

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Undertale*
Platform: Windows PC
Genre: Role Playing Game
Release Date: September 15, 2015
Developer: tobyfox
Publisher: tobyfox
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Toby Fox

Overview

On the surface, *Undertale* is a game about a child lost in an underground realm populated with monsters on a journey to go home. The child, controlled by the player, meets a variety of Monsters and has the option to either fight or spare them as they journey to escape the underground. Over the course of their journey, they learn the story of an ancient war between humans and monsters that sealed them beneath a barrier. The barrier can only be passed through by the union of a human and monster's soul, or destroyed by the power of seven human souls.

However, underneath its cute and playful veneer, the story has sharp criticisms about the way people behave in games and the morality of murder. The game features three endings based on the player's actions:

- **Neutral** – Some monsters are killed, or the first completion of the game.
- **True Pacifist** – If no monsters are killed, and certain story segments have been completed.
- **Genocide** – For not just killing every monster, but going out of one's way to hunt them all down.

In addition, the narrative contains multiple portrayals of depression. All of the characters that drive the plot forward are reacting in some way to numbness, inadequacy, regret, or abuse. They react to this in different ways, ranging from isolation to self-destruction.

Characters

- **Frisk** – The lost child the player controls. The name of this character is not actually revealed unless the player completes a True Pacifist run otherwise, they keep the name given to them at the beginning of the game. Nothing is said about the life of the child before they fell into the underground. In fact, the gender of the

child is also kept intentionally ambiguous. Frisk possesses a power unique to humans, called “Determination”. This allows them to SAVE and RESET the world.

- **Flowey** – The first character Frisk meets in the underground, Flowey is the main antagonist of the game. Flowey introduces himself, pretending to be a friend, and offers to explain how the underground works. He believes the world is “KILL or be KILLED”. Flowey is secretly the reincarnation of Asriel Dreemurr, however he has lost his soul. This has caused him to no longer feel compassion or love for even his parents, Asgore and Toriel. Flowey feels that the world is no longer worthwhile since he cannot feel love and attempts to kill himself several times. In doing this, he discovers that he also has the power of Determination. He initially uses the power to help others, but eventually becomes jaded and uses it to inflict harm and undo it at will. Flowey exhibits signs of Major Depressive Disorder caused by his inability to feel affection toward others. This results in his self-harm and sadistic tendencies. In True Pacifist games, Flowey forms a bond with Frisk and feels like Frisk is the only one who understands him. In Genocide runs, Flowey becomes afraid of Frisk as they turn into the reincarnation of Chara.
- **Chara** – An unseen character until the end of Genocide runs. When entering this name into the screen that directs the player to Name the Fallen Human, the phrase “The True Name” appears on the confirmation screen. This is because Flowey is projecting a name onto Frisk, the fallen human. Chara was the first child to fall into the underground, who was adopted by Asgore and Toriel. Chara is revealed to be a malevolent force that reincarnates through Frisk as they kill monsters. In some tapes found in the True Laboratory, it seems that Chara bullied Asriel and may have become sick on purpose so that he and Asriel could unite their souls, leave the barrier, and gather more souls to break the barrier entirely. For what purpose is unknown. Before he died, Chara told Asgore and Toriel that he wanted to see the golden flowers of his hometown again, this leads them to believe that Asriel left just to return Chara’s body. Chara does not appear in True Pacifist runs and appears after waiting on the blank screen after a Genocide run, offering to RESET the world in exchange for Frisk’s soul.
- **Asriel Dreemurr** – Asgore and Toriel’s son. Before he was reincarnated as Flowey, he and Chara were seen as the hope of the underground. After Chara became sick, he absorbed his soul and traveled through the barrier. While this initially may have been part of Chara’s plan to break the barrier, Asriel lost his will to kill humans and let them wound him grievously after leaving Chara’s body in the human world. Asriel returns to the underground and dies in his parents’ castle. Later, a golden flower blooms on the place he died. This flower is injected with Determination by Alphys and becomes Flowey. Asriel is depicted as a kind and loving son before his death. When asked about his life, Flowey says that when they left the barrier Chara was in control, but Asriel took control back so he could not harm the humans.
- **Asgore Dreemurr** – The king of the underground. When Asriel died, he instigated a policy that all humans that enter the underground will be killed and their souls taken in an attempt to destroy the barrier. Asgore is not fully committed to this agenda, however, and is actually very kind and forgiving.

- **Toriel Dreemurr** – She is the second character Frisk meets in the underground. She and Asgore used to live with Asriel in the castle at the edge of the barrier. After seeing the way Asgore killed the other fallen humans, Toriel left him and her position as queen to live in the ruins.

Breakdown

The narrative follows a pattern of introducing characters that are initially hostile and allowing the player to either fight them or attempt to weather their attacks and try to resolve the conflict in another way. These interactions make up the arc of each NPC in the game.

Every NPC, from minor enemies to major actors follow this arc. For example; Woshua, a basic enemy found in random encounters, is initially aggressive. However, by examining Woshua, the player can learn that Woshua just wants to clean things. By requesting to be cleaned, Woshua will change their attack to incorporate a bullet that will heal the player and allow them defeat Woshua without harming it.

A character with extensive dialogue, Papyrus, attempts to capture the player character with traps, puzzles, and attacks. As the player continues to encounter Papyrus, they see that Papyrus is actually very incompetent. He only wants to capture the player to join the Royal Guard and make friends. By evading Papyrus' attacks until he no longer wishes to fight, the player can instead befriend them.

