bicycle, there is no problem. Not just from a societal propriety sense, but within the game world itself. I can unmake what has been done with the press of a button.

I shut the game off, and my actions are gone. I can will them out of reality, returning myself, safely, to the state I held before I'd shut things down. Cities could fall, villains could rise, and carnage could spread throughout these digital lands, but I had limitless power to unmake them.

So, when I broke my own heart with Toriel's death, I could undo it. Kill or be killed could be Flowey's rule, but I was still a God here. I could revive her with a stroke of a key.

And I had! When I reloaded my save, Toriel was sitting in her chair, waiting for me to talk about snails and push too hard on how to get out of the underground. Everything was right again. I didn't need to feel any guilt for what I'd done, since I could just unmake my cruelties as if they'd never happened. And I did.

But then I ran into Flowey again.

"I know what you did. You murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it."

Right there, the game changed. We were no longer playing around. The consequences became real.

That was the key difference between *Undertale* and any game I had played before. As I've said, many games are consequence-less, in a broad sense. Barring me breaking a controller out of frustration (which is my own fault, but screw you too, *Spider Man 2*), there are no permanent results in a game outside of my own choosing. If I don't choose to save the game, then I can freely erase all that I have done in it. If I stop playing and restart, my behavior goes away. I am in control of how my destiny takes shape, and my

involvement in the story.

Undertale will not have that. Once you have committed to a behavior, that behavior belongs to you. Much like saying something in anger to a loved one that you will regret for the rest of your life, your actions, however thought out or not, are permanent. The consequences are permanent. Whatever you have done will affect this reality FOREVER.

I reset Toriel. I put her back. But Flowey knew what I'd done. The game didn't forget that I'd killed her in a fit of nervous fear (which could have been avoided had I paid attention and noticed she stops trying to kill you when you're low on health, which made me feel WORSE). That I'd killed this loving character just so I wouldn't have to replay five minutes of dialogue to try again. That I just didn't want to be inconvenienced with a GAME OVER. It's just a game, so why would I care? Take the digital world and just put it all back.

I play games on the 'Good' route when I go through them. I make all of the morally correct decisions to become a paragon of virtue. But I'm not above killing someone and restarting. I'm not above searching people randomly in the streets for drugs (*True Crime: Streets of LA's* lovely morality system could be manipulated in funny ways), or of killing everyone in Megaton in *Fallout 3* just so I could see the nuke go off, then putting it all back for that Good Boy Ending.

I'm good, but these digital beings are still here for my entertainment. I'm good in that I wish to receive the rewards for being good, but without having to actually commit to real, good behavior as a code of conduct. That's part of the venting process of games. I can be good, and rewarded as such, but can also freely revel in destructive, awful, and murderous ways, all of which can be undone with a button press. I can do whatever I want with these people. I'll be good...if I feel like it.

Undertale does not allow this kind of convenient virtue. You can't get irritated and kill something in *Undertale*. The game will always, ALWAYS remember that you took Toriel's life. It will remind you in odd moments, or

change up bits of character dialogue. It keeps track of what you're doing, and when you don't expect it. You're no longer in control of that save function any more. You're powerful and dangerous, but you're not a God here.

Here, for a rare time, your actions have consequence in what have always been transient worlds. Games have always allowed this freedom to discard consequences we don't desire, but *Undertale* intends to hold us to real-world rules. If we commit a horrific act, or don't behave ourselves, or think we can skulk off after being naughty, the game will rap our hands for it. It doesn't forget. It won't let us forget, either.

Flowey didn't bring up Toriel again, but that first instance was chilling. I was paralyzed at the keyboard, having started to hammer through dialogue without paying attention to what was being said. The game was just going to repeat the same old words, wasn't it? I had discarded the world I didn't like, replacing it with this better one. Why would anything have been changed?

But it was different. For all my wishing that I hadn't killed Toriel, the game would never forget it. I didn't know if that would hold some sort of in-game consequence, and with the various ways that *Undertale* messes with the player, I'm still not entirely sure that there isn't some hidden factor beyond the dialogues I've seen that I'm carrying with me as a result of my behavior.

It doesn't matter, though. What matters is that, even if I choose to rewrite the world, there are still consequences to my actions. I would still pay for my acts. My sins couldn't be wiped. Like the real world, I could sting someone with a word or deed, and that would matter for the rest of their, and my, lifetime. My screw-ups would be remembered. They had shaped the world in ways that couldn't be repaired.

But who cares? It's just a fictional world. A made up playground cobbled together by lines of code and imagination. There's no reason for me to feel any sort of guilt or regret about what I've done, whether the game chastises me for it or not. The story moves on, allowing me to finish the game and see it through to its conclusion. I can still collect treasures and go on adventures

with Sans and Papyrus. So a flower chewed me out? Big deal.

Then I remember Toriel's hand on my head. That gentleness of character. The soft music during my meetings with her.

Creating consequences that matter in a video game world is a remarkable feat, and made for an interesting playthrough. However, making me care about the consequences for the monsters and people within it was the bigger accomplishment, to me. It's not just that my behavior carries permanent effects in *Undertale*, but who it affects.

It's not that I hurt the tutorial character. It's that I hurt Toriel, the gentle creature that had taken me in. A character I'd known for less than a half hour. In those thirty minutes, most of which was spent apart from her, I developed a bond that would leave me on the verge of tears when I found out that I could have saved her life, and that the game, and I, would never forget that I'd killed her.

I felt guilty – rightfully so. But I felt a real-world guilt about my actions. A true sense of moral distress in my guts. This was because Toby Fox had drawn me into his world and made me feel for these characters. He'd made me feel a friendship within them, like any great weaver of fiction does. When they were hurt, I was hurt.

But how had he forged that bond? How had he made me feel alongside these characters? Even if my consequences were permanent, why did I care?

2.

“I feel that it’s important to make every monster feel like an individual. If you think about it, basically all monsters in RPGs like Final Fantasy are the same, save for the graphics. They attack you, you heal, you attack them, they die. There’s no meaning to that.” (2) – Toby Fox

I learned to care about Toriel in a hurry in *Undertale*. Like I said, I’d barely been playing for an hour before I felt wracked with guilt over doing her harm. It’s what triggered my first run-in with the game’s system of consequences. I could have pressed on without ever seeing that the game would remember what I’d done within it, but instead, I got an early glimpse because Fox already got me to care about a character.

What is it about Toriel that made me feel a connection with her so quickly? It’s not much different than with any other good character in fiction and film – she was a fully-realized character. She was like a person, having believable wants and needs. It wasn’t that she was a gentle goat mom, but that she possessed those same characteristics that real people, and characters that connect with the player or viewer, have.

She starts off her connection with the player by saving their life, clobbering Flowey just as the monstrous flower has surrounded the player with dangerous pellets. This sequence is a key moment for both characters, and skews the player’s expectations of what is to come in the game.

A flower tells the player they need to collect friendliness pellets in order to play the game. The flower grins and winks as it talks, all while a slow but upbeat track plays. It’s a disarming moment, and lulls the player into vulnerability. Then, Flowey turns on them, the music stops, its face twists in a horrific display, the font shivers, and it begins to laugh that harsh, grating laugh that will haunt the player for much of the game (depending on how they play).

We learn much of Flowey’s deviousness in this moment, but this is also

when we learn of Toriel's kindness. The player has already been shocked with a moment of vulnerability, one likely made even stronger by preconceived ideas of what the game would be like (much of its artwork on its sale pages show cute characters, silly monsters, and hint at how it's an RPG where "you don't have to destroy anyone."). They feel betrayed. Unsure who to trust, if even a cute flower can turn on them.

Then she comes.

Toriel arrives with a fireball, saving the player's life, and the music shifts from unnerving silence and jarring laughter to a soft, calming track ("Fallen Down").

"What a terrible creature, torturing such a poor, innocent youth...Ah, do not be afraid, my child. I am Toriel, caretaker of the RUINS."

In the span of moments, players have had their expectations jerked around. Many who came to the game blind, expecting a joyful romp or cute adventure, have just had a taste of betrayal from someone they thought they could trust. Here was someone else seeming to offer that same trust. Soft music and gentle words seem to point in that direction, but we've already been turned on, in a similar fashion, only seconds before. Toriel saved our lives, yes, but for how long? When will she turn on us?

This moment sets the player up to be skeptical, causing them to almost over-analyze Toriel's behavior. This makes the player pay special attention to what she's doing, honing the player's focus on her actions, which only makes her kind behavior stand out even more. After this stinging betrayal, Toriel's kindness shines brighter. We can see that this is a harsh place, and that we can easily be killed by being too trusting, but yet there are beings who will help us.

The player soaks in her kindness as she leads them through the ruins. She helps the player learn to work the mechanisms of their adventure.

"To make progress here, you will need to trigger several switches. Do not worry, I have labelled the ones that you need to flip."

She explains how to fight (or how to chat up monsters). “As a human living in the UNDERGROUND, monsters may attack you. You will need to be prepared for this situation. However, worry not! The process is simple. When you encounter a monster, you will enter a FIGHT. While you are in a FIGHT, strike up a friendly conversation.”

When the player comes across a deadly set of spikes, she even means to have them work through it to learn about exploring dungeons on their own, but she can't quite leave the player to their own devices yet.

“This is the puzzle, but...Here, take my hand for a moment.”

Taking the player's hand, she leads them through the spiked trap.

Almost everything about her communication with the player carries a softness and kindness to it. Even the sound her text makes as it is written out has a soothing pitch to it, less sharp and harsh than the previous text boxes that the player has read through.

All of these aspects serve to show that Toriel is a kindhearted being, and with the player being hyper-vigilant after Flowey's attack, they notice. Whether they notice because they don't feel right trusting her after the last betrayal, or if they are thankful for this extremely helpful person while lost in an unknown world, her kindness is unmistakable.

But being kindhearted is a single trait. No person is made up of any single trait, and characters that exist in this way feel flat and uninteresting. If Toriel was just a very nice goat mom, she would be endearing, but might lack that connection the player would feel with a fully realized character. As such, we get to see another side of Toriel before long. We get to see her anger.

Toriel has set up a wonderful home, with the player having their own room and access to delicious pie, but we have come to *Undertale* to play a game. Calling it quits in Toriel's house would be denying ourselves progress. The game is not over. So, when speaking to Toriel, when an opportunity presents itself to leave the ruins, we push for it. We need to go forward. Retiring here

is just not a viable plan. We would be missing out on so much more if we did.

So we push.

And push.

And push.

Then Toriel walks away. "...I have to do something. Stay here."

If the player presses on, the cheerful, slow song, "Home", is replaced with something eerie, like wind whistling through an empty cavern (which it... kind of is?). It brings back thoughts of the fight with Flowey from before, where the music faded as things got ready to get dark.

When next we talk to her, Toriel's tone has changed. Not a lot, just yet. She's been so gentle so far, that even seeing the word 'destroy' come from her seems out of place and cause for alarm. If the player keeps following her, she becomes more direct. Less friendly.

"Every human that falls down here meets the same fate. I have seen it again and again. They come. They leave. They die."

Her sentences are clipped. Her picture in the dialogue box looks wearied and upset. Downcast. She is going to destroy the way to the rest of the game, if only to protect the player from what's to come.

Should the player keep following her, she says "Do not try to stop me. This is your final warning."

The words are chilling, especially coming from someone who had been so kind to the player in the past. Even as the player is preparing for the fight that feels like it's inevitable, though, the player can see a different side of Toriel. She's not just a simple, one-dimensional character around to provide the player with a tutorial. Her kindness stems from her character and her beliefs. She is good to the player when she feels they need help, but also

stern when the player clashes with her belief that staying in the RUINS will keep them safe. Her actions stem from her desires as a character, making her believable.

Suddenly, her kindness means more. She won't just shower the player with gentleness as a one-dimensional character, but the player's interactions, even if they're necessary to keep the game's narrative moving forward, can affect how Toriel behaves. She responds believably to changes in her interactions with the player. If we push into danger despite Toriel's wishes, she will respond with annoyance, then anger, and then force.

"There is only one solution to this. Prove yourself...Prove to me that you are strong enough to survive."

Toriel will try to stop the player with a battle, with the game warning the player that 'Toriel blocks the way!'. But even in this fight, the player can learn more about Toriel's attitudes toward them, further fleshing out her character. Even when she seems to be ready to beat the player to death for her beliefs, there is so much more the player can learn about her and her motivations. Even while dodging shots, she tells the player more about who she is. Each character hides a depth for the players to dig into.

Undyne, the warrior who dogs the player throughout much of the second area of the game, seems remorseless in her hunt for the player's character. She seeks to bring them to Asgore, providing a final human heart that will free the monsters of the realm from their imprisonment. She has a strong desire to see her people free, and loves them deeply. Yet, when the player shows kindness to a monster, she hesitates. When the player shows HER kindness, she pauses. She is not just a boundless rage, but someone who is conflicted with her duty.

Papyrus, the goofy skeletal brother of Sans, is determined to capture a human so he can join the Royal Guard. He makes it sound like this is the thing he wants most in the world, but cannot seem to override his playful nature long enough to actually capture the player. Even in combat, he can't bring himself to defeat the player, instead shutting them up in a shed. We

see that Papyrus wants something, but isn't sure of why he wants that something, through his actions.

Asgore, the final enemy who means to kill the player to free his people, cannot seem to get himself together to complete his task. "I so badly want to say 'Would you like a cup of tea?' But...you know how it is," he says when the player arrives for the Final Battle, torn between a need to help his people and the immoral act of bringing harm. He is not a being of evil, but one given a sickening choice that has cost him a great deal already.

Even basic monsters have wants and needs that give them personalities. The smallest creature might just want someone to cheer them on, to hug them, or to maybe not stand so close. They all show aspects of character, giving players a reason to connect with them in their human desires and needs. *Undertale* doesn't give players faceless images to beat on, but creatures with lives and thoughts that might mirror the player's own.

