Ethics at Play in Undertale: Rhetoric, Identity and Deconstruction

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the effect of ethical – and unethical – actions of the player on their perception of the self towards game characters within Toby Fox's (2015) independent Role Playing Game (RPG) Undertale, a game often perceived as a pacifist text. With a focus on the notions of guilt and responsibility in mind, a survey with 560 participants from the Undertale fandom was conducted, and thousands of YouTube comments were scraped to better understand how the audience who watched or played the different routes of the game, refer to its characters. Through the joint analysis of the game's semiotics, survey data, and data scraping, this paper argues that, beyond the rhetorical nature of its story, Undertale is operating a deconstruction of the RPG genre and is harnessing the emotional power of gameplay to evoke thoughts about responsibility and raise the player's awareness about violence and its consequences.

Keywords

rhetoric, ethics, deconstruction, pacifism, violence, character, avatar, meta-storytelling

INTRODUCTION

There are some artistic experiences that stick with us for a very long time, aesthetic memories, that one may put between their first kiss and their first fight. For many of its players, a game like Undertale seems to fall into this category. Because its story puts the player in the situation of making choices that affect dramatically the course of the narrative, and the survival of its characters, it seems people who played this game grow an attachment to its fictional characters comparable to the attachment to a friend in their real life. It is quite exceptional for an independent game, with retro graphics, made by a very small team, to get a fandom as involved and passionate as this one. For instance, it is thanks to this very active fandom that I could conduct a survey with 560 participants about how playing the game - or watching others play it- affected their perception and appreciation of its characters. In this survey, attention was paid to how identification towards the main character(s) may vary depending on the moral choices of the player. To also get insights from members of the audience who did not necessarily play the game, a certain amount of semantically targeted [i] YouTube comments were also scraped. [ii] Ironically marketed as "the friendly RPG where nobody has to die," it could be argued that the feeling of guilt that Undertale induces is among the drivers of its aesthetics. How the game design uses such negative feelings to drive the player through the narrative? How do players who chose to slay the monsters over sparing them negotiate with these gloomy emotions? And would the game have the same impact if the "genocide" path –

where the player chooses to slay every character they encounter – did not exist?

At first, we will attempt to demonstrate that the game's structure uses rhetorical devices similar to what could be used in a philosophical text or a morality tale. In a second part, we'll dive deeper into the use of guilt as an essential aesthetic device in Undertale. For this purpose, using our collected data, we will observe how the game's unethical "genocide route" affects players emotionally, and how this affect differs to those who only watched it. At last, we will try to understand why the less played "genocide route" is nonetheless essential to the overall message conveyed by the game. Through the emphasis it puts on the difference between expectations and the actual experience it offers, and through the contrast the game establishes between the gameplay of its different routes, we could argue that Undertale is a deconstruction of the RPG as a genre. This research advocates that Undertale could be perceived as an interactive text that embraces the deconstruction "as a practice" as advocated by the French philosopher Derrida (1967). It is a text that unfolds the heritage of classic RPGs while shedding light on the ethical contradictions between the gameplay and the narration in the genre.

A PROCEDURAL MORALITY TALE

Narratively, Undertale adopts the traditional monomyth of the hero's journey described by Campbell (1949), as most classic RPGs would do. The main character comes from the surface world; they are mysteriously called to a mystical place called "mount Ebott." They fall in the Underground, the world of Undertale. There, they meet Toriel, a motherly character willing to help them. They face challenges on the road. They must pass a final test, and eventually return to their world, changed by their adventure. All the steps of the monomyth are here. However, the nature of the challenges encountered by the player will be strongly intertwined with what they are trying to challenge within themselves. The game may be considered here as a – deferred – symbolic representation of an archetypal RPG. While the game itself is very structured, the way it differs from classic RPGs is pointing the finger both at the ethical flaws of the genre and the untold armature that became so natural to players that it turned invisible to most. Nonetheless, while we will argue that the game operates a deconstructive approach, we should at first look at the systems it establishes to incentivize a certain way to play: the game's rhetoric.

The Possibility of a Philosophical Game

Can a game bear a philosophical discourse? In a conference presentation, Jere O'Neill Surber (2015), Professor of Philosophy, was hypothesizing a game as a philosophical medium for one of his student's thesis. In his presentation, O'Neill Surber presents three ways a game could relate to Philosophy.

At first, there is the category of "Philosophy in Computer Games," traditional philosophical themes used as ludic or narrative devices in computer games (e.g., moral dilemmas). A second described alternative is "Philosophy and Computer Games," which is basically all the new questions brought to the field of Philosophy by the advent of videogame as a medium (e.g., avatars and 'self-identities'). The third form he introduces is "Computer Games as Philosophy," which is using game design as an argumentative tool to produce a philosophical discourse of some sort. We will see that on the surface, with underlying themes like the nature of evil, or the conflicting notions of character and avatar, Undertale probably belongs, at least, to the two first categories. At the end of his paper, O'Neill Surber is presenting us a series of exposition methods associated with Philosophy that could theoretically be used within a game: examples and counterexamples; thought experiments; moral scenarios and ethical dilemmas; and finally,

"reader-engaged" forms of expression. In the following part of this essay, it will be argued that some moments in Undertale may fall in some of these categories, making it, if not a philosophical text, a modern form of morality tale. To create a moral discourse though, a game must be able to incentivize the player to act in a certain way. This is where the concept of procedural rhetoric comes handy.

Procedural Rhetoric

Ian Bogost (2007, 2.; 2008, 125.) introduced the term "procedural rhetoric" as the "practice of authoring arguments through processes," in order to entail "persuasion to change opinion or action" or "expression to convey ideas effectively." Bogost gave to his concept the following formal definition:

> Procedurality refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools to conceptual systems like religious faith. Rhetoric refers to effective and persuasive expression. Procedural rhetoric, then, is a practice of using processes persuasively. More specifically, procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular.

