

# Ethics in Undertale: Immersion and examination of stereotypical ethical questions through the use of ludo-narrative dissonance

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**Abstract—** This paper focuses on the ethical questions raised by Toby Fox’s independent Role-Playing Game (RPG) *Undertale* (2015). This paper will direct its analysis towards the usage of ludo-narrative dissonance to immerse or emerge the player and make them question the pillars upon which classic RPG games have built their success as a way to call into question the ethical premises used in those games.

**Keywords—** *ethics, ludonarrative dissonance, immersion, deconstruction, pacifism, violence*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ethics in many role-playing games (RPGs) are often the same; A monomyth, following the “hero’s journey” [1] through hardships and stereotypical adventures while slaying thousands of monsters to gain experience points and gold to upgrade themselves. Usage of countless violence here is perceived as acting for the greater good of this world. But this contrasts with our society, where pacifism is preferred to warmongering to solve conflicts, whether they take place on an individual or global scale. What if a game tried to deconstruct all these beliefs and make a game follow the ethical rules as we use them in our society? This is the challenge Toby Fox tried to tackle with his game *Undertale* (2015).

Through the joint use of well-thought game design and an original approach on storytelling and immersion, Toby Fox uses ludo-narrative dissonance as a way to amplify the ethical questions scattered throughout his game, giving the player a new approach on the RPG genre and making them question basic and ethical principles in our society such as violence and its consequences or the manichean perception of good and bad.

In this paper, I will explain how, through the usage of ludo-narrative dissonance to immerse the player, Toby Fox embarks the player for an ethical journey hidden behind a seemingly friendly retro RPG. To support my claims, this essay will utilise academic papers and Steam review.

## II. PRESENTATION OF THE GAME

*Undertale* is a single player role-playing game created by Toby Fox in 2015, inspired by Japanese RPGs such as *Earthbound* (1995), the western version of the game *Mother 2* (1994). The game follows the different steps of a monomyth: The main character climbs “Mt. Ebott” and falls by accident into the Underground, the world of *Undertale*, where the monsters live after having been banned from the human world. While searching for a way to exit, they meet a lot of characters, face countless challenges and eventually come back to the Surface, having learned from their adventures.

The difference between *Undertale* and other RPGs come instead from the nature of all those said adventures. When reaching the end of the game, the player learns more about themselves as a character. They incarnate the eighth fallen human (who’s named Frisk as you learn at the end of the game) and landed on the tomb of the first fallen human (whose name is the one you inputted at the start of the game when asking you to “Name the fallen human”, but usually named “Chara”) when falling in the Underground, who happened to live again through the determination present in the soul of the character. This means that the player, as a real person, is a whole independent character of its own in the game, and is in fact controlling the soul of Frisk, against their will, and sharing this body with the first fallen human. Depending on how the player chooses to act through the character of Frisk, different routes are possible: Pacifist, where you spare everyone, Neutral and Genocide, where you kill absolutely every single living entity. Playing through these routes is a way of experiencing the outcome of your actions in a simulation instead of in real life.

### III. HOW DOES IT MOCK CLASSIC RPGS

Let us focus on the different gameplay mechanics Undertale offers to the player for now. The game has a top-down view, with the simplest designs possible inspired by the 8-bit pixel-art graphics of older games. On the map, the player can move the character, access the menu and talk to monsters. When a random encounter occurs, the screen changes and is replaced with the battle screen in a 2D style, with the monster facing the player.



Figures 1 and 2 – The map screen (top) and the battle screen (bottom)

Different actions are available for the player in the battle screen. He can choose to either FIGHT, to deal damage to the monster, ACT, offering more specific actions to the player such as TALK, CHECK, FLIRT, COMPLIMENT, and many others that changes depending on which monster the player is facing, ITEM, to use an item, and MERCY to either flee or spare the monster if it doesn't want to fight anymore. When a monster attacks you, your SOUL, represented by a red heart, can be moved inside of a box where the attacks will take place and aim to destroy your SOUL.

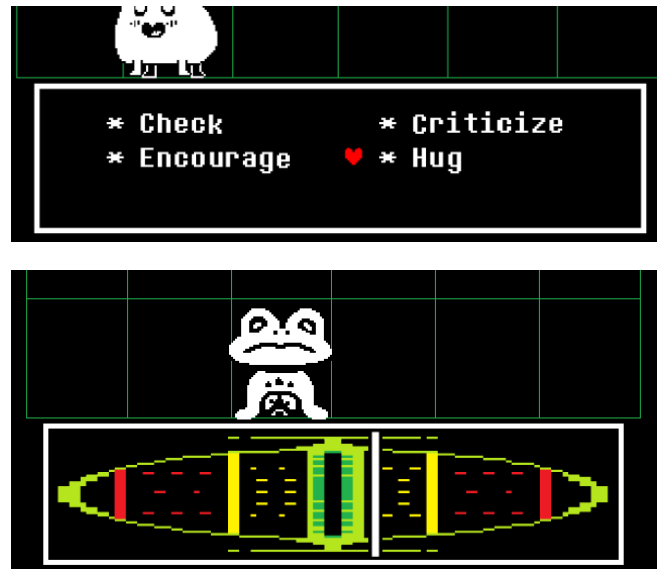


Figure 3 and 4 – Example of range of actions when ACTing (left) and FIGHTing mechanism (right)