There are no monsters within this world that exist just for the sake of holding the character back, or who don't have something to say about themselves. They all stand out as fully-realized beings. There's no smirking slimes or vacant-eyed goblins who are only there to smack around. Everyone has a home and a personality in this world, and it's all there for the player to find as they play.

Even if they have to get kicked around a bit to learn about it.

3.

They aren't very hard to draw, and the low resolution of the pixel graphics allows a lot of artistic interpretation. I was really hoping for that.” – Toby Fox

It's not just the story of each character that is built to help make a connection with its characters. The character designs themselves are even built to tell a story about each of them. Whether through an aspect of their looks, the facial expressions they make, or even the simplicity of their design, the characters draw the player in.

Drawing from the characters the player has only seen within the game's first half-hour, the player has already experienced an expressiveness in their features. Flowey's sinister grin and Toriel's cheerful smile help the player bond with their character and know them, seeing the emotions they go through played out on their faces.

Further characters are just as capable of that expressiveness, even in simplicity as well. Sans shows a great deal of his character depending on the pupils in his eyes, with a simple shift there causing his lighthearted tone to fade in moments. Sans, jokester for much of the game, suddenly becomes an unsettling character when two white dots are removed from his dialogue box image.

“if you keep going the way you are now...you're gonna have a bad time.”

This threat comes up if the player has been especially murderous on their playthrough, and is punctuated with an image of Sans with no pupils in his eyes, showing vacant, black sockets. Normally filled in with a pair of white dots, this moment will send off a bolt of alarm through any player that's paying attention, with something so small demonstrating that something drastic has changed. Not only this, but that Sans, our pun-loving skeleton buddy, might just have another side to him that we really, really don't want to know.

Fox does all of this with a few words and the absence of a pair of white pixels. It's a careful design decision, and one that shows the power within the simplicity of the game's characters.

Other characters go through these same expressions, from Papyrus' outbursts of joy, to Alphys' nervousness, to Undyne's enraged faces, all showing a variety of emotions the characters go through, continuing to strengthen that sense that these are people with ranges of feelings. There is not just one image in the dialogue box to indicate that these characters are talking, but a range of emotions to go along with what is being said. The dialogue communicates that emotional context just fine, but these images further strengthen that sense of a being shifting through varied emotions.

It's not just an expressiveness through simplicity that makes them effective at bonding with the player, though. The simplicity in the characters also opens them up to projections of the player's emotions and imagination as well. The characters feature somewhat simple designs (although still with a lot of thought put into details), so some thinking is required to fill in some of the gaps. In creating characters in this style, it forces the player to furnish a place for these characters in their mind.

Like novels, *Undertale* pushes the player to use their imaginations a bit. Not entirely, as books often do (although some describe characters TO DEATH, only to have you imagine them however you want anyway), but *Undertale* does give players a bit of a loose shape to work with, often rendering them in simple white with only a few stand-out details. It provides a structure for these characters so that players can get to know them, but their designs are just loose enough that a player's imagination is coaxed to life.

This can be seen in all of the fan work that exists out there for *Undertale*. Thousands of pieces of fan art, videos, songs, and other forms of media sprang up around *Undertale* before and after its release. The audience that got to play this game and get to know its characters found themselves inspired to create something out of the space these characters now

occupied in their minds. Yes, they had character traits and designs and color schemes and personalities that were already in place, but the simplicity in their design still got the imagination going.

Again, this is another trick of good fiction. Good fiction often does not go out of its way to overexplain a subject or item. For starters, it doesn't bog the reader down with unnecessary details. Most readers know what a forest looks like, so going into details about the trees can be a waste of time. Readers can be given a lowdown on what a character's physical traits are, but that forces their imagination in a direction it may not want to go, giving them a laundry list of eye colors and clothing types when they should be concerned with learning who your character is.

Fox's designs don't bog the player down with every minute detail of the character. There is a solid representation of what Fox wanted for his character, some important pieces of clothing and colors that help shape their personalities, and that's it. It gives the player room to let their imagination wander with the subject, and in doing so, make the character their own.

With some pixel artwork, there is that sense of interpretation that comes with viewing the style. Not every aspect is laid out for the player, and while occupying that space, the player is forced to create their own interpretations in their mind. The character is not just that clutch of pixels to them. Maybe it is in a simplistic game of say, Pong, but in a game with detailed characters? The mind naturally starts to fill in visual details.

When one pictures Sans, it is not always the simple version one sees on the screen. That is just a representation of what exists in Fox's imagination, used as a means to get his concept of Sans over into the player's. Now, the player has their own version of Sans, loosely guided by the visuals on screen, but also informed by dialogue, his text sounds, and general attitudes. He becomes more than just the pixel image on the screen, here. He's wormed his way into the player's imagination, and taken on a bit of a shape of his own, informed by the player's own life, thoughts, and feelings.

As stated in the quote at the beginning of the chapter, Fox wanted to leave things open to interpretation. In doing so, he allows the player to shape more of the character in their imagination, creating a bond between the player and that character. When the player has a hand in creating a character, even if it is only in their own head, that character belongs to them, to an extent. They've been molded and shaped by their creativity, and therefore bond with them more than something that belongs, wholly, to someone else. In the player's interpretation of the art in their mind, they get to keep a part of Sans that belongs to them and no one else.

4.

“It’s just ‘Toby Humor,’” (3) – Toby Fox

I chose Sans as an example because another thing Fox’s work excels at doing is being ridiculous. Humor is another important part in the creation of that bond between player and character, encouraging them to remember these people and creatures.

I was captivated by my connection with Toriel when I first played *Undertale*, but another key moment, to me, was when I attempted to solve a puzzle by pushing a rock – something that upset the lump of stone I was trying to move.

“WHOA there, pardner! Who said you could push me around?”

I was stunned, and couldn’t help but crack up. I was not expecting a rock to sass me just for trying to do what I needed to do to progress. Nevertheless, a polite request got my puzzle solved, and I could move forward.

“Aren’t things easier when you just ask?”

Well, maybe I could move forward after a few steps.

“HMM? You wanted me to STAY there? You’re giving me a REAL workout.”

Now, one of my clearest memories in engaging with *Undertale* is talking to a rock. A ROCK. Fox seems to effortlessly create these connections to his world through his sense of humor, creating these absurd situations where the player pretends to be a lamp, where they burn down Undyne’s house while violently making spaghetti, where they have to deal with the aftermath of flirting with Toriel after asking to call her mom, and many, many, many others. It is a nonstop torrent of the ridiculous, and it creates these memorable moments with the characters.

Talking with Papyrus was fun. Getting to see his silly personal desires was

fun. However, it is the ridiculous moments that stand out. His obsession with spaghetti is difficult to forget. Going on a date with him and navigating the complex series of relationship questions, all while several pointless meters filled, glowed, and shifted. His change of wardrobe for the date. All of these things stick out in the mind, making the character memorable.

Humor just seems to have that effect. We remember the people who make us laugh, and *Undertale's* characters excel at making the player chuckle, or at least scratch their heads. Even minor characters offer a hint of this ridiculousness, with the spider bake sale, the misspelled library sign in Snowdin, the bird that carries you over a disproportionately small gap, and several other tiny moments. Fox makes sure you remember your journey through *Undertale's* world, and all of the oddball characters you run across as you play.

Still, it is the major characters that stand out in these moments of humor. Each of them has made me laugh over some aspect of their character, and in such an absurd way that it has shaped my perception of the world through my memories.

It may seem a bit of a leap, but it's honestly hard to think of spaghetti without a hint of Papyrus popping up in my head. I'm not sure why this particular attachment took hold, but there was something so absurd about a skeleton being obsessed with making spaghetti that the concept continues to stick with me. This memory activates periodically when I look at a bag of noodles, or should I sit down to eat a plate of pasta. It's always there, having reshaped my perception of the world around me.

This could be tied to my enjoyment of the game and of silly jokes. I'm not entirely sure why. What I do know is that my mind has been shaped by a silly aspect of Fox's characters. I look at the world differently than I did before. And you know what? I laugh when I see spaghetti now. Not every time, but I'll find myself looking into a pot of noodles and giggling.

I'm not sure what's more absurd, a skeleton liking to make spaghetti or a writer trying to say that this has changed his perception of existence. Either

way, this is the result of Fox's humor – a memory trigger that has made his character stick with me. I find it impossible not to remember Papyrus. He's not even my favorite character, and yet he stands out strongly in everyday life because of a silly joke that's tied to his character. His connection to humor has helped give him a greater presence in my mind, ensuring that I will never forget him.

Papyrus now reflects in my everyday life, and I remember his tantrums and odd dialogue and font style just from what food I eat. This won't be the same for everyone, but it's these elements of humor that tie the character to the player. It helps strengthen that bond, helping them stand out in the memory. I won't necessarily remember all of the details of *Undertale's* end-game events, but I will remember a skeleton's obsession with spaghetti. And I'll never forget going through a ton of effort to solve a musical puzzle for hours, only to have a dog steal my treasure.

These moments were so far off-course from what I expected to experience that they have embedded themselves in my mind. Along with the memories of these events, I recall the characters. I have strong memories tied to these wacky people, and all connected via silly, silly moments that never fail to make me smile.

5.

“Everyone has different reasons for liking characters. There are many. Personality, scenario, visual design, concept, dialogue, emotional connection...I'd say one advantage that Undertale has over many other games in this respect is that the fact that there are multiple routes of the game and multiple ways to deal with each major character allows you to see more sides of them, good and bad.” - Toby Fox

Humor can be a defense mechanism, as well – one used by people trying to hide the hardships in their lives, or overcome them through making the people around them smile. Yes, humor and the absurd can bring us a great deal of joy, but they might come from someone who has a great deal of sadness lurking within. Like most things in life, and in *Undertale's* characters, there are nuances to behaviors and actions.

Many of *Undertale's* characters hide different sides, and depending on how the player tackles the game, they'll see different aspects of each character. Each one has multiple facets to them, and these can only be seen if the player approaches the game in a different way. In this, we see that someone's joking nature, like Sans, hides a deadly seriousness, or is a means of coping with horrifying knowledge.

Flowey's story is a fine example of this. Players will learn about Flowey's origins and motivations a great deal should they tackle the pacifist route of the game – killing no one and going out of their way to find the game's secrets and friendships. Hidden labs, powerful souls, and sad childhood memories await down this route, presenting the flower in a whole new light.

Should the player go through the much more violent genocide route, killing everything in their path and then going out of their way to murder even more, they'll learn more about the mysterious powers that Flowey has gained, and more of the creature's motivations in their malevolent actions. The dreaded power to SAVE comes more to light on this run, and the player is given a deeper glimpse into what Flowey has become over the years, and

why.

Depending on the player's relationship with each character in the game, or through their actions in the game's world, they can learn something different about the characters. Not only does this encourage multiple playthroughs to figure out the whole story, but it also adds more layers to each character. There is not just one story to learn about each of them, but rather an array of facets that come out based on how the player treats them.

Each character, then, is someone the player can get to know. It's someone they've formed a bond with. Alphys seems overly hard on herself, like a typical person with low self-esteem, but there is much more depth to it than that. Should the player push to follow her relationship with Undyne, they'll soon find a hidden piece of Alphys' past that explains why she's so self-depreciating.

This involves the player in getting to know Alphys, much like the game involves the player in fleshing out the character's visuals in their mind. The player has to do a little work to get a fuller picture of who and what a character is, and that work creates a connection with the character.

Well, not work. It's more like sharing in a bonding journey with a friend. It's in having a shared secret told on a moonlit car ride, rain dribbling across the windshield as the wipers squeak back and forth. It's in knowing more as you choose to do things together, growing closer naturally.

It's in learning something private by caring about a character – in wanting to do more with them and learn more about them – that *Undertale* continues to strengthen the bond between player and character. We've made a conscious effort to get to know them, and there are aspects of the character to know. It creates a more powerful bond, as we've willfully taken those steps to spend more time with them. They are less characters to know than friends who we wish to spend time with.

A similar feat is accomplished in *Deadly Premonition*. The city of Greenvale is filled with all manner of interesting characters carrying on their daily lives.

You're free to ignore them, if you like, but you learn so much once you start to dig in. Maybe Keith, the guitar-playing father of two who runs the Milk Barn shop, says something that brings you into his life. Maybe you want to know what's going on in Quint's trailer. There are people spread all over town, each one living a life that you can put yourself into or not.

There is a wealth of information and depth to many of these characters, and it's in that ability to miss out on it if you don't care that makes that information special. You can pass these people right on by without getting to know them, and so you make that conscious choice, like a real-life friendship, to get to know these people better. These people, and their depths, exist whether the player gets to know them or not, and change in relation to the player's behaviors, adding that sense of reality in the player's friendships with them. They react to the player.

In *Undertale*, we choose to learn more about the characters. We choose to become better friends and learn more about these characters. We can see the multiple facets of each character if we choose to look, and we can bond with them like a real-life friend by peering deeper. That depth, and its ability to evade us, is yet another way in which the game creates that strong bond between its characters and player.

We choose to know Sans. We choose to forgive Flowey. We choose to harm Toriel. Choice grants us the power to grow closer to these beings and get to know them, and in doing so, we learn to care about and love them.

6.

“Different characters were all created for different reasons. For example, Sans and Papyrus exist because my friend Jones has a comic called Helvetica, about a skeleton named Helvetica. So, I thought it would be funny to annoy Jones by having skeletons in my game that are also named after fonts. But the worst possible ones. Mettaton was created because a bunch of my friends love robots/entertainers. Each character has its own purpose, either narrative or to annoy my friends.” - Toby Fox

What do we know of the blue slime from *Dragon Warrior*? You know, that cute blue blob that grins away as you stomp it into a puddle of cerulean goo just to increase thy experience by one and thy gold by one? Maybe a whole lot now in the age of Wikis, but certainly not from what was told to us about it in *Dragon Quest*. All you knew was that it was there, it would smack you around if left alone, and you could clobber it back to get ever so slightly closer to buying outrageously expensive gear that would be WORTHLESS ONE TOWN OVER.