In the eyes of many players, Undertale is famous for promoting a certain idea of non-violence. To support this claim, players of the game will often fall back on the clear peak in the Google search trend for the word "pacifist" during the period the game was released. (See Figure 1.)
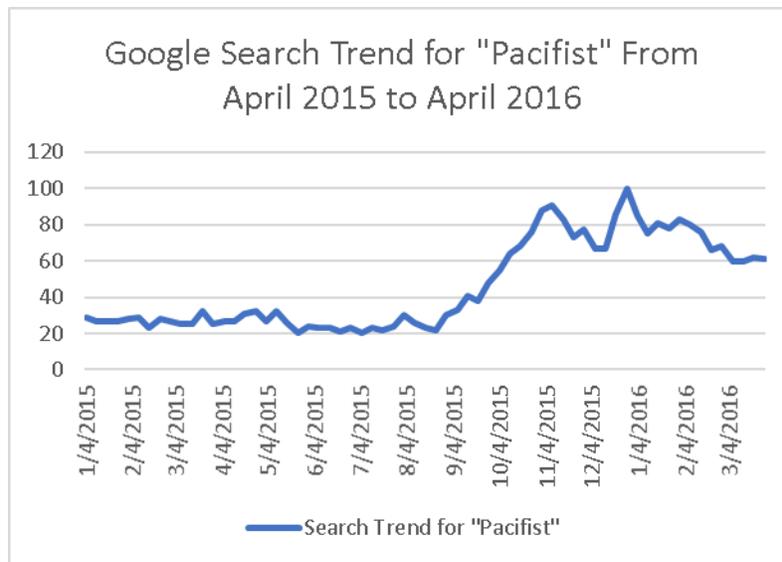
Figure 1: Undertale was released on September 15th, 2015

But on the other hand, the same holds true for the word "genocide," since those two terms are associated with the two most radical ways to play Undertale: sparing everyone and

killing everyone. But since only the adjectival term "pacifist" presented this significant boost while the nominal term "pacifism" stayed stable, it seemed important to study the rhetorical systems in Undertale and their effects on the players to understand their actual moral impact.

A Rhetorical Impact

In Undertale, the game's primary predicate is that the player must choose between being merciful or being violent during the encounters with the monsters of the Underground. Thus, the game features both the path of violence and the path of pacifism.

The rhetorical nature of the game transpires in many of the thoughts left by the participants at the end of the survey conducted for this paper. Despite leaving to the player entire freedom to use violence and kill every encountered character, for much of the audience, this violent path serves as a lesson on the consequences of one's actions. For instance, in the survey, one player who did not play the genocide route and who would advocate for not playing it, would still acknowledge the rhetorical nature of the experience in the following words. "Undertale is a wonderful game where your actions and choices matter. […] It makes you think about your choices and actions in life." While this other player would state that they "personally like Genocide better than pacifist, but the correct way is pacifist." Another surveyee pleads a thorough experience of the game by claiming "it could teach (or at least raise awareness) to some people to respect others more in everyday life," and that they "believe that it is a good thing to explore every part of the game by playing all the routes."

The Imbalance between Fight and Act

While it is probably not what leads players to consciously realize the moral message of the game, there is an imbalance between the fighting system and the acting system in Undertale. It could be argued that it is through this imbalance that the game's procedural rhetoric incentivizes the player to avoid violence.

Let us now analyze what is happening during a fight using Peirce's (1955) concept of legisign: the rule interpreted as a sign, along with my concept of ludics, interactions as signs. (Seraphine, 2017, 2014) Namely, within my taxonomy, an actum is a player-triggered interaction, a factum is an interaction triggered by an agent unrelated to the player, and a tactum is triggered by the joint influence of two or more game objects within the game state.

Figure 2: The red heart in Undertale is the symbol of the player's soul.

When the player starts a fight in Undertale, he is brought to a new screen, different from the game map. As in most turn-based RPGs, the fight is depicted on a symbolic [iii] level. While the representation of the foe is iconic [iv]; the depiction of the main character as a

heart here is symbolic: The heart representing here the "culmination of the soul" of the main character. (see Figure 2.) This rule of symbolic representation is enunciated clearly by the character Flowey at the beginning of the game.

The main defense mechanics in the encounter interface is to avoid the attacks of the enemy that are happening within a white frame surrounding the "soul" of the main character. Those attacks along with the flavor text displayed in the game interface are the only factums that would allow the player to interpret the opponent's behavior. During a fight in Undertale, almost every actums occur as movements of the red heart on the screen. This is the case not only during defensive phases but also while the player is choosing between the different options. The fact that this symbolic sprite is used both as an avatar of the character during the defensive phases and as a cursor during the choice of an action, really emphasizes the equal importance of choosing the right action to do and staying alive. Both actions are symbolically reflecting the player's soul.

Figure 3: Seeing the heart's color change prepares the player for a change of defense strategy.

In this case, the rules of control of the heart sprite, are what could be called actum-legisigns, the interpretable rules of the player input. They can change during the fight and will signify different things. For instance, later in the game, a foe could cast a change of color on the heart sprite. As a result, the actum-legisign becomes constrained, and it affects how the heart will respond to the player's input. For example, when the heart becomes blue (see Figure 3), it is no longer able to move freely in the square and will have to jump to avoid the enemies' attacks. While the change of color itself is a tactum which function is to indicate a change in the controls, the shift that occurs in the controls themselves may announce a variation of attack strategy from the opponent. The changing constraints will often give a hint to the player about the type of attacks to expect. If the heart sprite is constrained on the "floor" of the square, it is safe to assume that upcoming attacks will come from the sides and will be avoidable by jumping.

This change of function of the heart cursor is also a shift in the actum-legisign that has implications that are past strategy. The act mechanics will offer the player various options like "talk," "threat," or "flirt." All of these actions are to be selected with the same heart cursor. Each encounter can be convinced to accept mercy through various acting strategies. It makes the acting mechanics quite rich and offers the player a broad range of moral attitudes even within the only scope of pacifism. One may choose to be an execrable person while still being a pacifist. (see Figure 4)

Figure 4: An example of the range of possible actions in an encounter.

