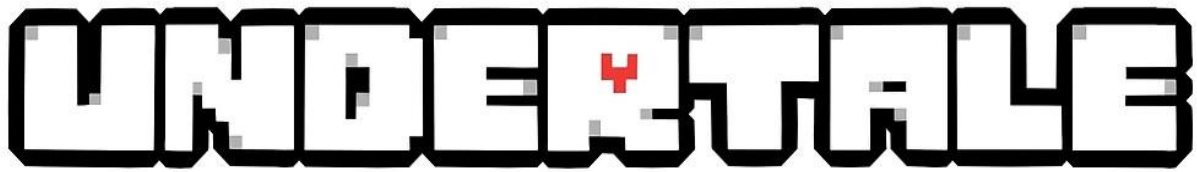


# Game Narrative Review

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

## Overview

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*Undertale* is the story of a human child who falls from the surface, down into the Underground, filled with monsters that were driven away by humans long ago. They must make their way through the realm, making friends and defeating foes along the way. The barrier between the two worlds is thin, and the soul of this human child is the last thing needed to set that plan into motion.

However, there is much more going on under the hood that the player is likely unaware of. There are three main routes the game can take and not only do the player's choices matter, the order in which they make them matters. The three routes are:

- Neutral: The player kills some monsters and not others.
- Pacifist: The player does not kill a single monster.
- Genocide: The player deliberately murders every single monster in the game, not just the ones they're forced to encounter.

Depending on the order in which the player completes these routes will affect their gameplay and interactions for all future playthroughs. Even if that playthrough is abandoned and reset, the game will not only not forget, it will rub acknowledgment in the

player's face in subsequent playthroughs. The game is permanently altered and the gameplay is then unique to each player.

## Characters

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- **Frisk:** An androgynous young human child who serves as *Undertale*'s protagonist and is a silent vessel for the player's actions that does not even receive their true name until the player has completed its true ending. They do not speak and the player is told nothing of their life before the fall. Their strong human soul gives them an ability called Determination, which allows them to save, load, and reset the world.
- **Flowey:** Flowey the Flower is the first monster the player meets in the Underground. While initially seeming friendly, Flowey soon reveals his true philosophy is "Kill or Be Killed". Flowey is the soulless reincarnation of Asriel Dreemurr, the son of Toriel and Asgore, who feels no love or sadness. Flowey likes to taunt the player and uses his ability to remember past play-throughs to haunt them with their murders and mistakes. The player's relationship with Flowey can change depending on the decisions they make and the order they make them.
- **Toriel:** Toriel is the second monster the player meets, a tall, white, anthropomorphic goat who has made it her mission to save all the children who fall to the Underground. She lives in the ruins that surround the main underground, scares off the monsters that try to attack the player, gives them food for health bonuses, and even offers to let the protagonist live there and even offers to prepare a curriculum for them so they can still attend school. When the protagonist asks to leave the ruins so they can find their way home, however, Toriel is immediately dejected and decides she must destroy the door to the ruins. The player can solve this issue one of two ways, sparing her until she gives up and lets them through, or killing her. Before the protagonist arrived, Toriel used to be the queen of the Underground with her husband Asgore, who she lived with at the edge of the barrier between the Surface and the Underground.
- **Sans:** Sans the Skeleton is the first monster the player encounters outside of the ruins. Usually the comedic relief, Sans enjoys breaking the fourth wall regularly, slacking off at his jobs, and hanging out with his brother Papyrus. This exterior hides his deeper personality, which often only comes out in serious situations. Sans watches over the player and judges their actions. He is aware of the player's ability to SAVE and RESET; while unable to recall his memories, he notices the player has reset the game and feels nihilistic towards his existence knowing no matter what he does, it can be undone by someone else. If the player decides to complete a genocide route, Sans is actually the final boss of the game. He reveals the only reason he hadn't killed them prior was because of a promise he made to Toriel. He believes in people's ability to change, and if the player aborts the genocide playthrough, he remarks that the player is doing the right thing.
- **Papyrus:** Papyrus is the brother of Sans and an aspiring royal guard. Despite being tasked to collect any humans and turn them over to Asgore to be murdered,

Papyrus decides to befriend the protagonist and convinces the head of the royal guard, Undyne, to do the same.