So, not much. Still, it's a living creature. It likely has some sort of motivations in life. Family of some sort. Is it attacking the player because it's hungry and desperate? Afflicted with some sort of magic spell cast by the Dragonlord? If so, why do some of the slimes have the presence of mind to run away when endangered? What's different between the various types of slime? Is there some sort of slime hierarchy? Clearly, as they have a system of government, as we can see in the form of the King Slime from *Dragon Quest IV* and onward. But wouldn't this kind of leadership imply intelligence, as the slimes can see a need for a governing body? And...

I can go on like this from clues that the games have in them, drawing from the context to inform me enough to make some really silly fanfiction. Still, I had to do this legwork myself. Fox gives you a little bit more to work with as you play through *Undertale*, giving its enemies rich backstories that players can discover, not just through conversation, but also through combat.

Hitting the monster will lead to the requisite RPG experience and gold gain, but there is so much more going on in the menus that will let players learn about the monsters they're fighting, as I started mentioning when I talked about the fight with Toriel. She won't harm the player once they're too badly wounded (and looks horrified should the dying player wander into one of her shots anyway), showing that compassion that is so strong within her. She may be attacking the player, but that doesn't mean she no longer cares.

But let's move on to other encounters. Take the early fight with Napstablook, the downcast ghost who "keeps saying 'z' out loud repeatedly, pretending to sleep". Players could smack him around for a bit and then leave the fight (although he DOES point out that you can't kill a ghost, soooo...), but there is so much more to be learned from this battle.

Undertale offers ATTACK and ITEM options – both staple fare for an RPG. On top of them, though, it offers ACT, which offers a variety of actions the player can take that tie in with the current encounter, and MERCY, which tries to let the monster go.

The ACT option lets the player CHECK, THREAT, FLIRT, or CHEER with Napstablook. Using Check on it tells you some of its stats, as well as pointing out that "This monster doesn't seem to have a sense of humor...", although the ghost itself points out "Oh, I'm REAL funny..." afterwards.

As combat goes further, the game points out that "Napstablook is wishing they weren't here." Threatening it prompts it to say "go ahead, do it." Following moments like this, Napstablook will often attack with damaging tears that behave in different ways, or just drop the comment "Really not feelin up to it right now. Sorry" in the combat box where players can dodge the enemy's attacks.

These paint a bit of a bleak picture of our dead enemy, don't they? Much of Napstablook's attacks focus on sadness, with the obvious tears as its main form of attack. Threatening it takes this in an even darker direction, with the ghost prodding the player to make good on what they're threatening. A ghost might not be too worried about dying or getting hurt, but there's a

powerful sense of depression surrounding the specter. It's listless and without much motivation, only managing to cry (which luckily damages the player) or do nothing.

It's a pretty sad fight. And how big do you feel hitting a creature that is only crying or wallowing in its sorrow? One that is down on itself and doesn't care if you hurt it?

If this were a ghost in many other games, the player wouldn't know much about it, much less have any reason to care that it's sad. It's accepted in many fictions that ghosts stick around due to painful past experiences, but how much do you care about that when you're trying to keep one from killing you? If you've played *Fatal Frame*, you might feel upset at the circumstances that lead much of its cast to become the dangerous phantoms that attack you, but how much do you care about that when a ghost with like fifteen arms is about to cause instant death by touching you?

Combat is rarely a time for introspection or thoughts on the enemy. The nature of video games simply makes it this way. In live action games, you're often too busy keeping your avatar out of danger to think about the depressing background story for the villain. You're busy with the act of survival, which doesn't give a lot of time to think. It's in the quiet moments of the fight that you remember the tragedies that lead you to this point. And even then, how much do you really care if they're standing in the way of you and completing the game? Not enough to stop attacking, to be sure.

Undertale's combat is still quite tense and will force the player to focus on surviving, but there are many moments of silence and stillness as well. Times when the player can take in what is being said between attacks. After spending a few moments avoiding tears, the player is allowed a moment in the menus, giving them time to take in the fact that the ghost is attacking us with teardrops. We're allowed to really take in the sadness of it all, and all of the depressing things the ghost is saying.

Players still have a few more options. Flirting with Napstablook prompts it to continue being down on itself, telling the player "I'd just weigh you down."

Should they choose to Cheer for the ghost, though, something different happens. Something that makes a huge difference after experiencing all of the various downtrodden things it has said before.

“heh...”

It seems like it could be sarcastic. Napstablook isn't a big fan of itself, so it could just be playing off what you've said to it. But then, the in-game text tells you “Napstablook looks just a little bit better.”

That first smile means a lot when someone you care about is feeling down. That little turn at the corner of their lip. The hint of change in their eyes. You know you're getting somewhere. You know you're helping them feel better despite the turmoil in their head.

Now, we're seeing that with Napstablook. The ghost has been showing, nonstop, that it is depressed, all through text boxes, dialogue, battle descriptions, and the combat itself. All of it has told a story of a ghost who is really, really sad.

So we Cheer again. This time, we tell it a little joke using the command. “heh heh...” it says. We're told, once more, that “Cheering seems to have improved Napstablook's mood again.” We're getting somewhere. We're breaking through that sad cloud around the creature. We Cheer again, and are told “Napstablook wants to show you something.”, and then uses its tears to cry itself a top hat.

“i call it 'dapper blook'”

You're then told that “Napstablook eagerly awaits your response.” A final Cheer brings about the end of combat, and pleasant conversation follows outside of battle. “i usually come to the RUINS because there's nobody around but today i met somebody nice...”

The ghost then fades out of your path, allowing you to progress. I was happy to be able to move on with the game, but a part of me felt far happier that I'd helped this ghost out a little bit. After following this personal narrative of

sadness and depression through the ghost's actions, I could see a glimmer of positivity within it. Maybe not something life-changing, but the ghost showed small signs of potential happiness. It had showed me something it was proud of, which is honestly a big step for someone so wrapped up in self-loathing.

Through all of these actions, I'd learned how sad the ghost was, but that he wasn't so deep in its sadness that an act of kindness couldn't bring out its sillier side. That it had abilities it was quite fond of, and was just waiting for the right person to share them with. That it often went out to be by itself, wanting to be alone, but also wanting a friend to find it. It wanted solitude, but maybe another part, deep down, wanted companionship.

All of this backstory is revealed through a few menu options and a single battle against Napstablook. Fox has carefully woven elements of the creature's personality into its attacks and spoken words, and also done so through the interactions the player can choose to take with that particular creature. Players learn about the monsters they meet as they fight them.

This isn't just true of bosses, but of every single creature in the game. Gyftrot is a monstrous, deer-like creature with decorations hung all over its antlers, and players can soothe its irritation by removing them. Snowdrakes will leave the player alone if they laugh at one of their puns. Shyren likes it when the player hums to her. Vulkin enjoys being hugged and encouraged despite their volcanic nature.

Each monster in the game has some story to tell, and through the actions the player takes, they will get to know the monsters. They'll learn their likes and dislikes by playing around with combat options, and once a friendship has been struck, or the monster's mood improved, the player can spare them and move on. And for the next time, the player will know how to better help the monster out, because they already know what the monster likes. They already know what the monster is like.

Instead of learning elemental weaknesses or what weapons to use, we're learning about a creature's personality. We're learning more about who

they are, and what brings them joy. Monsters, in this way, are less something the player needs to overcome, and more another anchor to the game's world. The monsters become beings the players know, even if only on the level of a neighbor they smile at in passing. They're someone who brings back a pleasant memory of this place, or of a silly moment spent in the Underground.

7.

“I started with the battle system because I learned about arrays when reading random articles on Wikipedia and realized I could use them to make one. Then I thought about creating a short game using that battle system. The pre-planning stage was so short as to be practically nonexistent, so there really wasn't much there.” – Toby Fox

From a pure gameplay perspective, there's a huge incentive to get to know the monsters as well. These creatures don't stop attacking just because the player is fumbling with a social situation. The player is still dodging laser blasts or thrown bones inside the game's shmup-like battle box, moving their heart symbol around whatever shape the attack takes.

Not that the player is always flying blind. Woshua likes to have a clean player, hinting at that through saying things like “Wosh u face” throughout the fight. If the player clues into this and asks to be washed, they can wrap up the fight in a hurry and escape with little damage. Then, the player knows for next time to ask for the same thing. The player that takes the time to get to know this monster, or pay attention to its clues, learns how to avoid damage in the future.

If the player ignores this, or puts little effort into it, they'll start taking hits. Monsters attack every round regardless of what the player is up to, so as they fumble to figure out what makes the monsters happy, they'll be taking damage. They may get good at avoiding attacks over time, but late-game monsters will go all out on the player, throwing high-speed, unpredictable attacks at the player's heart. Should more than one monster show up, players will find themselves dodging all of the monsters' attacks at once, each firing a variant on their ability that will layer the screen with damaging shots.

Therefore, the game encourages the player to get to know the monsters well enough that, when the time comes to fight one again, the player knows the correct actions to take to make the monster back off. For a purely

practical player – even one who has little interest in what Tsunderplane feels about personal space, or the budding feelings between the Royal Guards – it is still useful to learn who these creatures are.

This continues to deepen that bond with them as well. It's not like the constant array of goblins and orcs the players has mindlessly bashed by spamming the attack command. Few people remember the faceless soldiers they fought while playing through the last *Dynasty Warriors* installment. This practical combat application makes each monster memorable, in its own silly way, and in doing so strengthens the player's connection to them and the game world itself.

These may be monsters, but they're still characters that the player gets to know. They're not creatures with a set weakness the player needs to recall, but a goofy horse-man who likes to have a flexing contest with the player. A frog that can be mystified to show that it still has much to learn from this world. An amalgamation of dogs can still learn to love to be petted and played with despite the horrific events it has been a part of. The player learns who they are, even if only to make playing a little easier, but in doing so still gets intimate knowledge of who they are, and bonds with them over this shared connection.

The player knows the monsters' secrets, and it strengthens the player's ties to the world and its narrative. It's not just sparing some cute volcano-like thing for the sake of getting a specific ending, but it's knowing that this creature, despite its damaging outbursts, likes hugs. It likes to be supported in what it does.

Likewise, it makes striking these creatures seem more abhorrent. When you know what these creatures like – when you really start to get to know them for who they are, it hurts to attack them. How do you feel when you cut the throat of a creature that just wanted you to wash up, and spoke in such a silly, childish way? When you know the silly, playful, and affectionate nature of Lesser Dog and Greater Dog?

Knowing these monsters helps the player internalize the gravity of their

actions in combat. Even if they choose not to get to know them, lashing out while ignoring the option to take other actions, the monsters will speak and act in certain ways. They'll still talk about eating vegetables, or shiver and whimper out of fear, making sure the player knows these are more than just obstacles with different attacks and animations. They're more than something to cut down to grow strong enough to cut down the next thing that gets in their path.

Combat is filled with hints to each creature's character, both in ways the player has to seek out and ways the game makes their character overt. Whether the player is ignoring these or looking deeper into them, it helps give the creatures more of a presence in the game world. They're characters to remember instead of obstacles, and they give the world a greater depth for the player to get dragged into.

It is also important to note that all of them are like this. Every single monster in the game features these hidden aspects and overt stories. They all have personalities and characteristics for the player to pick up on. They're all unique beings, and they all stand out in their own way. Through this, the player is brought into a living world where every being has a place within it. No one is disposable, and as such, they all become a part of the full tapestry of *Undertale*.

If even one monster had no personality, it would all fall apart, as together, they form a world where each person matters. Each person has a right to live. Each monster has a place within this society. Every single creature has a home, has loved ones, has a life outside of the player's interaction with them. They are living beings with things to return to. They have friends who will miss them when they're gone.

Well, maybe not Jerry.

8.

“I think the funniest story was the reason Lesser Dog exists. Originally, Lesser Dog was just a regular dog with a sword but Temmie drew the concept art for it with a weirdly big neck. So I kept editing the file to make the neck longer and then sending it to her over and over to tease her. Somehow that turned into part of the game.” - Toby Fox

Whether the player cares about the enemies or not, it’s hard not to feel some attachment after hearing all of the silly jokes the game makes with its monsters. From Lesser Dog’s ever-lengthening neck, Metaton’s absurd math questions (with some useful assistance from Alphys), to Papyrus losing his special attack when a dog steals his bone, it makes for some unforgettable encounters with the game’s ‘enemies’.

Like the rock that just wouldn’t sit on its switch that I mentioned earlier, the goofy sense of humor that runs throughout the game continually creates these absurd moments that stick out in the mind. Even when the game is at its darkest, with Sans opening up with his most powerful attack to pound the player into submission during a Genocide run, the game continually drops little jokes or refuses to take itself seriously.

“huh. always wondered why people never use their strongest attack first.”

These moments, for starters, make the dark times seem that much more horrible. Should the player decide to take out their anger on Napstablook and ‘kill’ him, the death feels that even more terrible due to the creature’s potential good humor. Banishing a ghost doesn’t make the player feel guilt when working through *Fatal Frame*, but there’s something awful about knowing that Napstablook has that glimmer of hope inside of it, and that you’re the one who stomps it out.

Every enemy has some element of this humor to them, offering playful words or having their entire appearance and theme run with this goofiness.

The Vegetoid is a carrot that wants the player to eat their greens, and while that may not make someone want to laugh out loud, it's still pretty silly to be fighting a huge carrot that just wants you to be healthy. Migosp is a bug that just wants to dance on its own. Doggo flips out when the player doesn't move, and then secretly pets them. It's all quite ridiculous.

The monsters' back stories humanize them, letting players identify with them. This humor only strengthens that. People are ridiculous creatures. We use humor as safeguards against the pain of the world. We use it to escape those same pains. Laughter and silliness are our shields against the rougher parts of our lives, and it resonates with us when someone does something silly or makes us laugh. We can recognize a part of ourselves that wishes to escape that pain in something that is being kind of goofy, or recall back to a point in our lives where everything was silly and cheerful.