On the other hand, the fight button leads to a very simplistic mechanics. Once the fight button is pressed an elliptic target shape appears, a white bar passes in front of it, and the player is supposed to press a button when the bar is close to the middle. Nothing more than a synchronization mechanics that becomes quickly predictable, and that will never evolve along the game. This blatant imbalance is illustrating the procedural rhetoric of Undertale at work. While only the fight mechanics allows raising the player's EXP and LV, the game is nonetheless putting many efforts in providing a rewarding, variable, and fun experience with the act mechanics. (see Figure 5)[v]
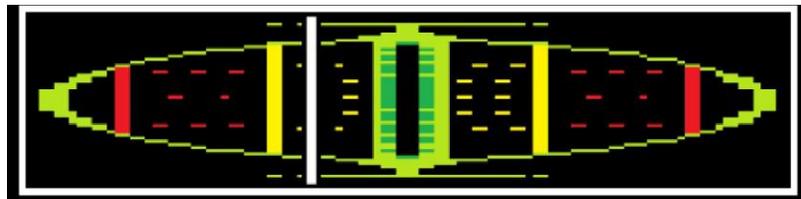
Figure 5: Undertale's only fight mechanics

GUILT AND DIFFÉRANCE

The French Philosopher Jacques Derrida (1967, 1968) coined the term différance that he refused to confine within the frame of a concept with a definition. The Derridean différance is an attempt at reuniting the meanings of differing and deferring and was mainly used by the philosopher to emphasize what is visible/intelligible in writing, and made invisible in speech, just like the "a" in the word différance.

|	Played	Watched Online
Pacifist	87.3 % (95 % C.I. ± 2.7) [vi]	80.5 % (95 % C.I. ± 3.1)
Genocide	46 % (95 % C.I. ± 4.1)	82 % (95 % C.I. ± 3.1)

Figure 6: Route Played Vs. Route Watched

This part of the essay will argue that there is a différance at work in the gameplay of Undertale. This différance happens within the gameplay, but also between the experience of watching and playing the game (metaplay). In his work, Derrida was concerned with the subjacent priority given to spoken language over writing, what he called the

logocentrism. It seems that the survey conducted for this paper is framing a similar hierarchization respectively between observing and playing. When only half of the respondents claimed that they played the genocide route, a proportion as high as 82 % claimed that they watched it online. On the other hand, a proportion of players almost just as high also watched the Pacifist route online, but as opposed to the genocide route, the number of people who also played represents almost one player out of nine. (see Figure 6) This difference of proportion regarding the genocide route is leading us to wonder what difference in affect leads the players to take the backseat when it comes to this part of the game.

The genocide route in Undertale is built on the same narrative skeleton as the neutral and pacifist routes. However, despite the locations and the progression being grossly the same, the genocide route provides the player with a differing experience. When players attempt a pacifist run of Undertale, they get a differing yet rewarding experience. Along the game, every character that they encountered non-violently will appear one after another at the title screen of the game, while the music will become more and more orchestrated and lively. The pacifist route plays with pride as an aesthetic driver, which is a classic approach in game-design.

Pride is already an emotion that would hardly be sensed while watching another person play the game online. People who follow the story may feel joy or empathy for the characters, but they won't have anything to be proud of achieving. But while a beautifying mirror is held to the player when they choose the pacifist route, something quite different happens if they choose genocide. The genocide route of Undertale defers – makes absent – most of the rewarding aspects that are present in neutral and pacifist routes.

Strangely enough, it makes it the one route that leaves the biggest trace of the idea of pacifism. The discourse about pacifism of Undertale is maybe unfolding more than anywhere else through the tragedy of a genocide run. The presence of the run uncovers the desire of deconstruction of the game designer but also allows the player to explore the buried desire for darker emotions they would usually avoid thinking about. The genocide route punishes the player by making the game repetitive and boring: Most of the dialogues disappear, the player spends their time only killing every character they meet, and many nonplayable characters (NPCs) have fled by fear of what the player might do to them.
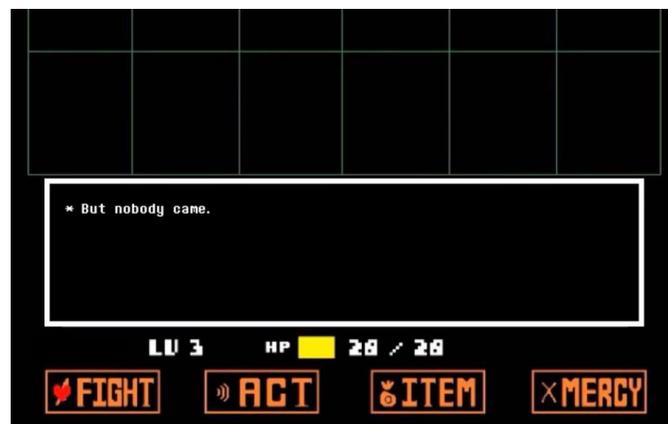
For instance, in the genocide route, the save points' flavor text is replaced by a count of the number of enemies left to kill in the zone. Interestingly, once all characters are killed in an area, the encounters are still triggered, except they become just an empty battle screen with the flavor(less) text "But nobody came." (see Figure 7)

The remaining encounter-triggering, for an absent character, emphasizes one of the reasons for which most of us play RPGs: The encounter with a populated imaginary world in which we wish to be immersed. Here the depopulation leaves us emersed – feeling "pulled out of the play experience" (Seraphine, 2016) – gazing at an empty magic circle (Huizinga, 1949, 77.), forced to think about it. Furthermore, the slowed down and distorted score of the game only emphasizes the discomfort the route elicits. The very same elements found in the other routes are transformed through the way they are played with. With its slowed down, merely recognizable musical themes, its depopulation, its barebone game systems devoid of their goals, the genocide route is a differing experience that through deferring of everything that makes the game likable creates an aesthetic of guilt and regret. This feelable différance is where active deconstruction happens, but for many, it is still easier to avoid confronting this dark aesthetic, hence their choice of observing instead of playing. Now we should try to understand what aesthetic driver brings the rest of the players to engage with this route that seems designed to be emotionally dissuasive. To understand this, we will take a look at Undertale as a game incentivizing its players to engage with 'deconstructive play.'

