

Game Narrative Review

Your name: Kristian Skistad

Your school: Dakota State University

Your email: Kristian.D.Skistad@gmail.com

Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2015



Game Title: Undertale

Platform: PC

Genre: RPG

Release Date: September 15, 2015

Developer: Toby Fox

Publisher: Toby Fox


Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Toby Fox

Overview

Undertale is the story of a human child who falls into the underground, which has become the home and prison of the monster race ever since humans drove them from the surface. Monsters have set up a life in this new place, but long to return to the surface. You are given the ability to spare or kill almost every one of these monsters on your own journey to return to the surface.

Undertale turns the medium itself into a critical piece of the narrative. Elements such as saving, loading, restarting, and the UI are all apart of the game's world. The very nature of a game and the control a player has over it is tied into the outcome of the player's actions. These actions persist through subsequent playthroughs, previous saves, and even erased saves, resulting in them permanently impacting the player's experience.

Characters

- **The Protagonist (Frisk)** -  The player character. The protagonist originally takes

up the name you input at the beginning of the game, but the protagonist's true name is later revealed to be Frisk. Frisk is a human child of ambiguous gender that holds the key to saving and loading: Determination. Being a human, their soul is extremely powerful when compared to that of a monster's soul. Having fallen into the underground, they seek a way to return to the surface.



- **Flowey** - Flowey is the first character the player is introduced to. Flowey usually appears bright and cheery, but in actuality he is cruel and heartless. Flowey's main philosophy is "Kill or be killed", and judges the player throughout the game based on the actions they have taken, namely the monsters they have killed or spared. Flowey lacks a soul and thus is unable to feel love or any other form of emotion. Flowey is also the only other character, aside from the player, that fully retains their memories regardless of when you save and load, and is able to make reference to events that you may have saved over.



- **Toriel** - Toriel acts as a mother figure to the player. She guides them through the game's combat and puzzle mechanics, namely the ability to 'ACT' instead of 'FIGHT'. Toriel is a kind-hearted individual who has shut herself away from the rest of the monsters due to their more hostile nature. She dislikes violence, even if it is used against humans. After the player leaves the tutorial she cuts contact with them.



- **Sans** - Sans is the first monster the player will meet outside of the tutorial. He is extremely laid back, often found sleeping or putting little to no effort into anything. He is kind and caring towards the other monsters, and even the player character despite them being human. He enjoys joking around and making puns involving skeletons. Though he keeps a cheery appearance, he can become serious and even threatening when the situation calls for it. He holds others' well-being in high regard, and would go so far as to fight for them, despite being one of the weakest monsters. He is the most judgemental of the player's actions, due to having some knowledge of 'SAVING' and knowing his own memories are being reset. Though he doesn't retain his memories through saves, he is able to tell by the way the player is acting that his memories have been reset. This causes him to act as both a guardian angel to the player, and an ominous foreshadowing of events to come. Of all the characters in Undertale, he is the most affected by the knowledge of 'SAVING', and

suffers from depression knowing all his actions are meaningless.



- **Asgore** - Asgore is the king of monsters. He is kind hearted and puts the well being of his citizens above all else. While he is seeking human souls in order to break the barrier that prevents monsters from entering the surface, he has yet to kill a human himself. He has an extreme dislike for violence, though he will still put up a fight if there is no other option. He is the father of Asriel (Flowey) and the husband of Toriel, though he hasn't seen either of them in quite some time. He knows that either the player or himself must die in order for the barrier to be broken, and regrets that there is no other way.



- **Asriel** - Asriel was a kind and loving soul who sacrificed himself to save the life of his human brother. He was later resurrected into what we know him as now, Flowey. He was resurrected without a soul, but maintained his determination. Because of this he had an enormous amount of power and drive, but no aspirations. The result was a homicidal being who sought to destroy everything because he couldn't understand it.

Breakdown

The first thing that Undertale will do after beginning a new game is deceive you. The tutorial attempts to kill you, and even lies about core combat mechanics. The first thing instilled in the player is a sense of fear and helplessness as their only lense so far into the world, a deceitful flower name Flowey, has just tricked them into hurting themselves. The player is taught, in Flowey's exact words, it's "Kill or be killed". Within these first moments we already see a character that shows self-awareness of the game's mechanics, a theme that will follow you throughout your entire play experience.