Fox's monsters draw on that kind of silliness. They make us recall childhoods spent laughing at goofy jokes. They make us see the funny things we do around the office to make light of the day, or of the ways we work to make each other laugh when we're down.

Let's not forget – the monsters are trapped in the Underground. Humans locked them in here with little hope of escape. The monsters are all living out their lives in what should be misery, and are all toiling under the same crushing issue. They're all prisoners in a place they don't want to be, and all while their ruling couple has endured a horrible loss that split them apart. With the schism between Toriel and Asgore, brought about by the deaths of both of their children, the world is left without rulership or hope to be free.

Despite this darkness, the monsters still act silly. They still respond to hugs and tenderness. They still have ridiculous lives and sleep in sports car beds. They laugh off the fact that the library sign is messed up, or get into conversations about how "DOGS ARE JUST FIRM CATS!!!!". They haven't been consumed by the darkness around them, and have turned to jokes, kindness, and love to keep themselves afloat.

And these are the creatures you're supposed to fight. The big, bad monsters

that stand in the player's way to Beating The Game. They're supposed to be obstacles, but they grow to so much more through that humor that runs through them. They're creatures that have turned to the absurd to stay smiling – turned to hope rather than despair.

Even when a human – one of the beings that ruined their lives – walks among them, and could end their lives in moments, they give them the benefit of the doubt. They open up to them, in all of their silly glory. They share parts of their lives. They try to clean them up. Offer hugs. Sing a song with them. If the player shows them the slightest kindness, they'll open up with laughter and joy, even if they've been turned into twisted amalgamations, mangled by science and a need to be free.

These creatures are endlessly funny and endlessly cheerful, and this resonated with me. I saw creatures that could have become vicious and heartless due to their lot in life, but they hadn't. Despite the weight on them, they chose to respond with a laugh. Even as their king labors with the guilt of so many human deaths, his agents still can't help but attack with a white, puffy dog on a rope, or with word jumbles. They cannot help that lighthearted nature, as it isn't within them to do harm. They've consciously chosen a life away from this, and the player only has to extend their hand in kindness to embrace it.

That silliness makes it easy to love these monsters. It makes it easy to internalize them and remember them. Every encounter has that memorable goofiness to it, and in that humor, a sense of humanity – a sense of facing the dark with positivity. It makes killing them a reprehensible act, and encourages players to care for them. In their jokes, I saw my own ways of dealing with difficult times, growing even closer to these creatures who smiled in their suffering.

Undertale's greatest strength comes from making the player care about the beings they encounter, and Fox does this through combat by giving each monster a personality and giving the player a reason to care about it. Even if they only want to play better, learning who these creatures are will do that. And eventually, one with a cute feature or silly quirk just might worm their

way into that player's heart, bringing them into the world and making them feel something for it.

Except Jerry (not really Jerry I'M SORRY FOR DITCHING YOU).

9.

“I feel like the thoughts and feelings are evident in the music and the game. However, I will say that three of the songs that you mentioned weren't originally composed for Undertale, so it's interesting how a song feeling perfect for a situation is somewhat of a retroactive illusion. “Megalovania” is an arrangement of an old song I made when I was a teenager, “Sans” was for a game I didn't get anywhere on and “Bonetrousle” was the main battle theme of that game.” – Toby Fox

Players are drawn into the characters of *Undertale*, made to give them a place in their imagination through their simplicity, see their depth through their hidden stories, and feel the love that fuels them through their humor. However, there are other connections that attach the player to the world of *Undertale*, connecting them through the senses and through their experiences in the world itself.

It's undeniable that music forms a part of that powerful connection to place and character, with sounds and effects giving each creature and place its own personality, known before they even speak a word. It was something I brought up with Flowey's introduction, with the playful notes of its appearance creating an opportunity for betrayal. The music sets the stage of *Undertale*, creating connections and expectations from them.

The track “Sans”, despite not actually having been made for the game, implies a joking nature. It's bouncy and playful, but there is a subdued nature to it. It hints at the teasing trickster, someone waiting to pull a prank and then elbow the friend who was in on it with them. It's a fine fit for the character, and it instantly breaks the tension the player might feel when first meeting Sans. Well, that and the whoopee cushion in the hand trick.

“It's ALWAYS funny.”

This music tells us much of what we need to know about the character, right off (which is really interesting, given that it was never designed for him, but

rather fit with his character in Fox's mind). It tells us about his lighthearted, but calm, nature. It implies who he is, and already hints that this is a goofy person we might wish to see more of.

We get the opposite from Sans' late-game Genocide run track, "Megalovania". The song doesn't fit with the light and soothing tones of the rest of the game, coming at the player with an aggressive, electronic style that is at odds with all of the music that came before it. It only plays if the player has done everything counter to the peaceful, loving nature of the game's creatures, playing at the culmination of the player's murder-spree through the Underground. It also makes it abundantly clear that our joking buddy will no longer be elbowing us over a well-played prank.

It was never made for *Undertale*, but that makes it work far better as a song that plays when the player distances themselves from the humanity of the monsters as far as they can go. They are no longer a being of this world, but a destroyer come to leave it in ruins. The music for this kind of being shouldn't be like anything else of that world, because the player has firmly rejected everything about it.

This isn't the only music that reflects this. As the player goes through a Genocide Run, going out of their way to kill each character and enemy in the world until nobody is left to fight, the music changes and distorts. It shifts to slower, discordant versions of the music, or meets the player with an eerie, haunting wind. It feels at odds with the joyful tone of the rest of the game's music, and tells us that we are doing something terrible to this place.

In this, "Megalovania", as a song from another place and time in Fox's life, becomes the perfect song for a destroyer from another world, one who has left the Underground in ruins and its people dead. It is, arguably, Sans' battle theme, but as the last warrior of his world (save whoever else Alphys managed to help escape), it is not his music. Here, we are the last boss, and it is our music as another being outside of space and time, one with a relentless nature and endless lives to throw away. This is the player's own hellish chorus.

Not that, you know, it's all bad. "Megalovania" stands out so much because of how positive, heartwarming, or emotional the rest of the game's music can get. "Snowy" conveys a loneliness throughout the snowswept first area outside of Snowdin (heh), joining the player as they are lost and confused while trying to understand the game's world.

This is followed by "Snowdin Town", a more robust, upbeat version of the track. It feels like a fuller song, and goes along with the peaceful nature of the city and the population of friendly monsters who inhabit it. If the player has been killing monsters on the way there, that song's absence is another indication that there are consequences to their actions.

That "Snowdin Town" track is light and cheerful, enhancing the friendly mood of the characters the player meets there. The goofy interactions, like getting your money back after only dozing for a few seconds at the inn, or the fun responses the player gets from knocking on doors, grow more powerful through this music. We can read the story, but we also feel it through the song.

And when we step out into "Waterfall", a subtle menace creeps into the music. It's a pretty track, using chimes to instill a sense of awe in the player, but the horns and strings that follow rise with a power that is frightening compared to what the player has heard before. It is no wonder that the player comes to battle Undyne down here, fighting against the first real source of menace the players will find in the game. It's a lead-up to an encounter with a real warrior, and the music ensures the player feels this coming.

And if the player wasn't sure they were finally playing for keeps, "Spear of Justice" will make that abundantly clear as they get brutalized by Undyne. The music is fast-paced, and shows no hint of softness or silliness. It's powerful, but aspects of its tone feel like a part of this place. There is still just that hint of silliness to it that makes it feel like it belongs to the *Undertale* world, but it is still a track that implies danger.

All of Fox's music is carefully crafted to enhance the mood of a given scene

or encounter. It adds onto the feelings they would already be going through due to the actions that lead them to this moment. Whether it be the end of a Pacifist Run bringing the soft, ever-rising emotional tidal wave that is “Undertale” (the song), or just knowing that this next battle will be a spectacle through “Death By Glamour”, Fox’s musical work enhances the player’s knowledge of setting, character, and their place within it all.

Players can experience these things intellectually and emotionally through the written narrative and their connections with the characters, but they *feel* it through the music. The music is what swells the emotions, taking the player to a wordless place where their senses guide them. Music is what speaks to the heart itself, and with what the words have already told the mind, strengthens what they feel here.

This music ties them to the emotions of this experience. Music is what ties us to locations and memories in our own lives, after all. Songs bring us back to the places we heard them and the times we shared as the songs played. They bring back people long dead, or places long left behind. It’s no wonder that this same power is used to bring *Undertale*’s characters and world that much closer to our hearts.

It's not that music simply does this, but that these striking tracks stand out for the characters and places that are tied to them. The music feels like a part of these characters and locations, and has that resonance of memory to make us recall the silly, sad, happy, and dark times we’ve shared in *Undertale*’s world with its charming cast.

10.

“Isn’t it natural for a game like this to end looking at a sunset...?” (4) - Toby Fox

Music ties us to place, but *Undertale*’s locations aren’t just static worlds that we run through. They aren’t just staging grounds for the gameplay to occur, but memorable places that the player develops a bond with, just like with the characters. The Underground is a place of secrets and connections – an environment with its own story to tell, should the player wish to look for it.

Frozen peaks and lava caverns aren’t exactly uncommon in video games, or stand out as storytelling places, but there are still small aspects of these places that tell their own tales. A hidden door buried deep into the hills, a strange symbol emblazoned on it, or something as simple as the snow dogs that litter an area of the woods outside Snowdin, hints that the world of *Undertale* can tell as many stories as its characters can. It will just be up to the player to decide what that story means.

Undertale offers several closed doors and secret places, many with hidden notes (like the house beside Napstablook’s home) that can reveal more about its characters and world. Simply by turning the right corner in the final area of the game, the player can see a hint to some horrific events that have transpired long before they got there, learning why Toriel was right to try to keep them from reaching Asgore. Or, in the case of the snow dogs, it can be a reminder that the bosses you face aren’t dangerous monstrosities bereft of kindness, but innocent, playful people who have been caught up in something awful.

This happens all throughout the game. As early as Toriel’s house, the player can see a blocked bedroom door, leaving them to wonder what lies behind it. And what tragedy led to all of the shoes that are lying around in the room Toriel gives the player? *Undertale* starts hinting at its secrets early, using the world itself to grab the player’s attention and plant ideas in their

head.

It's not an unusual storytelling technique, but one put to subtle effect in *Undertale*. The shoes are left lying around the room with no apparent reason given. The door sits there, uncaring whether the player ever, EVER understands it. The notes in a later locked house talk about an event, but do not go into deep details about it, leaving the player to imagine what has happened.

“Dear Diary: She surprised me with something today. Sketches of a body that she wants to create for me...a form beyond my wildest fantasies. In a form like that, I could finally feel like... 'myself.' After all, there's no way I can be a star the way I am now. Sorry, Blooky. My dreams can't wait for anyone...”

It is not so much what these things tell the player, but what they don't. *Undertale's* environments hint at their meaning, but are careful not to overexplain it. A statue in a cave, rain pouring down on it, doesn't tell you that it needs an umbrella. It's clear what it needs when the player sees one later in a bin, should they take the time to think about it, but Fox simply presents the player with items and notes and lets them make the connections.

Even at its most overt, within the confines of Alphys' lab with all of the notes on the walls, it only implies what has happened in this world. The player, through their actions in the story and combat, will end up deciding if they see all of what the game has to offer, and come up with all of its conclusions.

This will require multiple playthroughs as well, as Pacifist, Neutral, and Genocide routes diverge in dialogue and events, telling players shards of the single story that forms the history and events of the Underground. No one run at the game gives the player everything they need to know, but rather offers pieces for the player to put together. When assembled, they form a whole, but even then, the player has much to think about when putting it all together.

“The game speaks for itself.”

That’s something Fox has said to me a great deal whenever we spoke about the game. Especially in terms of the environments and objects, the game will whisper its secrets to the player who is willing to listen. Sometimes the pieces are all there and can seem quite clear, but in others, the game only drops small hints at what is to come – the kind of details that are rewarded on repeat playthroughs and with the benefit of knowledge of the varied endings and later events.

Across multiple playthroughs, these little pieces start to pop out more for the player. What may have only been meaningless gibberish on one playthrough becomes clear on the next. Alphys’ notes seemed quite clear to me when I was down in her lab, but was that only because I had tried the game several times and knew a handful of its outcomes? I was mystified by the lab on an earlier playthrough, catching the hints as they came together into a horrible truth, but it was only on the run I played for this book that I really took in what they meant, appreciating the facility and its meanings in its entirety.

Undertale’s secrets feel obvious when you understand them later, but when you first encounter them, they only whisper at their meaning. The coffins may seem meaningless to some, but convey a dread that becomes sickening once you’ve seen Flowey call up those same colored hearts that are on each casket. The game hints at many deeper horrors, tragic events, and buried secrets (some deep within the code of the game itself), and offers the player new understanding of its game world as they learn new aspects about the story.

Undertale is designed for players to play through multiple times. As such, it is littered with mysteries and hidden tidbits that become clear on further runs. Players can see that Fox was hinting at many bits of the story throughout the game, and so each run feels like it peels back a layer as the environments and items within them add onto the narrative.

And like the characters themselves in their simplicity, this piecing together

of the side narrative makes a part of the game feel like it belongs to the player. Yes, the story is there and set in stone, but it was the player who interpreted it based on what they witnessed as they wandered through the world.

When the player makes these connections themselves, the revelation belongs to them. When the game doesn't clarify this for the player, it forces them to engage with the story and place. They have to make all of the connections on their own, using evidence that pulls them to their conclusion, and in doing so internalize part of the game. Even years later, it can be exciting to draw up some new tidbit that hints at Sans and Toriel's relationship, especially when you put together that idea from evidence that was laid out in the environments, not because the game made that explicit.

And it was you who figured it out. The game didn't tell you things overtly. You just found some clues and came to the conclusion on your own. This feels good, creating a memorable bond with the game where you engaged with it on a deep level. You found your proof and came up with your own theory on the game. Maybe it encouraged you to post on the forums or talk about it with your friends. It drew the game out of the game itself and into an action you took in your own life.

