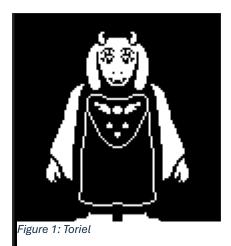Chris Anzilotti

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Dr. Bertozzi

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<u>Undertale</u>

 Undertale, created by indie developer Toby Fox, is an atypical addition to the RPG genre of video games. While *Undertale* utilizes typical RPG elements such as turn-based combat, a main story/quest, and a level-up system, the game employs a unique spin on each component. The narrative of *Undertale* focuses a lot on choice and the consequences of our actions; turn-based combat allows players to fight or spare the enemies they face worldwide. Even the level-up system denoted as LV is called level of violence to indicate how many people you hurt. This analysis will consider how Undertale positions empathy as the core gameplay mechanic, allowing players to go against traditional RPG norms by giving the option to engage in non-violent options and reinforcing the importance of moral decision-making through its narrative and feedback system.

Figure 1: Toriel

 The game starts with a child falling down a hole into a world of monsters, where they meet Toriel. As seen in Figure 1, Toriel is a female goat-human hybrid, and throughout the story, the players notice a motherly feel to her (Christie, 2025). Furthermore, Skay notes this character continues to convey a motherly feel with her guidance through the starting area (2021).

Toriel's mannerisms in the game along with her design allow the creators to describe a motherly feel to the players and invoke their empathy of a warm and caring character. Riswarie and Damajanti found that people have an increase in the capacity of empathy during the appreciation process of art (2020). Through this study, it can be concluded that the artistic choices for the character Toriel will allow the creator to appeal to the player's empathy and give them the sense of a warm and caring personality. The narrative enforces moral decision-making when the player is forced into a battle against Toriel. This is a pivotal moment, as the player's choice of whether to spare or kill Toriel determines the story's trajectory. Unlike traditional RPGs, which reward combat and level up, *Undertale* critiques these conventions by framing violence as unnecessary. Players who choose to harm Toriel may feel regret, as her death is presented as a tragic and avoidable loss. This design decision reinforces the theme of empathy, pushing players to consider the moral weight of their actions. Figure 2 exemplifies this as we can see the character Toriel has a pained expression when you choose to kill her, additionally prompting the dialogue "Y… you… really hate me that much?" This design choice makes players feel the moral weight of their actions.

Figure 2: Fight Against Toriel

During combat when the player gets into a fight the player transforms into a small red heart inside of a white box as seen in Figure 3. Seraphine notes how when you encounter an enemy the game

has a white frame surrounding the "soul" of the main character and that the symbolic sprite is used for every action the player takes reflecting their soul (2018). This design choice reflects the player and exemplifies every action they take and makes the player feel that the choices they make are theirs and theirs alone. This further illustrates the feeling of empathy the game is trying to induce especially since the combat schema is paired with whimsy enemy designs that often don't look menacing.

Figure 3: Battle System

The combat system in *Undertale* is a key element in its exploration of empathy and moral decision-making. In normal RPG often players want to fight enemies to level up as enemies throughout the game get stronger and do more damage to the player. However, in *Undertale* players are given the option to resolve conflicts peacefully by interacting with enemies. Seraphine notes that the symbolic sprite of the heart and the factums that allow the player to interpret the opponent's behavior emphasize the importance of choosing the right action (2018). Usually, these interactions involve observing the enemy's behavior and responding based on them. For example, often in the game, you can complement the enemy allowing the player to de-escalate the fight allowing the player to always run away afterward. Although running away does not net the player with experience points LV. However, LV in the game does not translate to a level-up system but rather

a "level of violence", a special dialogue with one of the characters Sans reveals this information. Furthermore, the character Sans states that the higher a person's LV is the more capable they are to harm others. This mechanic reinforces the idea of empathy and how players need to keep in mind what actions they are choosing since in the world of *Undertale* being a "hero" in a normal RPG, is a villain to them.

Undertale's feedback system plays a crucial role in reinforcing its moral themes. The game is constantly keeping track of the player's choices right from the beginning of the game. Depending on the player's choices the game offers different "routes" the game would then follow. For instance, if the player constantly chooses the pacifist routes they can then receive the "True Pacifist" ending, which rewards them with a heartwarming conclusion. Conversely, players who choose violence go down the "Genocide" route, which forces players to feel the consequences of their actions. Especially the genocide route as it starts with the death of Toriel, and continues on with the player killing anything in their path increasing their LV. Often this route has special dialogue where characters are either disappointed, sad, or angry at the player for their choice. Some bosses are even changed, for example, Undyne who normally is a generic king's guard member gains a second phase in the fight transforming the character into a hero against the player a villain. Then many story elements get changed since the rumors spread of a killer in the underground killing the monsters making them go into hiding as many towns get abandoned. On the other end, in the pacifist routes these towns are filled with life and characters that will gladly speak to the protagonist. These narrative choices show how the player's actions affect the characters and that they will react differently depending on them. Next, the game's feedback system extends beyond the immediate consequences since some characters can remember the player's choices in subsequent playthroughs. This feature highlights the solidity of moral decisions, even in fiction.

By reminding players of their past actions, *Undertale* blurs the line between real-world ethical considerations and in-game morality. Replayability also encourages players to explore multiple narrative paths, further immersing the player in the game's moral framework. Going through the different paths allow players to gain a deeper understanding of the characters and the consequences of their actions on these characters and further solidifies their message of empathy.

      Undertale stands out in the RPG genre for its innovative storytelling and use of moral decision-making as a core gameplay mechanic. It subverts traditional RPG norms to allow the players to truly feel the consequences of their actions. Through its narrative, artistic choices, and feedback systems, *Undertale* encourages players to engage in the world and the characters giving a deep understanding of them. Ultimately, this game is not just about defeating enemies and leveling up, but rather, a game about the importance of empathy and making choices that align with one's moral values.

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