

Undertale Review

Mike M. November 29, 2015

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“*Seeing the hope and happiness that undertale has brought to people... it fills me with determination.*” — Toby Fox”

Undertale is a game that's very difficult to convince people to play, which is a huge shame because it's probably one of the most affecting games produced in the last 10 years.

The kind of language that's often used to describe these indie games applies here; charming, witty, engrossing and will genuinely surprise you in a knowing yet unpretentious manner. The problem is those words get bandied around so much that there's probably little point in saying any of this. Most of us have played plenty of games that were described like that, and even if they were brilliant (Braid, Fez, Papers Please, Gone Home, To the Moon, Thomas Was Alone etc) it's difficult to shake a level of cynicism and weariness at the fact so many games seem -at first glance- so similar in tone. All I can say is that Undertale is genuinely different in a way that has to be experienced to really understand.

This game has an enormous fanbase with forums full of speculation as to the real meaning and identity of the main characters. Part of the reason for that is how endearing and genuine the game and it's characters are. A first playthrough of the game is probably around 5 hrs, and a second playthrough may weigh-in at a similar length, however after the credits roll, players are left wanting more, wanting to keep consuming it like any other media. The fact that the game has one of the best soundtracks in video-

game history helps alleviate that anxiety and desire for more, but I hope the game doesn't end up getting any direct sequels/prequels because I think it's short&sweet presentation is part of the charm.

Seriously, just go and play it.

This is your last chance to play it, I'm about to dive into spoilerific detail about the game mechanics, how the story is implemented through them and the whole time I'm going to assume that you've played the game to completion at least once. This is the kind of game where you really want to go and experience this stuff first-hand. Don't say you weren't warned.



I.

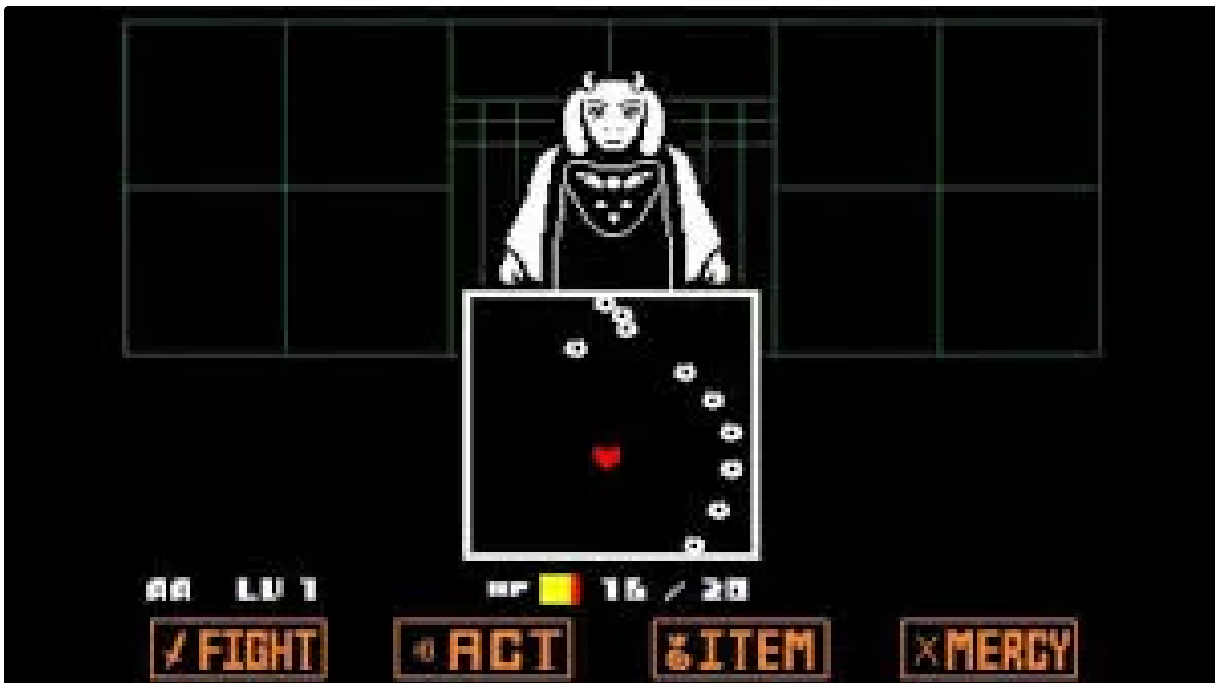
I'm going to come out and say it: very few of the games mechanics or concepts are actually new or innovative. Undertale is ostensibly a JRPG style game in the vein of things like 'Mother' or the early 'Final Fantasy' games. The player roams the 'overworld' and is pulled into random encounters. The battle system is a fusion of turn-based actions and has a 'bullet-hell' minigame for dodging attacks. Obviously neither are new with similar mechanics appearing in other JRPGs. The game's 'main' mechanic (as referenced in the game trailer and game subtitle "the RPG where nobody has to die"), is not entirely unique either. The player is able to show 'mercy' and spare enemies lives by convincing them not to fight or by taking them out non-lethally. Again, in and of itself, not a new gameplay concept.