Even if you didn't say your theory to anyone, it was likely something you mulled over in your own head for some time. You weighed the evidence while awake one night, or on an idle walk or drive. The game's story elements, in their vagueness and hinting, entered your life outside the game. It wasn't you thinking about playing it – it was you engaging with characters and narrative and place beyond the game's world. It connected you within it in a personal way, and you drew your own story out of the events within.

Like characters, the player puts their own stamp on the story through this "simplistic" storytelling. By offering the shape, but not the fine details, the environmental storytelling brings the player into the world of *Undertale* and furnishes a place for it in their mind. It helps them reshape it, internalize it, and make it their own.

11.

“Many factors further influenced this decision's development. The strongest one might be my desire to subvert concepts that go unquestioned in many games. You kill a lot of random monsters (sometimes even humans) in every RPG and the consequences for this are never addressed. What if they were addressed?” – Toby Fox

Players are also able to connect to the world because their actions directly affect it. By choosing violence or peace, they will soon be able to see just how their actions will have an effect on the Underground, changing its future as if it were a real place.

Players who do a lot of backtracking may note that, should they show Mercy toward many of the monsters and bosses, they'll pop up all over the world. Creatures that the player had spared will wander around old dungeons, or stop in for a game of solitaire at Grillby's. The player can chat with these creatures, hearing a quick word about their lives or what's on their minds after combat.

It's strange to see combat monsters and NPCs form a shared role like this. Typically, creatures encountered in combat don't make that jump over to someone the player can interact with in the game's world later. It is kind of a downer to kill someone you just talked to about how “Mountains're nice.”

That's just the point, though, isn't it? Players who see a monster show up in the general Underworld are being shown that these creatures have lives outside of combat. They hang out with their friends. They go back to wandering the forests and caves around the world. They are living beings with things they want to do.

This is an important aspect. Combat is often carried out in a separate screen and battlefield that differs from the regular game world, further increasing that sense that monsters/enemies are an “other” to be eliminated in RPGs. The enemies only exist in this other combat screen, dredged up from the

aether to antagonize the player when they aren't actually visible within the world. Some RPGs have visible encounters, yes, but *Undertale* doesn't, falling more in that camp where the monster's only existence in the world is to hold the player back. They aren't a part of the world, instead belonging to this otherworldly force that only exists to challenge the people who belong.

Some games have dabbled in this form of guilt, like *Chrono Trigger* with Medina Village, featuring monsters players can encounter in combat having lives outside of it, but here, we instantly see a more simplistic side of it. The player can be attacked within Medina, and the monsters clearly don't like having humans around (until they shuffle time around a little bit).

Undertale takes a different route, having the monsters exist in that "other" space outside of combat, but should the player be kind to them and spare them, then they appear within the game's world. They make that transition from just being creatures who fight the player to beings with lives outside of combat. They're not just something for you to clobber, but people with friends and friendships.

This also rewards the player for saving them. They get additional gameplay in the form of new story and dialogue that others may not have seen, and emotionally, it rewards them for saving the life of someone that would not have a place in this world, otherwise. The player's kindness gives the monster its place back in the world, turning them from feral creature to something gentler. Perhaps this act is what allows the monsters to forgive humans and come back to their families and friends, having abandoned an aspect of their hatred.

Or maybe it's just funny to see Lesser Dog playing cards with itself and losing, letting players meet the friends they made through combat. If the player took the time to befriend a monster in combat, it's nice that they get to see that friend again. Having gone through some truly silly fights, it would be a shame never to be able to experience that connection with the monster again. After all, I did let Woshua "wosh" me. If I let you bathe me, I'd probably want to talk to you again at some point.

The player gets to see the world changed by their kindness, and it helps them strengthen their bond with the monsters they saved by placing them in the world to interact with again. It reminds the player that their actions have consequences for these creatures, making them out to be something more than just killing monsters that have no place in reality. The player's actions have weight in this world, but it is a good weight. It is a way of making the place better and cheerier.

Or they could go another route and watch the land rot and empty before them as they kill everything in their path. If the player could only save monsters, their actions would not be as powerful as they are.

Through the Genocide Route, the player not only kills the monsters they run into, but has to go out of their way to kill more. Each area requires killing through far, far more encounters than the player would normally run into if they just went through the area at a regular pace. They have to grind out enemies, like they would do in many other RPGs, gaining extra experience from it to grow stronger and kill faster. They have to linger until every monster's life is snuffed out.

That part is key to it all. Players aren't just fighting a lot of monsters, they're fighting ALL of them. The player can only move on to the next area in a Genocide Run when given the message "But nobody came" in tiny (and discomforting) print. The player has to go out of their way to kill everything that lives in a given area. Their violence has to linger in an area until nothing more comes from it.

This creates the opposite effect of the Pacifist Run. Instead of making more monsters show up in the world, the ones who are there on the Pacifist and Neutral routes fade away. They've fled before the player's torrent of violence, leaving shops empty for the player to clean out, and streets devoid of any life. It's unclear for a while how many have fled or if the player has just killed them all, but places that used to be filled with funny creatures are now completely empty. And they FEEL empty, with many players having already experienced what they were like back when they had charming monsters wandering within them.

Even if they haven't, it feels surreal to play through an RPG with no NPC encounters. It's odd to play through one that doesn't have a single person wandering the overworld save for the player. RPGs typically have towns and people to make the world feel fully-realized. They want players to feel like they're in a real place, and so there has to be non-combatants, even if they're not exactly riveting conversationalists with their talk of bandits in the north. Still, they're people who wander about town doing their own thing, even if that's just meandering. It's a strange sort of life, but it's still life that exists outside of battle.

Undertale uses that sense of emptiness to let the player really feel the implications of what they're doing. It doesn't flat out say it for some time, but it lets the player feel the distorting effect they're having on life in the Underworld. Through shifting music and the emptying towns, players see that there are repercussions to their actions – moreso if they've seen the good they can do.

The player knows that what they do will affect this place, and like in all other aspects, it's that connection to *Undertale's* world that strengthens its bond with the player. Saving or dooming the world is not something that will just result in a different series of dialogues at the game's end with no other effects. It's not like joining with the villain in *Breath of Fire*, simply taking a seat beside it (although that did blow my mind that I could do that). If the player engages in certain behaviors, there will be repercussions. Their choices change the world.

The world is theirs. It's shaped by what they do. They have an ownership in the shape the world takes. If it's full of life, it's from their doing. If it's a cold and eerie void, it's their doing, too. This makes the game stick with the player, and through all of the varied ways Fox has crafted that connection, it creates a bond where the decisions they make matter.

Still, these are just decisions within a game world. It's sad to kill all of the people in a town created through code, but I doubt I'm the only person to have punched their way through a city in *Oblivion*. You can see this

emptiness in plenty of other games when the cities are cleaned out. Players have been doing it for years.

Which is why Fox took the repercussions outside the game.

12.

“One fan of the DEMO said ‘I’d never played an RPG game where I never had to press the Fight button before...’ That inspired me to try to keep that philosophy, though I may have disappointed some people in the end.” – Toby Fox

For consequences to matter, players must have a choice, and the consequences must be noticeable. Many games try to offer these kinds of choices, but offer meaningless conclusions or don’t actually have an effect on the plot. Many of Telltale’s games play up this angle, giving players dozens of choices and hinting that they will matter a great deal when they don’t have any effect at all. It’s a wonderful trick at first, but soon players start to catch on to the gimmick and the choice-based aspect loses its charm.

For players to feel a connection to a game, their decisions within it have to matter. Further, those decisions become more powerful, and tie us to these worlds even further, when we don’t even know that we’re making decisions at all. Often, games also make choices into obvious decisions, like deciding to punch a certain reporter or not in the *Mass Effect* series. It’s not hard to see the moral stripe here, and it is obvious which direction the player is taking their character in.

Undertale offered choices that had drastic effects on the game’s world, but offered little explanation on how or why. Sure, it’s a question of simple morality to kill or not kill someone, but killing monsters in RPGs has always been a pure, noble act. Even if *Mass Effect* feels you’re a Renegade for punching reporters, it gets kind of quiet when you shoot a few hundred aliens. Yeah, they shot first a lot of the time, but *Undertale*’s enemies strike first, too.

The player has likely been warned by *Undertale*’s Steam description “The RPG game where you don’t have to destroy anyone!” and that “Killing is unnecessary.” Still, it’s hard-wired, isn’t it? Grinding out monster kills in an

RPG is just normal behavior. And Flowey, your first encounter in the Underworld, did point out that it is a kill or be killed world. And monsters are still trying to hit you and hurt you, even if you do try to be peaceful with them.

It's not like they go easy on the player, either. They attack relentlessly as you try to figure out which ACT option will be the one that calms them down and makes them back off. It's hard to do this when you have to live through dozens of turns of Toriel's attacks, or flee from Undyne's stabbing strikes, or deal with Asgore's barrage of spear swipes. It feels like a game where you should fight back.

Undertale doesn't explicitly ask you if you want to go easy on these monsters. It doesn't make it clear that your decision to hit back will matter, or that you will pay for killing that carrot that was trying to fight you.

The Vegetoid was my first kill in *Undertale*, far before Toriel. I was a ways from a health-recovering save point, and didn't want to lose my progress. I was getting pounded by the game's shmup-like combat system, and hadn't found many healing items. I was low on health. I was confused as to how I would get stronger as I played the game. Was I supposed to survive the entire thing with this much health? Was I supposed to be fighting a few monsters to level up, while only saving the bosses? Would my actions matter?

I was thinking of the game in terms of it being a game. If I was a Good Person, would I get the True Ending? What were the criteria for being a good person in *Undertale*? Games play fast and loose with morality most of the time, allowing for genocide should I periodically save a puppy or give someone \$20. Having just started *Undertale*, I figured it would be more of the same. I'd be free to kill a couple of monsters, but if I was kind of good overall, I'd be rewarded with that Best Ending For Good Folks.

I was used to morality being made overt and clear, the kind of morality that comes up when answering a quiz, but not when you're faced with an actual, difficult life decision. When I was hurt and dying, wondering if things were

only going to get more challenging for me, I made a decision, all right. I made the kind of decision that I, myself, would make when endangered. I was panicked and afraid (in a video game sense), and that guided my true, personal morality, one that chose a dark act purely to avoid the inconvenience of having to replay a short area. One that wanted an easier route through the game later, even if I had no idea what was to come.

It paints a darker picture of me, and the more common kind of morality we see in games – we're moral because we want something. We play good because we want the Best Ending, or some unlockable power or gadget or character. We're good because we hope to gain, not because of some sense of altruism for a clutch of code and art assets.

This is why, largely, I didn't think about it when I killed the Vegetoid. I was more concerned with making it to the next save point so I wouldn't have to repeat something I'd just done, and besides, they weren't going to punish me for killing one lowly enemy, were they? It was just a grinning carrot, after all.

So I killed it. And the game didn't fault me for it. Didn't hint that I'd done something wrong with a growing evil meter, a change in my character's appearance, a note saying my morality was shifting, or any of the other things games do when they want to show "morality." No, it just let me go along my merry way with that fresh batch of EXP and new level I gained. Gave me a few more hit points and everything, making my journey easier. I mean, surely if I wanted to survive against all of these monsters, even if I intended to be nice, having a bit more health would help? So what if I killed a few creatures in the beginning?

"So what if I killed a few?" was the question I think Fox expected of many of his players. Yes, it was a game about playing nice, but after having played RPGs for so long, I doubt many people thought there'd be much harm in offing a few critters. I mean, you can see them again if you only kill a couple. It's not like they're gone when you kill one or two.

But what I did mattered a great deal, and I didn't know it because it didn't

come in the form of an obvious moral choice. The game hadn't prompted me with dialogue or anything, but had simply given me a world to act in and then provided me with consequences I wouldn't know until it was too late.

I was judged for my sins by the end of the game. Before you face Asgore, you run into Sans in a hallway bathed in light, and he calmly explains the consequences of the people the player hurts throughout the game. That there is a penalty for doing harm, no matter how inconsequential I thought it was at the time.

Those creepy carrots were indeed living things, and all of that lovely EXP turned out to be Execution Points, and my LV (or LOVE) wasn't an indication of personal strength, but instead my Level Of Violence. That carrot I had killed on a whim to avoid a minor inconvenience had come back to haunt me, dooming me to get the neutral ending, facing Flowey in combat that was surreal and disorienting. No Good Boy ending for me.

But that still reduces it to a simple morality system, doesn't it? It's still nothing more than: killing monsters is bad, saving monsters is good. It's still a simple, binary choice. One is pure good, another is pure evil.

Gameplay-wise, it's also still just me deciding not to kill anyone because I wanted the best ending. I pushed on to try for the True Pacifist ending immediately after "failing" to get that best ending on the first run. I wanted that "best" ending. I wanted to be a good person, and have the game reward me for being a good person.

But *Undertale* muddies the water of morality. Yes, deciding to kill a monster or not isn't a leap of morality, but sparing a creature is not an easy decision. As we've seen, saving them requires players survive an onslaught of attacks, dodging complex arrays of shots for turn after turn, weaving through them as they struggle to figure out which ACT decision will finally calm their foes down. This can take dozens of turns, and with limited inventory space for weak healing items, this will wear most players down until they know combat well.

It's very, very hard to live through being good in *Undertale*. If you're not

good at threading that little red heart through tight spaces, you will not live long. If you can't guess your way through the monster's wishes, personality, and desires, you will have a hard time surviving long enough to make peace with them and spare them. It takes a great deal of time and effort to help these monsters survive.

And the whole while, that ATTACK option gleams, waiting for you to choose it. It's so easy just to select it and wipe out an attacking beast in a strike or two. It's so much simpler to just lash out and be done with it if you're having a bad run, killing your foe and figuring you'll try again next time.

That's the point, though. It's easy to decide to attack. There's no obvious consequence, either, telling players nothing if they haven't already been through the game a few times. All you know is that it's easier to kill when you need to. It's hard to be good and just, and all it takes is a single slip-up for it to all fall apart.