The save and load functions are standard features in most games. In Undertale these two simple features become a persistent and essential part of the narrative. Throughout the game the player will find save points, where upon selecting them they will be given a short blurb on how something in that area fills them with determination. After this the game may be saved. This blurb is more than flavor text, however, because in the world of Undertale only those who

hold the most determination have the ability to 'SAVE'. As a result, a standard feature of the medium as a whole is encapsulated into the game's lore.

If you load a previous save file without saving your current progress characters within the world will still be able to recall selective events that took place during the portion of the game you decided not to save. For instance, if you kill Toriel you are called a killer by Flowey. This may cause the player to load back to the save point just before the fight so they can spare her. Afterwards, Flowey tells the player that he knows what they did, and that they went back because they regretted it. The player's ability to 'SAVE' and 'LOAD' is as core of a mechanic as combat is, because it contributes directly to the story of the game.

Being able to call upon events outside of the player's current save brings into light the idea that this world is persistent, not just within its own rules but within the rules of our world. Actions cannot truly be undone, as there is always some semblance of them left within the game world. This ties into not only the player's personal experience, but into the lore presented by the world. The game integrates itself into our minds as a part of our own world, rather than a separate world entirely.

The game's integration into our world is taken a step further when Flowey goes so far as to call out people watching gameplay footage of a genocide run (a run where you kill every monster). Because the true pacifist ending encourages players to never play the game again, many may turn to watching this type of run online. During this run Flowey will mention how sick it is for people to stand around and watch it, and that they only watch because they are too weak to do it themselves. This allows the game to not only be experienced through play, but even pulls those curious enough to seek out a medium outside the game back into its narrative.

Upon exiting the tutorial the player will be jumped by a friendly skeleton named Sans. Sans will interact with the player throughout their journey, acting as somewhat of an angel on their shoulder. He is aware of the world resetting when you load, and suspects that you are the cause of it. Knowing this, he keeps a close watch on the player, often showing up to give them advice and let them know how he thinks they are progressing. If they are abusing their ability to 'SAVE' he will scold them, as he can tell when they have done so by how they act. As the game goes on he gradually learns more and more about the nature of the game world he is in. Should the player make their way through the game by the killing of monsters, Sans will confront them about it and ultimately act as the game's final boss.

Sans is weighed heavily by the player's actions, namely their constant 'SAVING' and 'LOADING' of the game. The idea that he could have his memories reset at any moment terrifies him, so much that he eventually gives up all together and becomes a lost soul. He believes that even if he were to succeed in defeating the player during a genocide run (Killing all monsters) or seeing the surface in a pacifist run (Sparing all monsters) that none of it would matter because he would just end up right back where he started with no memory of any of it. At times he asks you just to stop playing, and never come back. He is the culmination of the player's actions.

Sans is the epitome of narrative abstraction, personifying everything the game represents through a single character.

The fight with Sans is one of the greatest examples of how to use the medium of games as a part of your narrative. Sans knows what you are doing, he knows that you can fight him as many times as it takes to win, he knows how the game's battle system works, he knows that his memories are just going to be wiped over and over, and he knows that the player is the cause of all of it. Due to his understanding of the game's combat system he is able to operate outside its rules. He only has 1 HP, but moves out of the way of your attacks. He is able to attack first, a trait normally reserved for the player. He throws attacks at you while it is not his turn. He can even spare you. Through knowledge of the game's medium he is able to present a mechanical anomaly for the player to face off with that maintains immersion within the game's world.

Sans has but one goal in his fight: To get you to quit playing, because at this point he knows it is the only way to stop you. This in of itself is an example of a character's goals reflecting the nature of the medium they exist within. He eventually employs his ultimate strategy: Doing nothing, and never ending his turn. This way the game cannot continue. He demonstrates an understanding of the game's rules by defying them. This is an attempt to affect the player's actions outside of the game world in a way that would have effect within it. At this point the player must wait for Sans to fall asleep so they can push the play area over top the 'FIGHT' button in the UI and, since the heart that represents the player is also a cursor, they can press the fight button to attack him while he is asleep. Everything from the UI being personified as a part of the game world, to the character's self awareness of the medium they are in, to the abstraction of gameplay mechanics as a narrative device is at work within this fight.