- **Asgore:** King of the Underground, Asgore is the father of The First Human and Asriel and ex-husband of Toriel. He seeks out a 7th human soul to break the barrier between the worlds to be able to return to the surface. He has organized the Royal guard to find any human souls. While he's typically a pacifist, he believes that his ends justify the means.
- **Asriel:** Asriel is the biological son of Asgore and Toriel. When the first human fell fatally ill, they requested to be brought back to the surface to see the golden flowers one last time. They fused souls and shared control of Asriel's body, and went to the surface. However, the village that they arrived in assumed Asriel had killed the human on purpose, and attacked and fatally wounded Asriel. Returning to the Underground and turning to ash shortly after, Asriel was later reincarnated as Flowey.
- **Chara:** Chara is unseen and elusive, only discovered by the player at the end of the game. Chara is meant to represent the player of the game itself and their insatiable lust for murder and destruction. Chara was the first human to fall down to the Underground after monsters had been banished there, and Chara was malevolent. They befriended Asriel and became the second child of Asgore and Toriel. When they became fatally ill, their spirit still lingered after their death and was awoken by Frisk/the Protagonist's fall to the Underground. At least that is Chara's in-game origin. As stated previously, Chara is a representation of the player. Chara stares the player in the face at the end of the genocide route and reminds them that they are the real cause of the destruction in this world, not Frisk. The character of Frisk essentially disappears in the genocide route and the corrupted soul of Chara, of the player themselves, is the cause of the genocide.

## Breakdown

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The general mechanics of the game follow a traditional turn-based RPG, where the player wanders through puzzles and has random encounters with small monsters, as well as scripted mini-bosses and major bosses. As stated previously, there are three main ways to complete the game, with some variations depending on the order of completion of certain tasks.

The True Pacifist route is considered the most canonical ending of the game, where Frisk/the player does not kill a single monster and does not gain any EXP or LVs. Every encounter the player has can have a peaceful ending and the player will still receive gold as a reward. That, or they can simply flee the encounter. After traversing through the world and making friends along the way, Frisk is met with Asgore, the King of the monsters with his sights set on revenge. He is insistent on taking their human soul to break the barrier the humans put between the monster and human worlds. However, right as the battle is about to begin, Toriel barrels through and demands the violence stop. Toriel meets the player's new friends and is happy they were able to find joy in the

Underground, in the event they are unable to leave. However, Flowey comes to take over the souls of the player's new friends and transforms into Asriel again. Now with the power of multiple souls, it is even easier for Asriel to take the human's soul, and yet the human still refuses to fight them. Asriel is moved by the human's willingness to save him and decides to fix everything and let everyone go. He releases their souls and the barrier is broken. Frisk wakes up to all their friends standing around them as if it was all a dream. They walk out to the surface and start their new lives together.

The Genocide route is considerably different. To complete a genocide route, the player must murder every single monster in the Underground, not only those they encounter by chance. They must murder hundreds to get this ending, as well as defeat all the extra mini-bosses. As the player does this, they gain a reputation, and the game is realizing what the player's goals are. At the end of the game, when the player encounters Asgore again, he is being warned about the player by Flowey. He isn't even aware the player is human, and before he can finish his sentence, the human has cut him down. Flowey is ripped apart not much later, but only after begging for his life like he was nothing but another level one monster. The player is then face to face with themselves. Technically, it's Chara, the first human, but they call themselves by the name the player gives the protagonist at the start of the game. In this route, Frisk is gone, the soul taken over by bloodlust and evil.

The contrast of these two routes illustrates the narrative differences between the two worlds where the player acted so differently. Deciding to be a murderous, malevolent force, stopping at nothing to kill everything in its path is not blocked from the player, and is sometimes actively encouraged if the player wishes to seek all of the content the developers created. However, there are consequences for those actions, ones that the player is forced to grapple with at the end of the game. They aren't allowed to walk away from their computer without understanding the gravity of the destruction they have caused. Completing a genocide route also means that they are never able to complete a true pacifist route again. The game makes them genuinely consider whether or not they want to permanently alter their game in order to access this route. Typically games don't want to make their players question whether or not they want to play the game, but *Undertale* works because players feel as though their choices genuinely matter to the world they're a part of.

## **Strongest Element**

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*Undertale's* willingness to use its mechanics as in-game lore explanations is a fascinating mix of fourth wall breaking and fourth wall building. The game takes things that the player has to do (saving, loading, gaining EXP, etc.) and gives them in-universe reasons to exist. The twist of Experience becoming "Execution Points" and LV/Levels becoming "Level of Violence" breaks the emersion of the player, and makes them grapple with the damage they've caused. Most RPGs have some kind of leveling system: Kill enemies = get rewarded with a level up and more HP. *Undertale* is unique in that these

mechanics are commented on by the characters and the player feels both more emersed in the game world because now their mechanics have in-game explanations, as well.