Undertale's morality does come down to a single binary choice, but it makes that choice matter by not making it an easy one. Players don't get away with just clicking a dialogue option or choosing which abilities are "good." Instead, they have to commit to being good, and fight hard to stick to the path they've chosen. Making peace with monsters that have every reason to despise you will not be easy, and it's only when you know them and care for them that you'll start to get some sort of a foothold. In the meantime, being good is a challenge, and you will ache with the need to just break from it that one time.

13.

“My original idea for him [Papyrus] was way different. He was going to wear a fedora and be kind of creepy, with no obvious redeeming qualities...I’m so glad I decided to change him completely. It wouldn’t have been right to have such a mean-spirited character.” – Toby Fox (5)

What if that choice to kill starts getting a little too easy? That first break did it to me, and soon, I was killing a handful of creatures. Just enough to level up, really. I mean, I’d already messed up and killed one monster, so what was a few more?

And in all of my failures in the future – all of the GAME OVERs – it grew stronger. It wouldn’t take much to tumble over that edge, and finally, in a later Genocide Run, where the player sets out to kill EVERYONE, I got to give in to that side of me a little bit. To revel in power. To eradicate life without thought. It was just a game, after all, so what’s a little bit of fun wiping out all life in the Underworld?

But making the decision to go full-on evil isn’t an easy one, either. Yes, it’s an easy one in the moment, when a certain spider boss is just steamrolling you and nothing seems to be working (why, oh why, didn’t I eat something from the spider bake sale during that fight?), or when you can’t quite sneak around Dogamy and Dogaressa’s pair of axes. But soon, killing all of those inconvenient creatures starts to bring about other problems.

I’m not just talking the handful of brutal bosses you’ll come across (although Undyne the Undying and Sans will test your keyboard’s durability). If you’re really, REALLY committed to killing everyone, it starts to chop away at you for various reasons. It starts with that delightful music that I already spoke about. Rather than playing the usual array of striking, cheery, or fun songs as you wander the world, the music shifts into this droning, unsettling series of tones as you kill enough creatures to enter a Genocide Run. It sounds oddly mechanical and distorted – a far cry from the pretty piano music of the

Ruins.

It reminds a bit of *Silent Hill* – an alarming shift in musical tone to something discordant that drags on and on. It grates on the ear, but in a subtle way. It's not aggressive, but rather creeps under the skin, making me feel sick with worry. In this distorted song, one can sense the world changing, especially when it abruptly starts up after you've been idly killing monsters, and right after the "but no one came" message spontaneously appearing when you thought you'd entered a normal battle.

This jarring shift in music changes everything about the reception of the game, and things get very, very lonely and uncomfortable. What once seemed like a peaceful ruin filled with odd creatures is now an empty, endless series of corridors. Not even so much that it is empty, either. This music, and what the player has already seen of the place and its talkative inhabitants, tells them that there were people here, and that they're gone, now. It's empty and lonely because it was once populated, and now it's not.

Because of you.

That's what makes this feel especially eerie. It's not some plot point the player had no control over. It's not "supposed" to happen. It didn't come from the player choosing too many evil points (at least, not overtly). It came from the player taking on a series of actions that they just wanted to, or from trying to achieve a certain ending, or acting in the same way they typically act when playing an RPG. It's something the player chose, accidentally or purposely. They were just grinding monsters and levelling up. Nothing weird about that, right?

But we don't just stop at music. *Undertale* slowly shapes itself around how the player acts in its world, changing many different aspects over time. NPC characters begin to disappear from locations. Towns are empty, with players able to take whatever they like or do what they want. Plot points change, with early encounters with Sans and Papyrus growing uncomfortable as the player character grows more cold, distant, and silent. Soon, even those run-ins dry up, and the player is only periodically stopped for boss battles where

the game's main characters try to stop their onslaught.

If a player were to do this on their first run, they might not notice the difference, but they would notice that SOMETHING was off. If they'd played any RPGs, the empty towns and lack of any helper characters might leave a sense of loneliness. The music and warnings of no one coming to battle give an unsettling sense that something is horribly wrong. The warnings from the population about the player's evil acts would work on a player had they never played any games at all. The game comes out and tells you that you're doing terrible things, growing more and more explicit over time. You are not a good force in this world, and *Undertale's* characters are unafraid to tell you that.

Even if you haven't been paying attention to the dialogue, can you honestly feel good about killing all of these grinning, happy characters? Is there not something childlike and innocent on many of their faces, smirking and happy as they meander through the world. Yes, Greater Dog could be demolishing you, but how do you feel about hitting a puppy that's smiling at you? *Undertale's* simple, cheerful characters seem too innocent or friendly to hurt, even as you're taking damage from them in the box below. Whether you feel anything or not, the appearance of these happy creatures seeks to make the act of killing them uncomfortable.

This grows much, much harder on the player that has already gotten the other endings, though. The ones who've gone on a date with Papyrus, shared a meal with Sans, or helped Undyne with a little cooking. The more the player digs into this world - the more they know about the characters who live there - the more reprehensible it becomes to hurt those characters

I never really felt like I knew the people of *Fallout 3's* Megaton that well. I didn't particularly like Moira, and I never much cared when I blew them all up. Besides, I could just reset and fix everything (but we've already talked about that a bit, and will more later). *Undertale* was different. Through my encounters with them, in battle and on the world map, I'd gotten to know these creatures well. I'd seen their good and bad sides, I'd seen into their personal lives, and they'd welcomed me as a friend. Resetting the game to

do a Genocide Run did not reset my memories of these people. I still could recall their friendships. I'd only just recently said goodbye to them in my previous Pacifist run, honestly. Our good times were only a few days old.

Now, I was here to kill them. Toriel, who'd taken me into her home and tried to keep me safe, had to die. Even after all the work I'd put into saving her the first time, I still cut her down - in one hit that did colossal damage, which was another indicator of the dark path I was walking down. These creatures who'd stood before me now didn't have a single hope (And as for making things easier, you don't have a better example than how you can just demolish early bosses. Revenge is, for a time, *sweet*).

"You felt your sins crawling on your back."

But it wasn't sweet. I didn't feel good as I cleaved through all these smiling, friendly, but somewhat aggressive monsters. I didn't get that same idle thrill I'd get from running people down in *GTA III*, my first experience at just crushing a powerless populace with powerful weapons. I didn't revel in the sort of goofy fun I'd had when I punched my way through an entire town in *Fallout 3*.

Sometimes it does feel good to just cut loose with some mayhem in a video game world, knowing there's no real consequences to what you're doing. I didn't feel that, here. Killing Toriel again made me feel like my mouth had filled up with ash. Stomping these monsters flat, especially going out my way to do so, didn't have that same dumb thrill that often comes with going on a video game rampage. Even getting stronger didn't feel much better, taking away that joy of levelling up I usually get in RPGs. I just felt...empty.

Worse than empty, I would find when I came to Papyrus. The spaghetti cook's innocent, hyper-positive attitudes kept assaulting my desire to see a Genocide Run through. It hurt to want to hurt him.

"Wowie!! I have friends! And who knew that all I needed to make them was to give people awful puzzles and then fight them?"

I could remember so much of the goofy things he'd recently said to me.

“Prepare yourself!! For high jinks! For low jinks! Dangers! Puzzles! Capers! Japers!”

He was so...goofy. So genuine in his desire to have friends. Even when capturing me would make all of his dreams come true, he didn't do it. It was still all in good fun for him. Just an excuse to joke around and have a good time, maybe making a new pal.

“Howdy! If it isn't my good friend who trusts me. This is Papyrus, your also mutual friend.”

I knew Papyrus pretty well. He'd made me laugh most of the way through the first hour of a game that was already pretty ridiculous. He just ramped up that silliness, being a perfect mirror to Sans' equally goofy sense of humor. There was just a genuine desire within him to make the people around him happy. He just wanted to be my friend (and ONLY my friend).

“Human. It's clear now. You're madly in love with me. Everything you do. Everything you say. It's all been for my sake. Human, I want you to be happy, too. It's time for me to express my feelings. It's time that I told you. I, Papyrus...]...um...”

He just came to encapsulate everything good and positive about *Undertale's* world. He was tasked with capturing humans in order to get a spot in the Royal Guard, which he claimed to desire so much, but he couldn't help but be kind to everyone he met. Even in death, when you're cutting him to pieces, this doesn't stop.

“But...St...Still! I believe in you! You can do a little better! Even if you don't think so! [...] promise...”

The other monsters, understandably, turn on the player in powerful ways

when the player sets out to kill them all. Undyne becomes Undyne the Undying, a stronger, more aggressive version of her regular self. Sans becomes a beast of monstrous power, one who overwhelmed me dozens and dozens of times – far more even than Smough and Ornstein from *Dark Souls*. It's only Papyrus who believes in the player no matter what they do. No matter their actions, Papyrus tries to be a positive influence, endlessly offering jokes and a smile, right up until he's left as nothing but a pile of dust.

This wasn't the fun of going on a rampage that most games provided. This was hurtful. Sickening. I knew these creatures. Had grown to care about the smallest among them from learning their personalities in battle. They'd made me laugh, even as they kicked around my in-game character.

And really, what did that matter? Save points were so frequent throughout *Undertale* that I never lost much progress if I didn't win a fight. What did I care that I'd lose five minutes of progress if I didn't find out how to best befriend an airplane with a bow on its cockpit?

This wasn't killing faceless characters in a game. This was an assault on characters I knew and loved. This was like seeing a favorite character in a book or movie die, only I was the one choosing to make it happen. I was the one deciding which characters lived to the end. I was doing this. Me.

I felt guilt when I killed Toriel again, but it was killing Papyrus that made me sick. Papyrus never stopped believing in the good in me, and now, here I was, breaking his bones for nothing more than curiosity. Boredom. I wanted to see what else the game contained, so I had come to town to end his life. Sorry, guy who was so fun to hang around, but I want to know about some more story stuff that I could read online. So you have to die. No hard feelings. After all, I'll just put you back together again someday. No one needs to feel put out by this temporary murder.

“That's the trash can. Feel free to visit it any time.”

Players who take the time to get to know the cast of *Undertale* will share in

that guilt. Maybe Papyrus won't be the one to trigger it, but someone in this silly, heartwarming place will do it. Maybe it will be a small monster, or one of the overworld creatures who just isn't there anymore after you kill them (Grillby's gets startlingly empty if you kill the various dog enemies, as opposed to cheerfully full if you save them), but someone will make the player crack – make them realize the gravity of what they've done.

Because you know them. You've laughed with them. You've shared in their pain, and likely helped them see you in a more positive light. You have bonded with these characters, and through everything Fox has put into his world, you've come to be close to these beings. Killing them hurts so much more in this situation. It means so much more since you've spent this positive time with each of them. There are no disposable beings (no matter what I feel about Vegetoid). They all have a place out in the world, and by taking them out, you are harming beings you've grown to care for.

But how much pain can we really cause a digital being? Hold the escape button for a few seconds and we've corrected our dark deeds. That's part of the appeal of messing around in a game – you can do whatever you like, but then a quick reset gets rid of it all. It's consequence-less should we choose to have it be that way. We're free to do whatever we want, and then wipe the slate clean. It's being able to be whoever we want to be, even if that's an insufferable jerk or murderous monster, and then come back as if nothing had happened.

As we've seen, though, we cannot escape what we've become in *Undertale*. As we've seen with Toriel, in *Undertale*, our sins are ours, crawling on our backs, forever.

14.

“Yes, the choice to kill or not kill will continue to be significant. If you kill certain people, then you can't be friends with them. Is there any benefit to being friends to people? Is it possible to play the game without having anyone die? Hahaha... I can't tell you...” – Toby Fox (6)

Consequences are permanent in *Undertale*. Not everything you do scars the game forever, but there are several actions you can take that cannot be undone. Like when Flowey spoke directly to me about the harm I'd done to Toriel and how I'd reversed it, the game is continually keeping track of what you're doing, ready to throw it back in your face should you feel you can just walk away from it.

This was jarring during that first run at *Undertale*. I felt bad for killing Toriel, to be sure, but I still knew I was just playing a game. The harm I'd done could be undone by just shutting the game off or restarting it. But as I said before, you can't just throw away your past in this game by playing around with saving. *Undertale* may forgive, but it doesn't forget.

This went completely counter to anything I was used to. I couldn't just play around and do whatever I wanted. I had to behave myself as if my actions would continue to have effects I couldn't expect, and repercussions I couldn't walk away from. My actions would carry forward, even if I thought I'd eradicated them by saving.

There are many minor ways that this system of consequences takes shape throughout the game, or that your actions will always be remembered. Characters will mention that you seem kind of familiar. Sans will notice that you turned around a little too quickly when he meets you outside the Ruins on later runs, or that you already seem to know what he's going to say when you meet him for a second time at the end of the game. While these actions are not consequences, per se, they do imply that the world remembers you, and follows a single timeline even if the player chooses to reset it or not

save. Put short, your actions will always carry weight. You cannot unmake something you have done.

Not all of this is negative. Most of it is tiny moments of recollection, but they tell the player that what they do here will have permanent effects. A part of these characters remembers what the player did to them, for good or bad. This does not actually occur, but these small moments of recollection from sporadic characters make the player weigh their behavior more carefully, especially after seeing it show up after harming Toriel. The player has learned that they cannot erase that harm, even if they so desire. The consequences of their actions will last forever no matter how many times they revive Toriel. And perhaps, on the same level that she recognizes you on new runs, she remembers your cruelty as well.

Suppose this doesn't bother you, though. Most characters only hint that they recognize you, and besides, the characters don't recoil in fear from you if you've hurt them. They don't actually remember. It's only a mental leap to assume they can remember your past misdeeds from recalling a moment or two.