Flowey's arc bookends the entire game in the Neutral and True Pacifist endings. As the player progresses through the game, they learn about what made Asgore want to kill all humans and who Asriel was. A plot hook about golden flowers leads the player to believe that Asriel has somehow become Flowey, but for unknown reasons. If the player repeats the Neutral ending multiple times, Flowey starts to reveal more of his personality and tells the player how to reach the True Pacifist ending. This ends up being another ploy from Flowey, as he only wants the player to do it so he can regain his form as Asriel and become powerful enough to absorb all of the monsters in the underground. However, by continuing to avoid fighting Asriel, he eventually relents and lets the player go after destroying the barrier.

In all three of these instances the player is introduced to the characters, learns their personality, and uses that knowledge to resolve the conflict non-violently. By presenting this option, the game gives even the smallest characters their own narrative arc that the player can interact with.

Strongest Element

The strongest narrative element is how the game uses the fact that it is a game to its advantage. The power to SAVE and RESET empowers and affects characters in different ways. Flowey becomes jaded and loses his sense of life's value when he can just undo whatever damage he causes, sans becomes depressed and begins to believe his actions no longer matter in a world that someone else has so much control over. The game also

makes a point of what the player decides to do with this power. Does the player endlessly RESET to try and save everyone? Or, do they lose some Determination, and give in to killing the monsters of the underground?

Unsuccessful Element

Despite giving the player the choice to kill, the game is very critical of the player when they decide to do so. After seeing the True Pacifist ending, and reloading the game again Flowey appears to beseech you to just let the game end and keep the happy ending. When completing a Genocide run, Chara appears and offers to revive all the monsters you killed in exchange for your soul. Playing the game after that permanently changes even the True Pacifist ending to reflect what the player did. This is actually a very strong deterrent to experiencing all of the game's content. While this is obviously intentional, it leads some people to never even consider seeing the entirety of the effort put into the game.

Highlight

The moment where every element comes together is the beginning of the fight against Asgore. Solemn music plays as text sets up the atmosphere:

A STRANGE LIGHT FILLS THE ROOM.
TWILIGHT IS SHINING THROUGH THE BARRIER.
IT SEEMS YOUR JOURNEY IS FINALLY OVER.
YOU'RE FILLED WITH DETERMINATION.

Asgore says, "It was nice to meet you, human. Goodbye" before brandishing a trident and destroying the MERCY button on the UI. This moment combines the sentimentality of the characters with the brutality of their current situation and further exemplifies the way the game breaks the fourth wall for drama.

Critical Reception

Undertale enjoys nearly unanimous critical acclaim. Austin Walker, of *Giant Bomb*, gave the game a perfect 100. Stating that, "I left the *Undertale* feeling joyous...but I was also ready to leave it...because *Undertale* preached a sort of anti-completionist doctrine that spoke to me." The doctrine Walker refers to is the way the game rails against players who do things in games just to "see what would happen". The game condemns that attitude as the same one Flowey took up since he began using the power of Determination.

Angelo D'Argenio from *The Escapist* gave the game five out of five stars. D'Argenio says that, "The characters in *Undertale* are easily its biggest strength...They feel alive. They feel like your friends, family, and greatest enemies." He goes on to say that:

So much else plays a central role in the plot. The feeling you get when you see your level increase...Your friends accidentally spoiling the game for you...No other game has done that.

What D'Argenio refers to is how the game has given context for the player's actions through the way it breaks the fourth wall. Enjoying leveling is allowing the sinister spirit of Chara to make the player stronger through murder. The desire to see content without playing through it also feeds into the game's conceit. Even the choice to quit playing could be explained as the character of Frisk falling into despair at their inability to progress.

One strong, dissenting opinion is that *Undertale* undermines its own lesson by being a system where morality is punished by the characters in the game. Jake Muncy of *Kill Screen* gave the game a 65. He writes, "Pacifism is never mandated, but it feels constantly encouraged." His main issue comes specifically from the Toriel fight where the option to spare her is obfuscated by poor feedback. When attempting to spare Toriel, she continues her dialogue and no feedback is given that the player is doing the correct thing to keep her alive. He continues to say:

As a phenomenon, this sort of mechanical constraint might have communicative value. Nonviolent resistance, after all, is a performance of sorts: resisters play a role in response to an aggressor, ceding one type of power in the hopes of gaining another. In doing so, they submit to significant constraint and the possibility of intractable failure. Being beaten or jailed is not a failure of nonviolent resistance, it's a state that's planned for and accepted as a possibility...Their presence in a system, though, one which has carefully constructed each choice and then determined how those choices are communicated to the player, however, suggests something different. It suggests a communicative failure, one brought about by the nature of the system itself.

Muncy finishes his thought by saying that, "Its limited combat options and often obtuse puzzle solving, alongside the sheer endurance required to survive boss fights...add up to a system that doesn't point to any elaborate moral insight." Muncy's insights lead to a very valid critique of the game. If the game fails to give feedback that sparing a target is conducive to shared success, the player should not be punished for failing to continue

along that path. This is, as he said, a failure for the game to communicate its intent through proper feedback. Muncy was punished by the game for failing to take a path that he could not see, despite the desire to progress in that way. More feedback here would have allowed Muncy to spare Toriel as he wanted to.

Lessons

- A story can embrace being a game not just for humor. Game mechanics can be real plot elements.
- No character is too small for a personality. Woshua loves to clean, Aaron loves to flex. Common, minor enemies with unique charm.
- Give players obvious signs to complete their goals. If there is an option present, make it very apparent so that a character like Toriel is permitted to survive as long as the player wants it.

Summation

Undertale is a surprise, indie smash-hit that draws in many due to its unique characters, gameplay, and quirks. This game promotes a message of understanding the pain and history that drives others to act, opposed to responding to blind aggression in kind. It argues that, while NPCs are here for us to enjoy, why kill them just to see what would happen? Or rather, it attempts to wake those that do kill NPCs for the thrill to reevaluate why they derive pleasure from the act.