## Unsuccessful Element

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*Undertale's* ability to recall flags from past playthroughs means there are unremovable bloodstains that the player cannot get around. No matter what, even if the save was aborted and deleted, the murder of another character can have lasting effects on future gameplay. For example, a player who is used to traditional RPGs may not understand a battle is winnable without a fight and may default to killing Toriel when she refuses to let them out of the ruins. However, upon learning this and restarting, even if the player does not harm Toriel or anyone else for the rest of the run, the game will still taunt the player, Flowey acknowledging their apparent remorse and futile attempt to save her by resetting. The issue with this comes when people are unable to ever complete the game in a specific fashion. Once a player completes a genocide route, they can *never* complete a True Pacifist ending again, meaning they're permanently blocked from accessing specific content. While this is surely intentional, can cause frustration and a possible lack of replayability. Players are essentially punished for getting the most out of the game if they don't happen to do it in the right order.

## Highlight

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There are a few mirrors in the game. There is one in Toriel's house, right at the beginning of the game. When the player walks up to it and engages it, they're given the message: "It's you!", which most players would probably ignore. However, at the end of the game, depending on what run was completed, the player is allowed to see a few new messages from the mirror. If they run back to Toriel's house and look into her mirror again after a True Pacifist Run, they'll be met with "Still just you, Frisk". If they look into Toriel's mirror after a genocide run, the mirror will read "It's you, [Player Name]". These are interesting, but not the highlight. If the player looks into the mirror of the new house, one that is a monochrome copy of the only they started in with Toriel, at the end of a Pacifist run, they're presented with:

"Despite everything, it's still you"



Despite everything that Frisk and the player have been through when they look in the mirror, it's still them. *Undertale* transcends its own story with this line; Frisk is ultimately an extension of the player themselves, and when they look in the mirror, they're faced with exactly who they are. *Undertale* regularly forces the player to be confronted with their actions and face consequences for their choices, and despite all of that, at the end of the day, that is them. That is who they are.

## Critical Reception

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*Undertale* has enjoyed critical acclaim since its release in 2015, spawning a large, dynamic fanbase that's still active. Kallie Plagge with IGN called it 2018's game of the year, rating it a solid 10/10. The music and art, despite being slightly archaic, are heralded as appealingly nostalgic.

It received a 92% on MetaCritic, most of the little criticism there is coming from people frustrated at the lack of diverse gameplay mechanics due to the game's RPG style turn-based combat.

## Lessons

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- **Be Bold:** *Undertale* is unafraid to do things triple-A games may not be allowed to get away with. It shatters the fourth wall and plays with the barriers of what games "should" and "shouldn't" do. This is one of its key elements of success. It wasn't afraid to have openly lesbian characters or depressive themes or to go out of its way to make fun of the player. Players enjoy the style, they enjoy risks, and they like games that don't coddle them.
- **Be Eccentric:** *Undertale* is weird. It's quite proud of that and rewards players for digging into all of its nooks and crannies to find all its references and details. It includes original characters from people who backed the original Kickstarter campaign and it has references to other games and media.
- **Be Emotional:** *Undertale* is a lot more than its wacky exterior. The themes of depression, nihilism, and loss permeate the entire game. Toriel is so wrecked by the loss of her children that she vowed to never allow another child into the underground and is mortified to realize she cannot stop Frisk from continuing. Sans is aware of the player's abilities to erase his memories and feels hopeless to ever attempt to make changes in his life that will mean anything when they could all be reset at the whim of someone else. The game even forces the player to grapple with their choices and asks if they're really happy with the choices they make. Going through the game makes the player bond with the friends they gain along the way, and then if they choose to go through the genocide route after, will taunt them with their decision to make them feel remorse for the deaths of fictional characters.

## Summation

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*Undertale*, though far from underrated, is a wonderfully mystifying indie game, developed by only a few people and loved by millions. It takes Concepts that other games play with like self-aware storytelling and 4th wall breaking meta and mechanics and streamlines them into a wonderfully nostalgic RPG package with great replayability. No two people play the game exactly alike and they have a completely different experience their first time playing the game and their last time playing the game. *Undertale* really challenges the players with their decision-making and lets them feel the consequences of their actions. It has an upbeat, humorous exterior and an emotional underbelly it isn't afraid to expose. Players are able to form deep connections to the game and its world, and *Undertale* embraces them.