Suppose your curiosity is piqued, rather than you feeling horrified at your repeated toying with this world. That you want to know what sort of changes await the world when you see it through to its destruction, rather than making peace with everyone. What happens when you kill them all - push events to their conclusion, killing everyone in the Underworld on a successful Genocide Run? It's at that point that you get to meet...yourself. Well, a white-skinned, alarming version of yourself.

This dialogue slowly plays out with no text sounds, but with a sharp, shuddering tone burrowing its way into your ears, accompanied by a slow, steady thumping, like an echoing heartbeat. It feels like something sinister is returning to life, shaking off ancient dust before turning to stare right at you.

And it does feel like it is looking right at you, the player, black dots peering into your eyes. And that smile. Something about its smile makes the whole thing feel even more frightful, alongside the music.

“Greetings. I am <player’s name>. Thank you. Your power awakened me from death. My ‘human soul.’ My ‘determination.’ They were not mine, but YOURS.”

You’ve been in control of the horrific events that took place in this game. You wanted to see them all the way through, even if they hurt the people you used to be friends with. But what was the harm? You can delete it all and be free, right? And while the characters knew what’d you’d done, Toriel was still back in one piece. You could still have your bloody fun and then put everything back.

“At first, I was so confused. Our plan had failed, hadn’t it? Why was I brought back to life?...You. With your guidance. I realized the purpose of my reincarnation. Power. Together, we eradicated the enemy and became strong. HP. ATK. DEF. GOLD. EXP. LV. Every time a number increases, that feeling...That’s me. ‘<player’s name>’.”

“Now. Now, we have reached the absolute. There is nothing left for us here. Let us erase this pointless world, and move on to the next.”

You’re given a choice to erase the world or not at this point. There is nothing to return to whether you do or not, but maybe you pause here. Maybe erasing a dead world feels like too much, as some part of you has an attachment to this world you’ve been having so much (murderous) fun in. Maybe a part of you feels you should leave a testament to your cruelty, either as a pleasant reminder, an idle curiosity, or a symbol of guilt.

The decision has already been made, though. You made it a long time before, and there is no sense in hesitating. So you erase the world, whether willingly or not (not agreeing is far, far more frightening, if you haven’t experienced it yourself).

You’ve made the ultimate change to the game’s world. Committed the ultimate crime. What sort of differences would await you when you came back to it for a NEW GAME? What would be new, based on your final act of cruelty?

Maybe you want to come back and make pals with everyone again. Delete the old save and start over. Maybe you just feel like messing with Flowey one more time, or to experience the challenge of fighting Undyne the Undying or Sans yet again. Maybe you don't like the state you left the world in, and wish to correct it. To erase your sins, completely.

No matter what your reasoning is, you come back to the game and turn it on. And you're presented with nothing but a blank screen.

The wind howls. Darkness envelops everything in the window. A minute passes. Two. Five. You destroyed the world, remember? What is there to come back to? The game world is gone.

Undertale strongly hinted that your actions would have a permanent effect on this place. That your choices would matter, within the game's world and, in a sense, outside of it. These consequences seem extreme, but you did choose to kill everyone on that Genocide Run, did you not? And part of the experience of killing everyone is to truly embrace that sense of solitude – that loneliness that would come from being the only thing left. Maybe you just wanted to know what it would feel like. Well, a part of that is in embracing the void. In knowing you cannot ever, EVER come back.

Now, *Undertale* is playing a game with you.

Fox isn't without some compassion for players who regret their decision, though. This IS a video game that you paid for, and locking you out of it forever for killing everyone and destroying all life is a bit extreme for a commercial product (IS IT, though?). So, if the player waits for ten minutes, a familiar voice will speak to them again.

"Interesting. You want to go back. You want to go back to the world you destroyed. It was you who pushed everything to its edge. It was you who led the world to its destruction. But you cannot accept it. You think you are above consequences."

The player is given the option to reply, here. Not that your reply matters a whole lot. Events have already been set in motion by your actions.

Consequences, pesky things that they are, tend to play out once their criteria have been met. Things spiral out of your control, and there is little you can do. You have set a stage, and must live with the domino effect of what you've done, no matter what you feel about it.

"Perhaps. We can reach a compromise. You still have something I want. Give it to me. And I will bring this world back."

Whatever this creature wants in its void of howling wind, it feels uncomfortable to give it to them. But refusal just boots the player out of the game. Then, they must wait another ten minutes to be given a similar offer. This will go on and on until the player gives in, offering this force whatever it wants.

"Then it is agreed. You will give me your SOUL."

And should the player agree to this (because if they don't, ten more minutes of waiting in the shrieking darkness awaits)...

"...Then, it is done."

And the game restarts. But it will never, ever be the same again.

Players can be friends with Papyrus all over again, going on a happy little date. They can play a goofy quiz with Metaton. Visit the ridiculous Temmies in their village. Help Royal Knights take time for ice cream. They can have all of their good times with their friends again, all the way up to the end where they embrace their lost friend Asriel in a bed of flowers, tears streaming down their cheeks from this act of forgiveness.

But then the end rolls, and something is wrong with that picture of you and your friends, their faces all crossed out as those empty black eyes peer out at the screen. Or you turn up from your covers after Toriel brings you a late night snack, twin voids glaring at you from under the sheets. It knows what you did. And it will never let you forget it, either.

The game has not changed, but these moments hint at a world that suffers

from the player's toying. That things may appear the same, like the aftermath of our own personal grievances, but something festers beneath the surface. It's a lie, cobbled together by everyone trying to pretend that everything is all right. That no one remembers how you viciously cut them down.

They were like toys. Toys one could break and then put back together again. Most games are. But Fox went out of his way to give the player the means to get to know these people. To learn to like or love them, in their own way. To feel close to them. And then many, in their curiosity, chose to tear them apart just the same. Because we wanted to know more about them. Or maybe just see what would happen when the knife plunged in. So we poked and prodded, and now we're in a world we know is lies.

Whether the characters show it or not, we know what we did, here. And if we forget, the game will make us remember. It will force us to confront that we hurt these creatures because we felt like it. That we cut down our digital friends on a whim. A boring afternoon and a curiosity about what would happen should we play the game in a different way. They all lead to these twisted versions of the game's ending, and those hideous black eyes. Our eyes.

Even if we choose to discard our actions as simply those of someone playing a game – exploring separate versions of a generated reality with no connection between the two, this moment ties them together. When <player's name> turns to the camera, looking right into the player's eyes, or when it speaks to us at the beginning of the game, it shows that *Undertale's* playthroughs form a single, interconnected timeline. Ours.

We are the link that ties all of *Undertale's* playthroughs together. We're the single experience that knows all of the varied ways we've saved or abused the world. And we continue to make these people suffer for our amusement, in one way or another. That is the consequence of what we do in this world – that all of our actions have occurred, whether we feel they've been discarded or not. Instead of games as separate trips to a multiple, similar realities, they form one reality where we continually revive the

beings within it, forcing them to relive their suffering for our entertainment.

This power is the heart of what *Undertale* seeks to explore. Beyond kindness to monsters in games, beyond experiencing the world as a pacifist or murderer, besides consequences in the game world, there is the morality of repeatedly bringing back a suffering world to make them feel that pain again.

“Ha ha ha ha...You naïve idiot. Do you think you are the only one with that power? The power to reshape the world...Purely by your own determination. The ability to play God! The ability to ‘SAVE.’ I thought I was the only one with that power. But...I can’t SAVE anymore. Apparently YOUR desires for this world override MINE. Well well. Enjoy that power while you can. I’ll be watching.”

15.

“Hi. Seems as if everyone is perfectly happy. Monsters have returned to the surface. Peace and prosperity will rule across the land. Take a deep breath. There’s nothing left to worry about...Well. There is one thing. One last threat. One being with the power to erase EVERYTHING. Everything everyone’s worked so hard for...You know who I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“That’s right. I’m talking about YOU.”

This was the warning Flowey gave me when I came back to my game for my Genocide Run. After I’d spent wonderful times with Sans, Toriel, and the gang on my Pacifist Run, becoming best pals with every living creature in *Undertale’s* world.

It was as if it knew what I would be up to. Even if it didn’t, it knew that I would be putting all of the characters in the game through the same pain they’d already just overcome. These creatures would have to suffer all over again for my curiosity and entertainment. Suffer even more, given my current intentions.

“YOU still have the power to reset everything. Toriel, Sans, Asgore, Alphys, Papyrus, Undyne...If you so choose...Everyone will be ripped from this timeline...and sent back before all of this ever happened. Nobody will remember anything. You’ll be able to do whatever you want...That power. I know that power. That’s the power you were fighting to stop, wasn’t it? The power that I wanted to use.”

And it was right. I was planning on using all of these creatures I’d come to know, all of these places I’d taken soothing walks through, and all of these joyful songs, and relive them in another way to sate my curiosity. To poke at them like an experiment and see what shook free. To prod and torture. Not that I thought of it as torture. I just wanted to see how this game world changed when I did something different. I didn’t see it as a cruelty, even if I loved these characters. I just wanted to know what happened.

But Flowey has no clue what kind of run I intend to do, does it? It'll say the same thing should I be coming back for another Pacifist Run, simply looking to go back and re-experience that growing friendship and love between the characters I felt before. That sense of getting to know the creatures, and watching how happy some of them get when you show you understand them. To help Napstablook find a friend. To feel all of that warmth just wrap itself around my heart as I relive all of those wonderful, happy moments that made me treasure *Undertale* so much.

To do that, though, these beings need to feel pain again. I need to take them out of the world they've escaped to, and put them all back where they were. Rip them out of a time when they're happy and free, and place them back in the mire of their people's misery. I've already saved the world, but doing so scattered my friends to all corners of the earth. In game terms, there is no other way I can see them. They're gone, as the game offers no further meetings or encounters. There's no more time to spend with them. No memories left to make.

I miss them. Even that silly rock at the beginning. I want to see them all again. The only way to do so, though, is to exercise a power that would throw them back in time to a place that hurt them. To make them fear and fight me all over again. To take away their happiness for my own.

That's not even taking into account the time I did that purely to make them suffer for it, if only so I could understand more of the game's story and more of their character motivations. When I chose to kill these cute creatures to sate an intellectual curiosity about them and their world. That's a dark moment, to be sure, but that doesn't mean my actions in bringing them back to their old lives to bring them back to the happy ending isn't any less cruel.

I've done this many, many times before. Kefka falls to me every few years when I replay *Final Fantasy VI*, but each time, Cyan must watch his family die to poison, Terra has to deal with her fears surrounding herself, and a world must see itself come to ruin. James Sunderland has to return to the

hell of Silent Hill, reliving his penance every time I want to see that town again. Even Princess Peach finds herself thrust into captivity just so I can dress like a raccoon and run around flying boats one more time.

We do this regularly in games, feeling nothing for the digital constructions that live there. We thrust our favorite characters back to a place of pain so we can grin and experience their worlds again. So we can have a laugh for an afternoon. So we can kill a few hours before work.

These are beings who've been constructed to have lives. To have existences. Some are fleshed out and more realistic than others, but these beings we've built are only designed to suffer. We build up men and women, give them lives and lovers and personalities, to an extent, and then we drag them out to make them hurt or hurt others to amuse ourselves. That's just what many video games are.

And the strangest part of it all is that we do this the most to the games and characters we love. After we take these characters to a place of peace and safety, we drag them back out of it after a few months or years so they can endure that pain all over again. We do this the most to the characters we love.

Trevor Belmont has dispatched Dracula, but I get bored one afternoon so I revive the vampire and make him forget all of his past friendships. Dr. Wily is imprisoned, but I just want to hear some good music so I restore the doctor to power and strip Mega Man of all his abilities. I just want to goof around with the grappling arm in *Bionic Commando*, so I have Super Joe recaptured, revive the cruel Master D, and have the hero lose all of his weapons, powers, and health. And I do this sort of thing ALL THE TIME.

Undertale looks at this form of behavior as a form of cruelty – the player as a powerful anomaly in these worlds, one that goes beyond the avatar they control. Through the game, we see the player as this invading force, one that wants the beings within these worlds to suffer. Through that suffering, they can fight and be entertained. Or relive memories they enjoy, even if that means forcing everyone within that world to go back to a bad time. Or to

just goof around, messing with weapons or tools for no good reason.

The player is that force – that guiding energy between all of the games they play. That force that wants to come to a place and find it in turmoil, for turmoil means action and change we can make to the world. It gives us a place to exercise our wills, whether good or bad. Maybe we want to do good in that world, but what happens when we want to come back and do good again? Even if I play Paragon again when I come back to *Mass Effect*, how good am I really being when I've forced these people, who I've already saved, to face the Reapers again?

Undertale tells us that there is a cruelty to coming back to these worlds to play through them again – in resetting lives we've helped better just so we can see our friends and re-experience things again. That these digital worlds and the creatures within them are forced to live with pain we've already fixed just so we can have fun again. It's a bleak look at the replay, and the flippant attitude many of us have toward the digital peoples we spend so much time hanging around with.

Two characters in *Undertale* know all about this, though. Sans has an idea of what you're up to, as he explains while kicking your head around in a Genocide Run.

“our reports showed a massive anomaly in the timespace continuum. timelines jumping left and right. stopping and starting... until suddenly, everything ends. heh heh heh...that's your fault, isn't it?”

Sans is aware that you keep messing with time. That the player is hopping into a body like some sort of cosmic force, shifting time and space to feel better about themselves or play through something in a different way. To toy with the world, gently or destructively.

“you can't understand how this feels. knowing that one day, without any warning...it's all going to be reset.”

But Sans wants the player to know that there is a cost to this. That they're

not just creating new worlds with each playthrough, but instead drawing in those same characters to suffer all over again. Not that most in-game characters are aware of their lot, but they do feel pain each and every time the player brings them back to that place of suffering. And that he, now that he is aware with it, carries a terrible burden that fills him with constant fear.

Sans. That funny skeleton who asked you to pretend to be a lamp. Who greeted you with a whoopee cushion in the hand. Who pops out with a trombone for a laugh, or is quick to drop a pun. Whose laziness makes him seem somewhat goofy. Who has a cute, joking relationship with Toriel. This loveable character lives in constant fear of what you might do to him and his friends.