What Undertale does really well is implement all of these in a really neat and sensible way. None of the elements by themselves are mind-blowing, but the way they knit together to form a cohesive whole is incredibly well done. It sometimes feels like a lot of high-concept indie games forget that games are not films or books, and they work best when they don't pretend to be. Undertale is intriguing and engrossing

to play because everything it does is well executed and enjoyable to play, and after a short time can be taken for granted by the player, while still having a lot of depth so that it never feels repetitive.

In a lot of ways, the fact that the game will feel immediately familiar to anybody who's played games in the last 30 years is all part of what it's trying to achieve. The game explains to you the basic premise, and then leaves you to carry on at your own will. The game expects you to play along with its JRPG trappings is exactly the same way that 'Mother' did years before (In fact, it comes as no surprise to those in the know that the games developer Toby Fox is an Earthbound fan and his early game-dev outings were hacks of Earthbound ROMs), and then dedicates most of its time to referencing and to some extent deconstructing the kind of expectations that a typical RPG player might have.

Having said that, Undertale can be quite difficult. Never incredibly hard, but the game can be frustrating; without having played 'bullet-hell' games before, some players may well struggle with some encounters. In the very least, new players are certainly not expected to achieve the true pacifist ending on a first playthrough, and the difficulty must have been intended to play a part in that. There is a very generous save-system that constantly encourages the player, and even the game-over screens do their best to allay some of the frustration that the game can sometimes cause, with several instances making affordances for retries (skippable boss dialogue on the subsequent attempts after dying is a good example). Failures, mistakes and game-overs are very much expected, but perhaps the difficulty curve is slightly skewed towards people who already have some experience with games. That's not a bad thing in and of itself (and I'm not criticising the game for not letting me sail through without dying), but it's a shame that the game is a little inaccessible on that front.



II.

However, with death and difficulty, Undertale is actually doing something incredibly clever in its world-building. Once you get really deep into the game, there is a lot of very intelligent stuff going on with the save/reload system and its implication for the game world, but for most first-time players this will likely be missed and simply be chalked up to the fact that the game is attempting to fit in with the JRPG genre that it borrows so many other elements from. One of these very clever things is always saving player actions, even if a player tries to affect a different outcome through 'save-scumming' or restarting the game. A notable example is found shortly after the game's introduction where some players may be tempted to restart and try again, only to be confronted with the game reminding them of what they did before.

Upon playing through what fans have termed 'the genocide route' (kill everything you ever meet), you are confronted by a character who explains to you that your ability to save and reload isn't just a game-quirk, it's actually resetting their world. Upon completion of the 'true pacifist route' which fans consider to be the 'best' ending; loading up the game will actually confront you with a message telling the player to go and do something else rather than reset the game-world which would effectively reset all the characters' happiness for your own selfish indulgence.