Leveling up by the acquisition of experience has been a staple of RPGs before they even made their way over from pen and paper. Undertale is no different, using LV to represent your level and EXP to represent your amount of experience, that is, until Sans explains the true nature of these tried and true stats. LV is revealed to stand for 'LOVE', or 'Level of Violence', and EXP to stand for 'Execution Points'. Elements that would normally be considered 'just part of being a game' become a part of the lore, and cause the player to throw other standard RPG elements into question.

The combat screen is where the player spends a good portion of their experience. In this screen a small heart is used both as the player's cursor and as a representation of their soul. Should their HP drop to zero this cursor will be split in two and they will be sent to the game over screen. Despite often only performing one of these functions at a time, in several different combat encounters throughout the game the UI is shown to serve a purpose beyond giving the player a method of interacting with the game, such as in Sans' fight where he is able to harm the player's soul outside of his turn by attacking the places where their cursor must be to select the 'FIGHT' and 'ACT' options. Similarly, at the start of the fight with Asgore he destroys the player's 'MERCY' button, making the player unable to run away or spare him. Both of these examples tie in thematically with these characters, with Sans defying the game's rules due to

his knowledge of them and Asgore forcing the player to defeat him.

Nowhere is the save and load function more prominent than the game's final boss fights. The ability to 'SAVE' is taken away from the player, as it is revealed that the only reason the player had the ability to 'SAVE' and 'LOAD' was because of their determination. Once Flowey absorbed all of the human souls, which contained immense amounts of determination, he held more determination than you. Flowey demonstrates this by deleting your save file while you are walking around the game's UI. From this point on Flowey is in control of your game. Even the title screen now displays his name as the file name. During the player's fight with him, Flowey is able to save and load the game at will, turning an ability that players hold in most games into an opposing force. Flowey has also shattered the combat screen UI, making the player unable to act against him, further emphasizing it as a piece of the world rather than simply a control mechanism.

Asriel, the true identity of Flowey, will detest the player saving them, as he doesn't wish to say goodbye, referring to the game itself coming to a close. The player is an integral part of this world, as they hold the most determination and can therefore control it by saving and loading, and Asriel knows this. Once again we see the game presenting itself as a world within our own, one that we can interact with and even destroy if we should desire. Characters such as Asriel react to this with fear, they are afraid of the amount of control a player has over a game. Though ultimately the player is able to express that control over the medium, and determine Asriel's fate.

If the player attempts to play the game again after getting the true pacifist ending, they will be greeted by Flowey who pleads to them not to play again. Flowey explains to you that everyone is finally happy, and that if you reset the game you would be taking that all away from them. This continues to convey that the game world is one that exists within our own, and that it can continue on without our intervention. Even if you did reset the game completely, Flowey would still be able to remember you and everything you have done, for better or for worse.

Strongest Element

Undertale was able to turn the medium of games into a character driven story. Even more impressive is its ability to do so without breaking the immersive atmosphere the game has set up. The elements of a game become a part of that atmosphere, as they are crucial to the world itself. It is an experience that could only ever be delivered through the medium of a game.

Unsuccessful Element

There will come several points in the game where you may wish to backtrack, and at the end of the story you are even encouraged to backtrack all the way to the place you began the

game. While thematically this works, mechanically it can be a slog. This is a problem with the pace of the game. While most of the time you are meeting new characters or discovering new places, there are moments where you are simply spending 10+ minutes walking to places you have already been.

There is some form of fast travel, but it is only between three locations and you must be in one of those locations to use it. Being able to use fast travel from anywhere would break the cohesion of the world, but this could be remedied with an item similar to the bicycle in the original Pokemon games, which faced a similar issue of slow travel times until flight was introduced.