A GAME STRUCTURED FOR DECONSTRUCTIVE PLAY

Technically speaking, Undertale is – in the craft – a very standard videogame. Undertale is made like an old-school Japanese RPG, thus it consists of an assemblage of fairly simple game mechanics, and its narrative is scripted from A to Z. However, through an unusual layout of hackneyed systems that have been played and replayed by many players, Undertale hides in its feelable deferrings and differings an invitation to a thoughtful play: a deconstructive play.

Undertale plays with the well-established codes of its genre (RPG), to drive and educate the player's critical eye on the way video games usually coerce them to behave.

Inversion(s)

In Undertale, the player will often see their assumptions about the hierarchy of concepts challenged, which is the very basis of a deconstructive approach, at least in a Derridean sense.

When the player encounters Flowey, the main antagonist, they are met with an adorable smiling yellow flower that welcomes them with "friendliness pellets," that are in fact dangerous attacks. Flowey's cute smile transforms into an abominable grin before telling the player "In this world, it's kill or be killed." This is the first inversion of Undertale regarding a player's expectation when they start a game. In many RPGs, players expect to encounter a friendly character whose advice will serve as the game's tutorial. Nonetheless, this first encounter introduces the player to the concepts of the fight mechanics, except it is done with a death threat. The player learns about the layout of enemy's attacks, the encounter-environment, the basic defense strategy, and the concept of LV, which according to Flowey – who calls his attacks "friendliness pellets" – stands for "LOVE."

Toriel is the first ally the player meets in the Underworld. She saves the player's life from the evil Flowey and takes the main character under her protection. Through the ruins, on the way to her home, this motherly character introduces the player to the encounter mechanics again, encouraging them to rather use the act mechanics. The player is prompted by Toriel to "talk" to a dummy and will be frowned upon if they use the fight mechanics against it. The friendly tutorial encounter was in fact deferred to a later moment, and the lesson of Flowey about violence in the world of Undertale is now challenged by the kind-hearted figure of Toriel. The game operates here a moral inversion again. Subsequently, the game will present us with other types of inversions, in its narrative and its gameplay. For instance, despite RPG monsters being usually depicted as strong and dangerous, when, in actuality, they are always weaker than the player's characters; in Undertale, the monsters are presented to the player as significantly weaker than humans accordingly to what they are throughout the game. This succession of inversions of an expected hierarchy of values is the game's approach to a medium and a genre that is usually in a state of contradiction. In a typical case of ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking, 2007), a situation where the ludic structure is in contradiction with the narrative structure, most RPGs present the main characters as virtuous and peace-loving while incentivizing the player to kill as many enemies as they can to gain level. On the other hand, this inner contradiction is a design response to the societal hierarchy placing pacifism as nobler and more politically correct than bellicism. These successive inversions that Undertale is presenting us in its discourse serve as a mean for the neutralization of both stances: the game design stance, and the general moral stance. This is the first step to put the player in a neutral state-of-mind, ripe for deconstruction.

Aporetic neutralization

An interesting thing with Undertale is that the game tries to have the player quit the game at several moments. Using contradictory procedural rhetoric devices, at numerous moments the game places the player in situations that Derrida would have called aporias, moments where one is placed in a situation of impossibility to take an informed decision. For Derrida, the impossibility is the only case when one may be brought to think and take their own decision.
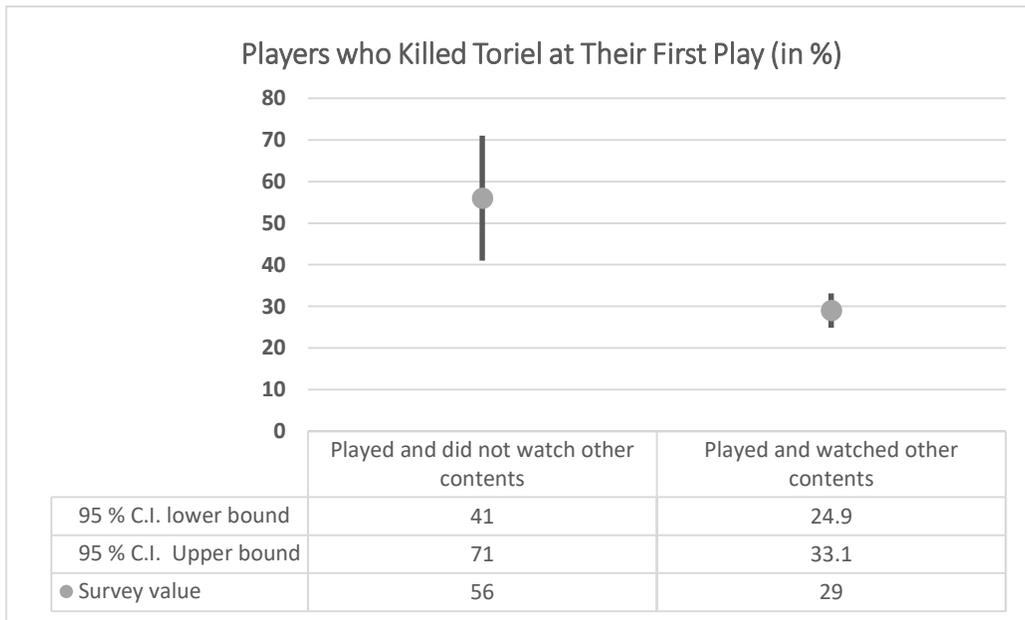
As Wortham (2010, 15.) defines the Derridean concept "aporias confront us with entirely undecided and indeed undecidable 'situations' that deeply interrupt and suspend all established programmes, norms, conventions, moralities, duties and expectations, precisely so as to open anew the possibility of decision, response and responsibility, perhaps even experience itself. To endure the 'impossibility' of an aporia is thus to risk the chance of an 'other' possibility, an impossible possibility that is perhaps the only one worth its name." The encounter with Toriel and the subsequent confrontation is probably a good example of an aporetic moment in Undertale.