However, this seemingly classic interface contains a substantial, but intended, flaw; the imbalance between FIGHTing and ACTing. As we have seen, FIGHTing only requires the player to press two buttons to finish its action, with a simple timing mechanic to deal more damage, which may seem more alluring for players used to RPGs, or players who want to play the game quickly. Killing a monster also gives you gold to shop for items as well as EXP to increase your LV, giving you stats and making the game easier. On the contrary, ACTing doesn't seem to give you a lot of benefits. A consequent amount of actions is available, but in the end "only" gives you dialogues with monsters while you still have to dodge attacks, and in the end, spare the monster, giving you no EXP and no gold. As a different set of specific actions needs to be executed for each monster if you want to spare them, and the game gives you little advice on how to do that, new players will most likely choose to take a path of violence as an easier and more classic approach to the game.

Moreover, the first character that you encounter is Flowey, a little yellow flower with a seemingly friendly face. According to the classic RPGs rules, this character should be the one acting as a tutorial. Thus, Flowey presents you the combat system, tells you that your "LV" represents the strength of your soul and that it's the short for "LOVE", which you increase by gaining EXP. However, you learn at the end of the game, in a place called the Judgement Hall, that "LOVE" is in fact short for "Level Of Violence" and that "EXP" is short for "EXecution Point". Those statistics are in fact here to judge how violent you were while playing the game, and give you an appropriate punishment. Flowey also tells the

protagonist to grab the “friendliness pellets” appearing on the screen and aiming for your Soul. If you do grab them, you realise they hurt you and you’re left with 1HP while Flowey’s face turns into a creepy visage and tells you “In this world, it’s kill or be killed”. If you decide to dodge the pellets, Flowey’s face turns again to the same creepy visage and tells you “You know what’s going on here, don’t you?”. You later discover that Flowey also has the power to SAVE and RESET the world, but that your soul, filled with “determination”, overrides their power and you’re in control of the saving and resetting. All of this is made to disturb the player’s classic conception of an RPG by playing with an inversion of all the classic rules. It’s also the very first time, but not the last, that the real player is directly addressed at, as they are the one capable of saving and resetting. At the end of the first zone of the game, if you met the criterias for the Genocide run, Flowey will even call you by the name you input at the start of the game, even though the name of the character is in reality “Frisk”. Flowey then really speaks to the player and says “You’re not really human, are you? No. You’re empty inside. Just like me. In fact... You’re <Name>, right?”.

#### IV. AN IMMERSIVE WORLD, WITH THE PLAYER BEING A PART OF THE STORY

In order to immerse the player into a seemingly realistic world, Toby Fox created a considerable cast of monster characters, each of them with their own personality traits, reactions and dialogues which helps create a stronger bond with them and consider them as real living creatures instead of just monsters to slay. Promoted as “the friendly RPG where nobody has to die”, all the ethical questions in the game come from the fact that the player is free to play however they want, but only if they are ready to pay the consequences of their actions. This freedom induces a certain feeling of anxiety, defined by Kierkegaard as “both the attraction to and the repulsion from the nothingness of future possibilities” [2]. Indeed, nothing prevents the player from making unethical decisions in the eyes of our society, as opposed to the classical RPG games, the only difference being that behind every decision is a consequence that will alter the world of Undertale forever in some way.

If the player choses a route of pacifism, they will be met with a world filled with life, humour and friendship. Indeed, the game lets the player befriend important characters in the story, which then allow them to leave the Undertale world alongside their companions and let the monster race and human race make peace again.

#### V. THE ETHICAL JOURNEY BY TAKING A FEW STEPS BACK

The key mechanic of Undertale is the Emotional investment/Reward concept. As said previously, if the player follows a route of pacifism and kindness, the game will reward them with a lively world, strengthen bonds with characters and they will be given a good ending.

On the contrary, when the player tries to push the level violence to the limit, they are met with a dead and empty world. From there, the game will try to punish you for your choices in every way possible.

First of all, the method to get to the Genocide route is to kill every single enemy in each zone. To do that, the player will have to run around until a random encounter is triggered, kill the monster and start all of this over again until no more monster can be found. This is a very boring and repetitive task, which is meant to be a punishment for choosing this path of hatred. All throughout the game, you will also have very few interactions with NPCs as almost every one of them flee by fear of the player beforehand. This means that there is little to no dialogue and that the player must spend time only killing characters instead of learning about this world and its inhabitants. The save points’ flavour text, which are supposed to be encouraging quotes to keep you determined, are replaced by a counter indicating the number of monsters left to kill in the zone you are currently in. Once every monster in this zone is slayed, battles still occur but you are only met with a text saying “But nobody came” and a really slowed down music, giving a sensation of oppression. Finally, all the puzzles throughout the game are already solved by Flowey when you encounter them, ripping away from you the chance to feel the satisfaction of solving them.