Highlight

As the game's final antagonist, Asriel, stands before you, having consumed the souls of every character you have ever met, reducing the world you have come to know to nothing more than a black void, and deleting your save file leaving you unable to load, one thing remains with you: Determination. This determination is not only a power within your character, but within yourself as a player. This comes from the desire to save those you have met along your journey, due to Undertale's excellent writing and characters (Which is another paper entirely).

This determination is mechanically present by the player's soul being unable to be destroyed, and the return of the ability to 'SAVE' (which was previously lost). This time, however, you don't 'SAVE' your game, you 'SAVE' your friend's lost souls. The 'ACT' option on the UI is replaced by 'SAVE'. One by one, through the same combat system that has followed you through the entire experience, you bring them back into the world, you 'SAVE' them, and even 'SAVE' Asriel himself. This is a power fantasy in one of the purest senses. You cannot die. You are given a power which cannot be defeated. You rise above something that is powerful enough to devour the world itself. And yet you do so without sacrificing that which made you powerful: Love, compassion, friendship, and determination. This power fantasy manages to fall right in line with Undertale's core narrative, overcoming the narrative dissonance it induces into many other RPGs.

Critical Reception

The Escapist gave the game five stars, commending it for its writing and characters. They expressed their pain as the game put them in situations that would impact these character's lives, proclaiming the title a classic in the same vein as Earthbound.^[1]

PC Gamer praised the game's ability to convey character through the combat system, as many of the enemies encountered will perform attacks based on how they perceive you. They also highlight the drastic differences experienced through multiple playthroughs, ranging from "a

pitch-black horror game” to “one of the most charming and heartfelt RPGs ever made.”^[2]

Lessons

- **Embrace the medium** - A story can be told through every medium, but not every medium can tell the same story. An experience is at its most impactful when it is able to fully harness the strengths of its medium. For games this strength comes from the interactivity we have with the medium, and our ability to impact the outcome of events within it. To both play upon the strengths and expectations that this implies is to create an experience that could only be had through the medium of games.
- **Mechanics can tell a story and convey emotion** - Mechanics can be used as more than a means of progression or challenge, it can also be used to reflect and impact the experiences of the player or characters within a story. Undertale demonstrates this in its combat, with enemies’ attacks changing based on their emotional state. The more impactful the results of the player’s input are the more invested they become in the narrative that they have helped shape.
- **Narrative is more than a story** - Narrative is the culmination of experience, whether it be from the gameplay, dialog, art direction, or audio design. Every element in your game should co-exist to achieve the same goal. Much like the elegant wafting of snowflakes and the sound of a gentle wind come together to create the icy chill of a cold winter morning, so too must we use these different elements of our medium to convey an experience.
- **Always ask yourself “Why?”** - Often times we feel the need to include things in our games because of the genre it falls in, or because it’s just something that has come to be expected. Things like a leveling system in an RPG, or collectibles in a platformer. You should always ask yourself how these elements further push your core experience, or if they are really even needed at all, and seek ways to integrate them into the narrative you are crafting.

Summation

Often we see games feature some form of self-awareness, from the irony of The Stanley Parable showing us how meaningless our choices in games are through a game about choice, to the Metal Gear series’ psychological mastery of the 4th wall used to reflect human nature and convey philosophy and comedy. These games use the breaking of the 4th wall to convey a message of human experience applicable to us outside of the game world. Undertale, on the other hand, uses its self-awareness to construct and convey a hero’s journey. It intertwines this self-awareness so deeply within its core narrative that it couldn’t exist without it. It turns the player themselves into a character by deconstructing the barriers of medium between them. It doesn’t just work with the medium, it embraces itself as the medium.

Sources

1. D'Argenio, Angelo M. "Undertale Review - The Pinnacle of Classic RPG Storytelling." Rev. of *Undertale*. n.d.: n. pag. *The Escapist*. 20 Nov. 2015. Web. 4 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/editorials/reviews/15026-You-Should-Play-Undertale-Our-Review-of-Toby-Fox-s-JRPG-Revival>>.
2. Cobbett, Richard. "Undertale Review." Rev. of *Undertale*. n.d.: n. pag. *PC Gamer*. 28 Sept. 2015. Web. 4 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.pcgamer.com/undertale-review>>.
3. All images taken from the game *Undertale*.