After arriving at Toriel's home and being kindly fed and sent to bed; the player will come to the realization that they are a prisoner in those ruins. If they want to go further in the game, Toriel will oppose them. Not as an antagonist, but as a motherly character who is trying to protect a child. In a last attempt to save the child from other monsters, Toriel decides to destroy the door leading to the rest of the Underworld. The player who wants to continue the game will be forced to enter in a fight against her. During the fight against Toriel, the player will be tempted to try to use the act option as advised by Toriel herself before. And yet, when the player tries to talk to Toriel, the game will display sentences like "You couldn't think of any conversation topics" or "Ironically, talking does not seem to be the solution to this situation."

When the player tries the option "spare," Toriel stays silent and only suspension points are displayed in the dialog box. A player who would be used to classic RPGs would think of this moment as a classic "mentor fight" where winning would probably just mean that the mentor would stop the fight and let them pass. That is what I personally thought when playing the game for the first time.[vii]

When with other enemies, the feedback of the act mechanics is rich and variable, pushing the player to avoid violence, in the case of the fight against Toriel, the feedback of acting is made minimal, if not inexistent. Thus, a player might more easily be driven to use the fight mechanics. Which brings the player to a moment where ludonarrative dissonance is used intentionally to create discomfort. The character of Toriel until now was advising to avoid violence, and yet the gameplay seems to be pushing the player to use it against her. If the player decides to hit Toriel, he will at first deal only a few damages. Yet, all of a sudden, one hit will consume all the remaining health points of Toriel. And far from the expectations of a classic RPG's "mentor fight," Toriel actually dies and disappears into dust. At this moment, like many other players, when I killed Toriel, I felt an acute pain in the heart. But I was not sure if it was guilt, as I felt that the very structure of the fight pushed me to do so. On top of that, the song of this fight being called "heartache," it seemed like the game coerced players to end up in this situation by design.

At this moment, the players feel they are in a situation where the choice is only between killing the beloved motherly character or quitting the game. This is very close to the Derridean idea of impossibility. Players who would have watched the pacifist route online would know there is a way to save Toriel, but without any exterior knowledge, it is an aporetic situation that tests the breaking point of the moral determination of the player. This Aporia is indeed used by the game to germinate moral self-questioning into its players.

	Played and did not watch other contents	Played and watched other contents
95 % C.I. lower bound	41	24.9
95 % C.I. Upper bound	71	33.1
● Survey value	56	29

Figure 8: The effect of meta-play on the decision of sparing Toriel seem to be significant.

In the case of the players who answered the survey, despite the confidence interval being too large to confirm that a clear majority of players would kill Toriel if they play the game without prior knowledge of the way to save her; the comparison with surveyees who did watch or read other contents about the game, clearly confirms that a higher percentage of players would end up killing Toriel when they never experienced meta-content of the game. (see Figure 9)

**Figure 9:** The attacks of Toriel won't touch the player.

During the fight against Toriel, if a player's health points are running very low, something quite interesting is happening: all the attacks of Toriel will start to avoid hitting the player. (see Figure 8) To carry on with the earlier semiotic analysis of the fights in Undertale, Toriel's attack sprites, as long as they don't hit the player, are factums, interpretable interactions, that are observable, but unrelated to the player's input. When Toriel's attacks are moving in patterns difficult to avoid, they can be interpreted as factum-indices, as they are an 'indicator' of aggressivity from Toriel. Those factum-indices, when their constitutive legisign – or rule – is shifted to a moving pattern that avoids hurting the player, are no longer indicating aggressivity, they are now rather an indicator of pity. In this situation; the player may realize that Toriel never had the intention to beat them. Thus, the whole fight will start to feel unfair towards Toriel. When asked about what they felt when they realized that Toriel stopped fighting back, the respondents that encountered this situation were often very affected by this realization. One of them confesses, "I felt guilt. She was the first in the game to care, she actually cared for the player. Yet, so many, like me, has [sic] at least killed her once or more." Another expresses their frustration towards the game telling that they felt "pretty bad. And a little bit angry to the game itself 'Hey ! The critical hit is unfair !'" This other one would claim that "She doesn't have the intent of killing the player." Most of the comments left are along the lines of feeling "guilty," "evil," "heartbroken," "like crap," "awful," or simply "sorry." And on another side, a marginal minority of comments from some responders would emphasize the power they felt. "I was powerful." Writes one of them. "Messing with the monsters [sic] emotions, it felt like just a power rush. I knew it was just a game though, lol, I'd never do that in real life I just did it for the sake of playing the game."

At the end of the game, players who did end up killing characters during their play are asked by the main antagonist if they want to start again, and this time try to avoid killing anybody. At this moment the player that killed Toriel may understand that the heartache

was indeed guilt, a guilt that will be the drive that pushes them to play the game again in a differing manner.

It seems that a large proportion of 83 % (95 % C.I. ± 3.1) of the surveyed players are watching other people's playthrough. According to another online survey (Crystal Gryphon, 2015), 45 % (95 % C.I. ± 3.4) of the people know the game only via watching playthroughs. We can, therefore, assume that a similar proportion of players prefers playing informed rather than facing the aporias of the game. This high proportion of watchers for a solo story-driven game like Undertale may be seen as a symptom of logocentrism.