That's already interesting enough, but Undertale makes use of its platform (PC and Mac) in a really interesting way; Even if you uninstall the game, Undertale leaves files hidden on your computer that track a history of everything you did whilst playing. The game **always remembers**, even after you've moved on. While you can root through the system files and remove this data from your computer, it was clearly the developer's intention that you never be able to fully avail yourself of the consequences and responsibility for your actions without clearly being aware of what it is you are doing. For example, if the player chooses the name 'Chara' after a character slightly hidden in the lore, then the game remarks that it's a fantastic name and forbids you from **ever** changing it; you knew what you were doing choosing that name and now you've forever tarnished the game-world with its presence. Playing the 'genocide route' to completion goes so far as permanently locking the 'true pacifist' ending to the game.

There's a whole long boring discussion about whether the hidden-file business constitutes a fairly egregious violation of private space that is actually kind of irrelevant, as once again, other games have done this kind of thing before, albeit not perhaps for the same reasons. What's really interesting is that Undertale is able to do this kind of thing precisely because of the platform it's on.

III.

At the conclusion of the game on a first playthrough, players are confronted by Flowey, a malevolent being who steals the souls of the deceased humans who preceded Frisk (the game's protagonist) and uses them to become godlike and take control of the world. At this point, Flowey mocks you for your failure and shortcomings and the game crashes.

Loading the game confronts the player with a corrupted version of the intro-scene and the main menu shows the current save-file as belonging to Flowey, who is Lv 9999 and that the location he last saved at is “MY WORLD”. Selecting either ‘continue’ or ‘reset’ prompts some mocking from Flowey, at which point he ‘deletes’ your progress file (which actually does happen) and forces you to battle him, reminding you that because he can save and reload, he can just torture you for eternity. Each time he defeats you, the game will ‘crash’ again and boot you back to the desktop.

When first playing Undertale, you may feel like the game is essentially a program that you now ‘own’ by virtue of having paid money for it. Kicking you out of the game and actually locking you out of playing it properly until you complete the final scene is an incredibly bold move, but also one that just wouldn’t work on consoles. For starters, can you even imagine having the conversation, trying to pitch the idea of ‘crashing’ the game and installing irremovable files onto the hard drive of a console? It’s already surprising enough that PC gamers are willing to accept that, but console gamers would likely appreciate it far less. Secondly, the feeling of being booted back to your desktop... we’ve all been there right? That sudden dread of data-loss, the immediate feeling of anger directed at your PC for being such a worthless piece of shit and the disbelief that the game could have actually done that to you right at such an emotional climax... these feelings just wouldn’t work on a console.

But even more than that, the feeling of invasion that comes with having a game forcefully evict you, and that sudden feeling of alienation from your own computer and the stark clinical feel of your desktop compared to the game-world... these are predicated on the platform, and I simply can’t see how it could be pulled off on a console. Undertale feels like a genuine world in itself -the game app a portal into that fantasy- chiefly because of the fantastic writing and design of everything, but that moment when Flowey pushes you out of the fantasy really establishes that feeling of a world independent of the player far more effectively than explicitly stating the idea.

It’s no coincidence that Flowey is a flower; Undertale really gets it’s roots into your computer and into your life.



For this reason and the reasons mentioned above, Undertale is an amazing success story in terms of utilising the platform, akin to the successes of Super Mario 64, Metal Gear Solid and Demon's Souls. PC gaming should be more about this kind of incredibly clever usage of the framing afforded by the platform rather than the 60fps, 1080p, mouse&keyboard, master-race bullshit that has dominated mainstream discussion of the PC as a games platform.

IV.