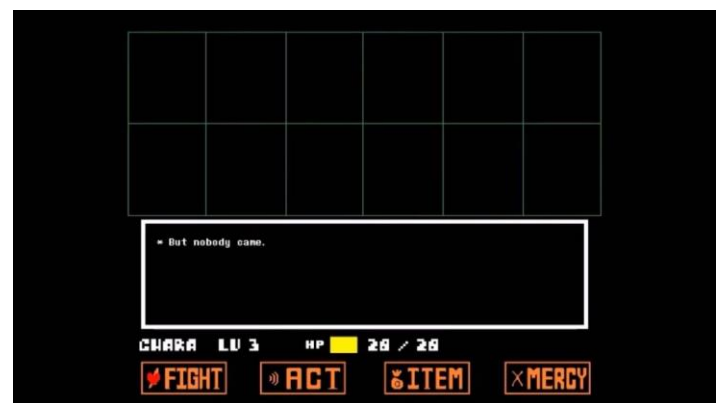


Figure 5 – Empty battle flavour text

In short, once going down the path of violence, everything is made so all that you ever do in the game is killing. This procures the player a feeling of discomfort and is made to be emotionally dissuasive by completely

emerging you from the game instead of making you dive deep into a world full of story and life.



Figure 6 – An example of the genocide route's flavour text

Moreover, the game is in fact impossible to lose through "traditional" means. Indeed, all the player does is resetting the whole world to a previous save state when dying. Some characters in the game are aware of that, and in the genocide run for example, Sans, being the last boss and reputed to be one of the hardest boss of the history of video games, will try to make you give up playing the game throughout all of your tries, as this is the only way to really stop you from killing everyone in the Underground world.

If you manage to get past Sans, meaning that you're about to exit the Underground and finish the game, Chara strikes a conversation with you as a player. This conversation ends in Chara asking you to make a choice. You must either "ERASE" the world, or "DO NOT". If the player chooses to "ERASE" the world, Chara calls them a "good partner" and that they will be "together forever". If the player chooses to "DO NOT", Chara seems a bit surprised at first, but their eyes widen and says "SINCE WHEN WERE YOU THE ONE IN CONTROL?", before throwing a jumpscare at the player. Whatever choice the player makes, the game is then forced to window mode, with "9" appearing all over the screen, in the same style as when you deal damage to a monster. The window then shakes similarly to the death animation of the monster and the game crashes.

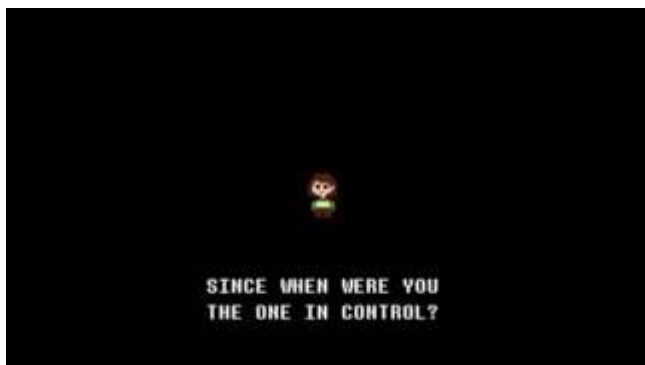


Figure 7 – Chara's dialogue at the end of the genocide route

This last gaming experience is made for the player to realise that the game emerging them from it was in fact a way to prevent them from doing actions they might regret. It is also a way to immerse the player instantly back into the game by making them realise they were the real monster all along. The fact that Chara interacts directly with the computer is also a reminder that reality and the game's world are not that far apart, and by breaking the thin barrier in between them, Chara makes the player reflect on all the choices they made throughout the game, as you "turn from the only human in a land of monsters into the biggest monster in a land of innocents" [3].

To take things even farther, the game will forever remember all the choices the player made in the past. A lot of the dialogues will be adapted depending on who the player slayed, or not, during their previous playthroughs for example. Moreover, if the player decides to repent by playing the game through the Pacifist route after doing a genocide run, the ending will be slightly different with Chara taking over and supposedly killing everyone right after the end credits, once every monster is freed from the Underground and start living in the Human world. All those choices are kept even when the player resets the game, with some characters referencing things that happened in previous playthrough.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Undertale is what I would call an iceberg-game. It seems somewhat simple on the surface, with a classic RPG gameplay, allowing you to make companions along your journey and embarking on an adventure filled with hardships. But if you take a closer look, every little detail is thought to slowly make the player question their actions and the consequences they might have. This gives a whole another depth to the game as a way to challenge the classic RPG model, based on totally different ethics than our world. Through the use of ludonarrative dissonance, Toby Fox offers a journey to change our view on how to play video games and the impact they can have on us as a player. With a clever usage of non-traditional gameplay designs, the player is facing a game making everything in its power to prevent them from pursuing a path of destruction and offers a different view on a classical video game genre, the RPGs.

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