Logocentrism for Derrida is a desire for ultimate truth, in his eyes, it was the reason behind the idea that "writing is but a privative version of the living presence enshrined in speech." (Wortham, 2010, 88.) Meta-play and the organization of the fandom have this tendency to "canonize" some ways to play Undertale and stigmatize others.
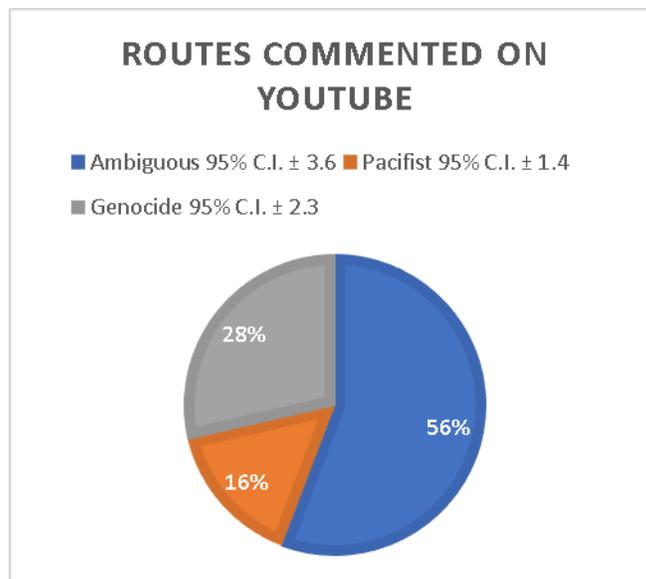
Figure 10: Topic of the comments containing keywords related to genocide and pacifist routes.

The expectation for a clear-cut discourse in creative media makes the aporetic approach of Undertale uncomfortable to many. For Instance, as stated before the genocide route despite being the least played is oddly the most watched online. And among the scraped YouTube comments for this survey, it was also the most commented route. (see Figure 10)

The scopophilic [viii] approach of preferring to watch someone else's intelligible – narratable – play is the very manifestation of logocentrism. It is the symptom of an aversion for aporias, a mode of experience that provides the watcher a dimensionally reduced take on the game's aesthetics, where another person takes responsibility for all the ethical choices, leaving to the watcher joy, sadness or empathy, but saving them from experiencing guilt or regret.

Introspective Play Versus Meta-discourse

On this last part, this paper will focus on the impact of Undertale's rhetoric on the perception of the self and the perception of the avatar(s). The survey revealed a lot about the construct of gendered discourse in the fandom, despite a lot of players being conscious and careful about it. On the other hand, the Youtube data scraping brought some more insights on self-responsibilization and scopophilia.

Without exposing too much of the story here, the backstory of the pacifist run introduces the character of Asriel, the son of Toriel who died a long time ago. Asriel befriended a human, the first human who fell into the underground. Interestingly, when one starts playing Undertale, they are asked to "name the fallen human" instead of being prompted to name the controllable character. Within the game's world, nobody ever calls the player's character by the name they chose at the beginning. It is only at the end of the Pacifist route that Asriel uses this name to call the character, but the player discovers it was the name of the first fallen human, the best friend of Asriel. The name the player had chosen was not the name of the controllable character. At this moment the controllable character reveals that their real name was in fact "Frisk."

The game clearly attempts to blur the lines between the avatar and the character in its narrative. This is a very interesting thing to do, especially considering 59.3 % of the respondents (95 % C.I. ± 4), a significant majority, admitted using their own name (or nickname) when prompted at the beginning of the game. For instance, during fights, the name is always displayed at the bottom of the screen, since the very beginning. So, whose role is the player endorsing? Are they Frisk or are they playing the role of the spirit of the first fallen human that they named?
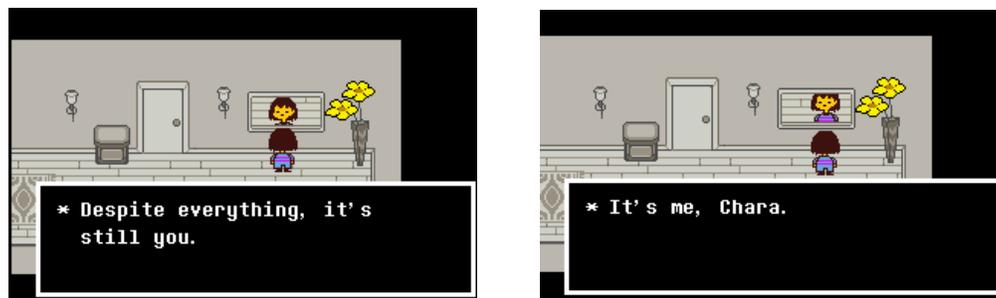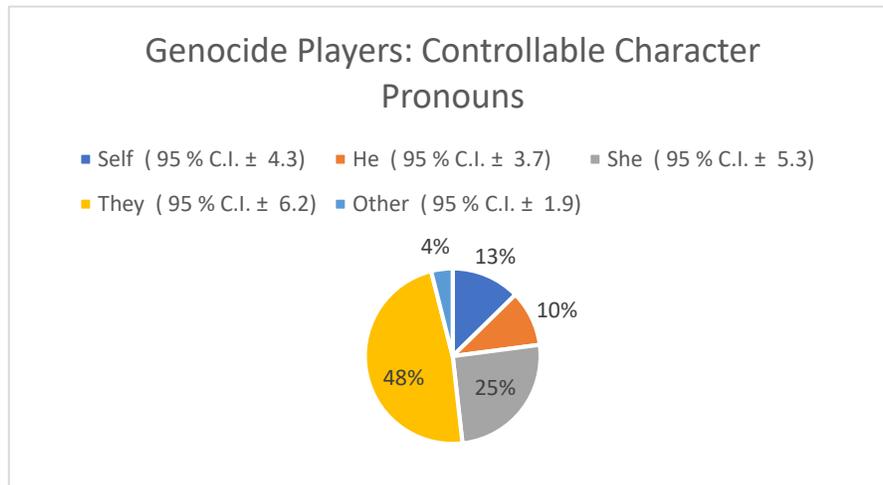