Undertale never explicitly punishes you for being a killer, even though one of its main theses is that violence is borne out of ignorance. You chose to fight because you didn't know any better. You chose to fight because you didn't understand. You chose to fight because you couldn't think of a better way. Time and again, you realise afterwards that there was always going to have been another way. If you'd just tried harder to understand, made more of an effort to care... you could have done better. The game is a gentle yet firm reminder that violence and killing are products of ignorance, weakness and misunderstanding. It also wants you to consider that your actions have consequences, and that even if you try to make everybody else forget, you can't change the past, and what you once were.

I'd heard hearsay that playing the genocide run provides some unique story content although was wary of the content-locking. Still in a fairly game-y mood, I decided to install the game on a old laptop and play the genocide run for myself. In so doing, I imagined that my genocide run would be 'consequence free', essentially a chance for me to explore the game more thoroughly whilst completely evading any feelings of guilt. However, I had played right into one of the game's central conceits.

There's no such thing as 'consequence-free'. Even though my 'main' save-file would be unaffected by my actions, Undertale made it clear that what I was doing could only be construed as selfish cruelty for my own indulgence. It's something of a trope that in games with save systems, there's always scope to abuse that reality-bending power. Just before turning the game off, we decide to see how many NPCs we can hit with a single fireball, or whether we can kill the entire town with just a pistol because we know that those events aren't canonical... they won't follow us.

"That's not *really* who I am..."

"It's just a *game*..."

Undertale allows you this save/reload power, but never lets you forget that it knows what you did. Lots of games have branching decision-trees filled with consequences... most of Undertale's events don't have to have explicit consequences if you don't want them to, but that doesn't exonerate you of the responsibility for having made that decision once. The game asks you to confront who you really are in this way, and by my decision to play the game on another computer, I was essentially allowing the game to tell me that the only thing preventing my curiosity from going to dark places is the notion of consequence, and without that...

V.

Undertale is hugely intelligent and charming game that perhaps makes one of the strongest cases for non-violence ever seen in any medium ever without every being preachy or pretentious, and if you have read through this without having played it then you're a terrible person.



ONE CRITICISM: The only real criticism of the game is incredibly petty: the handling of the confrontation with Asgore. Before even meeting Asgore, the player is walked along a very linear path and given a great deal of plot exposition. This sequence is genuinely touching and I personally was welling up whilst the history of the underground was laid-out and the hopes and dreams of the monsters made clear. Meeting Asgore and walking to the final battle is an incredibly emotional sequence... that can be totally ruined by backtracking through this area.

If you are finding it difficult to defeat Asgore, you might need to buy some healing items, unfortunately, the nearest item shop is about 5 minutes of walking through silent areas just to meet the fed-up fast-food salesperson or the two hipster girls selling things they found in the bins. Listening to how those girls are “like, so hyped for the destruction of humanity lol” is funny, but that moment shouldn’t be allowed to intrude on how tender and meaningful the final encounter is meant to be. I know not everybody experiences that, but considering the game is so well thought out in other areas, it surprised me that the game doesn’t handle that particular circumstance very well. In fact, Undertale doesn’t handle backtracking well at all, despite the fact that numerous story-arcs all but require it. I’m not really sure how this could have been done differently, but mechanically it’s where the game is weakest. Traversal of the game-world isn’t all that engaging, and certain circumstances might necessitate it.

On my second playthrough I experienced this and found that it totally wound-down the pacing of several scenes. It's nice that the developer considered that people might want to explore the rest of the game before entering the final encounter and has placed 'transport' areas that can be used to bypass lengthy walks (albeit with needlessly time-consuming animations), but I can't shake the feeling that the ending sequence definitely could have been handled better in order to maintain the emotional tension rather than give you the option to turn back seconds before the fight begins. Perhaps a warning before the players begins the long exposition-sequence or the option to warp back to a store/hub more easily rather than asking the player to walk through the empty areas...whatever the solution might be, I feel that this part has an potentially crippling effect on the emotional pacing of the final moments. It's such a shame, because for a game that is so close to being perfect in almost everything else it tries, it drops the ball slightly at the very last moment at unfortunately what is meant to be the emotional payoff of the story (at least for most players).