“look, I gave up trying to go back a long time ago. and getting to the surface really doesn't appeal any more, either. cause even if we do...we'll just end up right back here, without any memory of it, right?”

Our happy, joking buddy has been hiding this sense of defeat within himself for an unknown amount of time, and only when the world is teetering on the edge does he reveal it. How long has he been holding this in? How many playthroughs did we make him suffer through? How much does he remember of you? How much does he resent it when you drag him back, over and over again?

How much does any character when we make them relive the worst part of their lives for our own amusement?

“sounds strange, but before all this, i was secretly hoping we could be friends. i always thought the anomaly was doing this because they were unhappy. and when they got what they wanted, they would stop all this. and maybe all they needed was...i dunno. some good food. some bad laughs. some nice friends.”

“but that's ridiculous, right? yeah, you're the type of person who won't EVER be happy. you'll keep consuming timelines over and

over, until...well. hey. take it from me, kid. someday...you gotta learn when to QUIT."

Sans is aware of who you are. What you want to do. And his framing of the replay shows it in a cruel, heartless light. We are here to make the characters in the game world suffer one more time for whatever feeble reason we have. And he knows it, which only makes that act seem all the more cruel. He persists across timelines. Therefore, he is actually suffering each time. There is no broken timeline when we restart a game of *Undertale*, but one continuous flow of pain that we perpetuate every time we turn the game on again.

Flowey drives that point home as well. If Sans' words didn't make that clear, Flowey's dialogue from the grayed-out landscapes only moments before should.

"At first, I used my powers for good. I became friends with everyone. I solved all their problems flawlessly. Their companionship was amusing...for a while. As time repeated, people proved themselves predictable. What would this person say if I gave them this? What would they do if I said this to them? Once you know the answer, that's it. That's all they are."

"It all started because I was curious. Curious what would happen if I killed them. 'I don't like this.' I told myself. 'I'm just doing this because I have to know what happens.' Ha ha ha...what an excuse! You of all people must know how liberating it is to act this way. At least we're better than those sickos that stand around and WATCH it happen...Those pathetic people that want to see it, but are too weak to do it themselves. I bet someone like that's watching right now, aren't they...?"

I had those feelings. When I played through the Genocide Run back when the game came out, I lost all stomach for it after killing Papyrus. I felt my monstrosity, and turned away.

But now I was writing a book about it. I needed to see all of *Undertale* to be able to fully talk about it. I had to peer deep into the darkness to do that. So

I told myself it would be okay, if that's what I needed to do to do the book justice. Even if my wife told me I couldn't even play the Genocide Run when she was at home, refusing to endure even a moment of it, I told myself this was all right. I didn't *want* to do this, but was doing it purely for academic reasons.

"Nowadays, even that's grown tiring. You understand, <NAME>? I've done everything this world has to offer. I've read every book. I've burned every book. I've won every game. I've lost every game. I've appeased everyone. I've killed everyone. Sets of numbers...Lines of dialogue...I've seen them all. But you...YOU'RE different. I never could predict YOU, <player's name>."

On some level, Flowey should be able to predict me, for I'm the same thing as it is. I am it – the explorer who comes to push and poke and prod at every aspect of the game to sate my curiosity. How I've come back to game worlds and poked at everything in every conceivable way. Why I'm so fascinated when some new glitch or muddled secret appears about any of the games I used to obsessively play. It's because I have exhausted my curiosity in those worlds, but there are still some secrets that evaded me. That somehow, there is something still there I haven't touched.

So I come back. And I reset the world, throwing everyone back into sorrow and pain, because I want to see how this new particularity of how I play makes everything change. What happens when I kill Papyrus, but leave Sans alive? When I kill everyone but Undyne? When I do something as simple as flirt with Toriel after asking to call her mom?

These two characters point to that viciousness that is inherent to returning to a game's world. To making its people hurt again. And especially in the world of *Undertale*, given the work Fox put into making its creatures so loveable, and the time I spent learning to love them. It makes my own actions unforgiveable, making me embrace the consequences that the game puts on me for daring to complete a Genocide Run when I claim to love these characters so much.

I deserve to have my game ruined forever. I deserve to feel my sins crawling

up my back as I play. I deserve to hesitate every time I return to this game from here on out. I understand what I've heaped on these people. What I willingly did to them to write down a few thousand words as a study. What I did when I wanted to pry open these characters in hopes of finding a single new facet of them. I was willing to hurt them for my own curiosity, and Flowey, the very creature I came to stop, is the creature I have become out of my own interest in digging deeper.

I could have left them free. Could have let them be saved. Happy. But I didn't.

While not every playthrough hints that coming back is bad (a few Neutral endings press the player to come back and try for something a little happier), both Pacifist and Genocide endings tell the player, explicitly, that they've done enough. That the world is in a place that we can safely leave it in, or that we should leave it in.

Let them be. We have done enough.

But I didn't, did I? And now, I've killed Toriel three times. Did it hurt any less the next few times? When I was *supposed* to do it? You know, because the game would *reward* me with a new ending if I did it? I spent a few chapters telling you how much I'd learned to care about these monsters, but how much did I really care if all it would take to get me to turn on them were a few sentences of changed dialogue and a few new boss fights?

Many players feel they're taking altruistic routes through the games they play. They come to them to be a hero and better these digital places, but how long before that sheen fades away? How little will it take to turn us from this feebly-constructed sense of video game morality?

Boredom? Is that it? Is that all that it will take to break us, even if we love these creatures?

Boredom?

16.

“Hearing ‘Undertale made me want to be kinder’ or ‘Undertale helped me through a dark time’ feels more valuable than any award or score.” – Toby Fox

I set out to write this book because I loved *Undertale*’s characters and world so much. I liked hearing Sans crack the same jokes, having Papyrus make the same goofy phone calls, having Toriel shower me with kindness, and meeting the rest of the oddball cast, both in battle and outside it. I liked spending time with them, even as they hurt me. I liked forgetting little bits about them, and taking the time to learn what they were like all over again.

It’s undeniable that others have taken the same liking to these characters as well. Fan art sprung up well before the game had even come out, and an endless array of drawings, animations, songs, videos, jokes, and other fan projects still continues to pop up surrounding the game. The fans still imagine their favorite characters in their own way, internalizing their memories of them and creating homages to their favorite moments spent with them, or creating new moments they’ve imagined in their own minds.

These characters have touched people. Toriel, Sans, Papyrus, Undyne, Alphys, Mettaton, and Flowey continue to inspire those they meet, prompting their own creativity with these characters. Through their interesting and fun personalities, they make players want to have more time with them. To imagine further adventures they could have, or to show how much they’ve grown to care for them over the course of their time with them.

It’s a powerful, positive influence on so many lives. So many have found creative outlets through the sparks these characters have set off in them. So many turn back to their own lives with a greater sense of personal creative power after playing this game, making them create more positive works in their own lives.

Imaginary skeletons are making people paint beautiful, detailed pictures. Goofy songs about dogs are making people pick up their instruments to compose new renditions of the music that followed them on their adventures. Plates of poorly-cooked spaghetti are making people animate their own films, build complex setups of dominos, craft models of toys, and sew plush friends for players to hug when their own lives bring them sorrow. *Undertale* has spread so much joy to its players, and shown them so much more of the positive abilities that exist within them.

Others, besides myself, miss that time they've spent with the characters there. They've gone on to create new memories with them that exist in their imaginations, or have created striking works of art to celebrate the good these characters have had on their lives. It has become a celebration of the positive, and all this despite offering that possibility for a Genocide Run.

This could be due to the nature of the Genocide Run, or my own misguided hopes of what people have taken away from the game, but there has been an outpouring of creative celebration of what *Undertale* accomplished. The dark aspects are there for players to experience, but much of the response from fans has been focused on the positive aspects of the game. Much of it has created joy, and a spreading of joy, to the people who play it.

But this was what we were supposed to take away from *Undertale*, wasn't it?

“While you are in a FIGHT, strike up a friendly conversation.”

That's what Toriel tells us when we're about to meet danger. When our lives are about to get difficult. When things seem bleak. Having that friendly conversation, even with a stranger, offers us the hope of a better outcome. Maybe a new friend where we once thought we would hurt.

This is what our art does, even as we blunder through our earliest attempts. The child's drawing of Sans can provide an escape from a world that can frequently be cruel or indifferent. Our own adult attempts at music, story, and art are much the same. Even the writing of this book has helped soothe

some worries in my own life, letting me escape back to a world where a couple of bony pals make me laugh and forget.

And our art speaks to others. It tells them of the joy we felt in exploring the world of *Undertale*. It talks of friendships, challenges, and overcoming them. It talks about a fun place we found, tucked away amidst the hardships in our own lives, and how it sent us back to the world with a need to create something positive of our own.

Which draws others to it. It draws other people in to see the good that's here, and maybe give them something of their own to smile about. When people's lives are dark and sad, there is a place of positivity they can find. The creative works of many of its players all point to it, hoping others will find their way there.

This is that friendly conversation. A chance to find something positive in the negative situations of life. A chance to give back when all you want to do is lash out in anger. A chance to find friendship and companionship out of shared love when you feel like no one could ever care. Through the art inspired by this game, people speak to others, having that conversation without ever having met them. We speak through our creations, and others are warmed in the listening.

This positive effect keeps drawing me back to this place. This magical place of joy and forgiveness, of accepting the monstrosity within us and working through it to a better beyond. Of healing the pain that breeds violence. It is idyllic, yes, but it fills me with something better whenever I leave it. Maybe that good force can't realistically exist in this world, but it makes me want to try. Try with everything I have.

But I won't be going back any more.

I did some things I'm not proud of in the Underground. Hurt people and expected the cosmos to shrug off my actions using a power that I have only abused. Expected to toss aside guilt when I hadn't paid a penance.

I hurt all my friends. A lot. And for nothing more than curiosity.

My laptop died after I finished my Genocide Run. True story. Not from me punching it over repeated (REPEATED) losses to Sans, or anything. It just... broke soon afterwards. That file, and everything with it, is trapped on that hard drive on a computer that will no longer run. That place has been closed off to me. I can't go back and fix it, but I also am not able to pay my penance by never being able to play a game without seeing my sins laid bare again. If I start *Undertale* on a new computer, it will be without those black eyes staring back at me. Everything will be new. I'll be able to start clean.

That doesn't feel fair after what I did to that place. After doing what Flowey expected me to do. After doing what Sans hoped I wouldn't.

I get that I'm going to a made-up world to interact with made-up characters, but I go to these fantasy places to forget the world I'm in. To become someone else and embrace their reality for a while. I sometimes abuse the power I have to go there and leave at will, but I do go there to accept its reality as my own for a time.

I don't feel right slipping into the world of *Undertale* anymore. I feel like I did something there that can't be forgiven, and even if I did want to go there and make everything right, the damage is already done. I wouldn't be doing it to help them, but to assuage my own conscience. I would be doing it to make myself feel better.

So, while *Undertale* takes players to a delightful world filled with positivity, I don't feel right in going back there. I don't have the right to. Not after what I did to people I supposedly cared about while I existed in that space. Not after I pretended to care, showing my true colors when I came back to hurt.

But I have my memories. I remember the good times I had in that place. I remember how much fun I had when I first got there. The mistakes I made, and the good I tried to spread. How good it felt to bring peace to the characters, and to hug Asriel and forgive him. To be forgiven in turn. That's when those experiences burned brightest, anyway. Before I went back to relive them, feeling a slight hollowness to the experience.

It's that hollowness that does it, right? The sense that this doesn't feel the same on a second run when you know everything. Going back to play a game never feels quite the same as it does that first time. The highs just aren't as high, and you just need to try something different. It's that hollow return that makes you start to try new things to get a new experience from the game. When that cruelty starts to take shape.

Rather than look deeper into that abyss, I'm choosing to just treasure my old memories. Rather than make my friends relive their suffering, I can call them back up in my mind. Re-experience them through creativity, like so many others do. Cherish the time I had when I was just a lost child in a world of goofy monsters for a few days. Remember the good times. Strive to be better after the evil that I created.

So, when Flowey asks me to leave the game be, I will. I will leave it alone, and instead remember what I had. Look as others play through the game for the first time and smile. Think back to stupid telescope pranks, too much ketchup at Grillby's, hotdogs on your head, and laugh.

I will remember them because the consequences of what I did there felt real. They were real, in a sense, and they happened to people who felt real and natural. Silly despite the darkness surrounding them. I liked that they fought the bad in their lives with ridiculousness, and that they went out of their way to spread joy, if only you gave them the time.

I will remember that talking to beings who hurt me helped. That it could turn lives around. That listening was important.

But I will remember them from afar, because I've done enough harm there. I won't hurt them again. Perhaps not being able to play a game I love is penance enough. Or maybe I just don't have the heart to look them in the eye any more after a Genocide Run.

Fox's work has given me these strong feelings. Despite my knowing that it's just code – all of it just code – I feel for it. I feel for it through story and character and music. I feel for this place because of the way it reaches out into the world with real consequences. I don't want to hurt fictional beings,

and feel that my actions CAN hurt fictional beings. I know this isn't true intellectually, but my heart still hurts. I still FEEL for them.

Fox's work has shown that compassion is powerful. That it can heal worlds and rifts between human and monster through trying to understand. That it can bridge the gap from fictional worlds into reality. That it can make all of our lives a little better.

So I will feel. I will remember. And I will never return.

Fredericton, NB

May 27, 2017

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Joel Couture is a Canadian writer basically won't shut up about games, writing about all sorts of them for Siliconera, Gamasutra, Warp Door, Indiegames.com, and CG Magazine. If you have games, please talk to him. He has become a bottomless maw for games and we are no longer sure if we can keep him under control.

Also, he really likes *Undertale*. If you haven't played *Undertale*, he will come to your house and sit with you while you try it out. He will also come to your house if you have a dog. He may even bring snacks! But he will eat them all if you eat too slowly.