Figure 11: On the left: neutral route / On the right: genocide route. (the name will be whatever was chosen by the player)
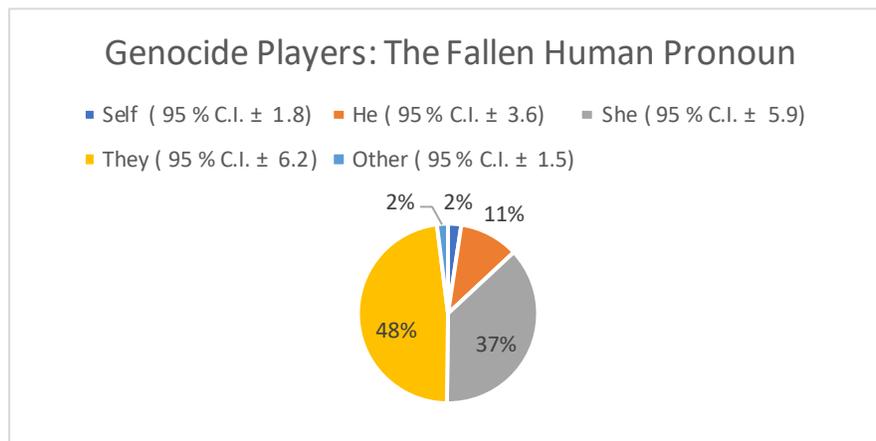
Apart from the encounter with Asriel in the Pacifist route, one of the only other moments when the player's character is called by the name that was chosen at the beginning is when the player finds a mirror (see Figure 11). In neutral route, the text in front of the mirror will state "it's you" or "Despite everything, it's still you." without ever telling the character's name. In the Genocide route, however, the text will read "It's me, [name chosen by the player]." The use of the first person here seems to be calling the player to face their responsibilities.

In Undertale, the controllable character (Frisk) and the first fallen human (Chara) are not gendered characters. Also, those characters are supposedly both avatars of the player,

since the player names Chara but interacts with Frisk. In the survey conducted for this paper, players were asked what pronoun they would use to refer to those characters. For this paper, it was decided to focus more attention on the answers of people who played the genocide route. Generally in this survey, the number of people referring to the characters in the first person was relatively low. Another constant was the use of the non-gendered "singular they" to refer to the characters. Among players of all routes of the game, there was always around 45 to 48 % of the participants who referred to the characters with the singular they.[ix]

Genocide Players: Controllable Character Pronouns

- Self (95 % C.I. ± 4.3) - He (95 % C.I. ± 3.7) - She (95 % C.I. ± 5.3)
- They (95 % C.I. ± 6.2) - Other (95 % C.I. ± 1.9)

4% 13%
10%
48% 25%

Figure 12-a: Pronouns used by the genocide players for the controllable character.

Genocide Players: The Fallen Human Pronoun

- Self (95 % C.I. ± 1.8) - He (95 % C.I. ± 3.6) - She (95 % C.I. ± 5.9)
- They (95 % C.I. ± 6.2) - Other (95 % C.I. ± 1.5)

2%   2% 11%
48% 37%

Figure 12-b: Pronouns used by the genocide players for the fallen human.

When observing the responses of people who have played through the genocide route, the only route where the fallen human may be encountered, there seem to be two tendencies, both for the perception of Chara (the fallen human) and Frisk (the controllable character). In one tendency they are referred as gender neutral, in the other, they are referred as female. (see Figure 11-a and 11-b) People referring to those characters as male are a

stable minority at around 10% in both cases. There are around 6 times more people referring to the controllable character at the first person (12 %), than people who are doing so for the fallen human (2%). This holds true also for the entire population of the survey.[x] It is very interesting to note that while only a minority of respondents identify the characters as male, in both cases, respondents identifying the characters as female is way greater.

Moreover, when only 27% of the respondents identified the playable character as a female with the pronoun She, 37% were using it for the fallen human. Both for the playable character and the fallen human, except for self-identification, the tendencies are seemingly almost the same.

Nevertheless, since the characters are clearly gender neutral in the game we could emit the hypothesis that this female bias of the respondents comes from the meta-storytelling that happens in let's plays, fanfictions, and other fandom activities. In the fandom, those two characters are very often represented as females, and this may explain the constant results among all groups. Furthermore, if we look at the group of players who played Undertale, but did not watch any video online, the findings corroborate the idea that the fandom influences the perception of the character, as the results are way more balanced for people who did not experience any Undertale-related meta-content (see Figure 13).
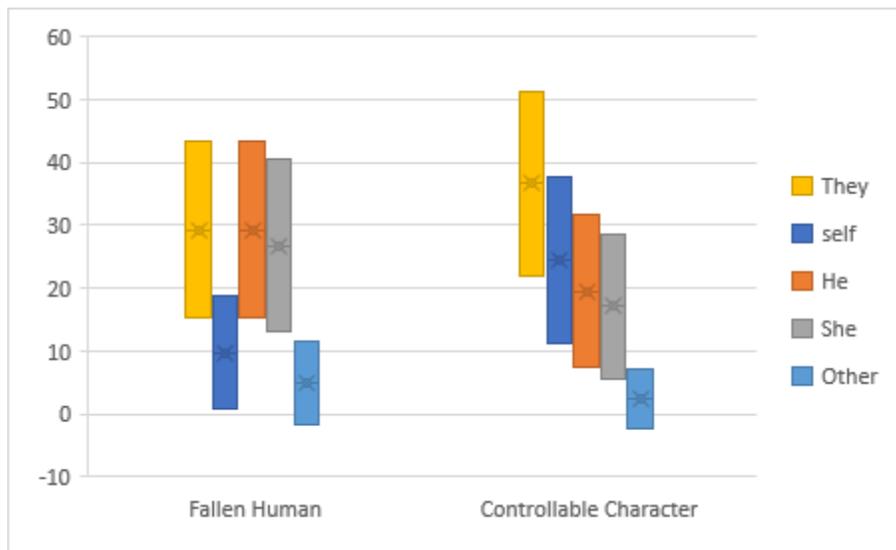
Figure 13: Played but did not watch other contents: Pronouns used. The cross represents the value found in the survey, the box boundaries represents the 95% C.I.

When examining the data from scraped YouTube comments it is interesting to see that way more people than in the survey refer to the controllable character as themselves with the pronoun I. (see Figure 14)
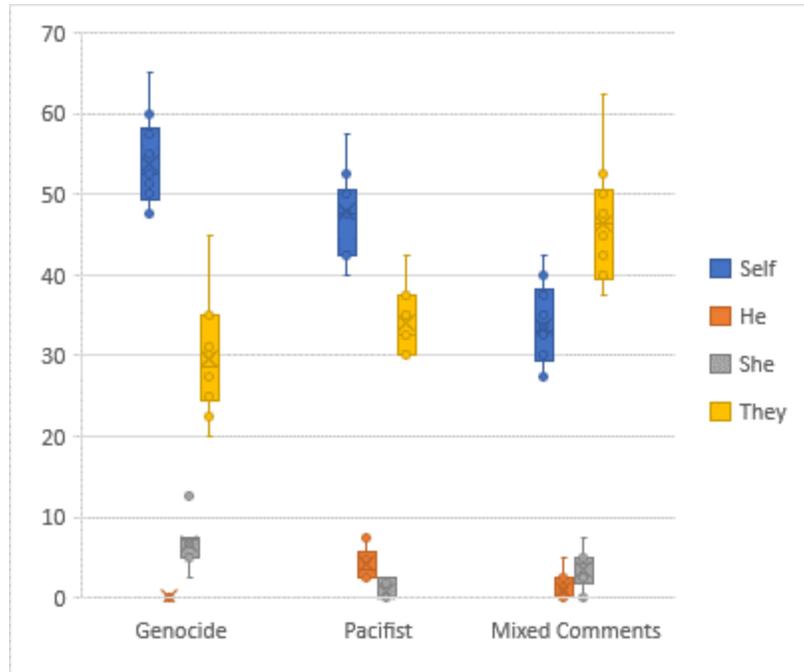
Figure 14: The pronouns used to refer to the game's playable character(s) by YouTube commenters. (The use of the character's name without a pronoun was considered as "They.")

Another interesting finding in this study is one regarding a question about culpability. In one of the questions, participants were asked to tell who they considered guilty of what happens in the genocide route.

Undoubtedly, here also we can spot a clear difference between people who played the genocide route and people who only watched it online. For those who played the genocide route, 58% of the questioned people (95% C.I. ± 13.0) considered that the player was responsible for what was happening. On the other hand, people who only watched the genocide route online were 53 % (95% C.I. ± 6.0) considering that others than the player were responsible for what was happening. While the confidence interval for proportions does not allow us to generalize that a majority of those who played the genocide route would endorse the responsibility, the confidence interval for the difference between the 58% who played the genocide route considering the player as responsible and the 47 % who watched the genocide route online considering the same would lie between 10% and 12% with a 95% C.I. This last finding really emphasizes the effectiveness of a certain moral discourse intrinsic to the gameplay of Undertale.

CONCLUSION: UNDERTALE AND PACIFISM
Undertale might not have a moral as clear-cut as a classic 'tale' would have. However, the game is designed to evoke the question of pacifism within its players' hearts and shake their moral stances. It does so by offering them the means to explore both the brightest and the darkest corners of their souls. It strips down the genre of Japanese RPGs and exposes its moral contradictions, but it also attempts to push the player to introspect their own moral stances by shattering any form of moral compass and putting them in situations of aporias. So, in conclusion, Undertale might not be a pacifist game, but it is

clearly a game that ignites questioning and discussion about violence and pacifism. In parallel, the community of players/creators builds collectively its own interpretation of the game's rhetoric, where avatars become gendered and characterized, and the overall experience offered by the game becomes narrativized, orienting new players towards a certain pre-made interpretation of the game's message.

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[i] Using Selenium for Python, 600 URL for videos containing the term "Undertale" along with the terms "genocide" or "pacifist" were scraped; then for each video every comment was scraped and only those containing the terms "Genocide," "Pacifist," and names of key elements and characters from the game were kept. From a selection of 10,000 randomly shuffled comments containing the key words, a sample of 500 were classified by hand according to their use of personal pronouns to refer to the main playable character and according to the route of the game they mainly refer to.

[ii] Scraping YouTube comments was the method chosen here to get the perception of those who experience the game's universe in a mediated way, through playthroughs, music covers, alternate universes (AUs), and other fandom contents. Providing a broader comparison perspective with the survey, whose respondents were mostly players.

[iii] A mode of connotation relying on rules or conventions. (e.g. a flag represents a country mainly by convention)

[iv] A mode of connotation relying on a certain set of shared characteristics with an object. (e.g. a drawing, a photograph or a sound recording)

[v] At the end of an Undertale run, the character Sans the skeleton explains that LV and EXP are acronyms for Level of Violence and EXecution Points.

[vi] C.I. in this paper stands for confidence interval. The number after the '±' symbol represents the percentage to add and subtract to obtain the upper and lower bounds of the confidence interval. A confidence interval is the boundaries within which we can be confident that a result belongs. The percentage stated before C.I. is the percentage of confidence that the result over the entire population resides between the stated boundaries. (Generally 95 %)

[vii] The website TV Tropes calls this trope "Strength Equals Worthiness." (TV Tropes, 2017)

[viii] Scopophilia is the taste or preference for watching. In the context of this research I chose to extend its meaning to the preference for passive

experiences.

[ix] The use of the pronoun They represents 46 % (95 % C.I ± 4.1) over all the 560 respondents both for the playable character and the fallen human.

[x] Percentage of the 560 respondents referring to the controllable character as "I": 12 %, 95 % C.I. ± 2.6; Percentage of the 560 respondents referring to the fallen human as "I": 2%, 95 % C.I. ± 1.1

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