MERCY or FIGHT: Violence and Morality in *Undertale*

During the fight against King Asgore, what the player assumes is the final boss of the hit

indie game *Undertale*, the normal battle arena takes form. At the bottom, there are four

options—among them, FIGHT and MERCY. Asgore gives the player a sad smile and says,

"Human... It was nice to meet you. Goodbye." From beneath his cloak, a trident appears and in a

heartbreaking moment, he destroys the option for MERCY. The player must fight. For many

players, this is the ending they receive at the end of their first playthrough. For those that take the

True Pacifist route, this is the first time they FIGHT in the game. Those in the Genocide Route

never see this option. Instead, Asgore tells the player that "there's no need to fight" as the *player*

character initiates the battle—before he can finish, the player character kills him in a single

blow. These two options represent the dichotomy of the morality system within *Undertale*. The

morality system in *Undertale* uses the consequences of violence to push forward the narrative

and the metanarrative around the game. From how characters interact with the player, to the

different endings, to the way the game remembers your choices is all indicative of *Undertale*'s

message about the consequences of actions and the cycle of violence.

Before talking more about *Undertale*, it is important to discuss morality systems in video

games and how it can affect (or not affect) a player. According to Heron and Bedford, "Choices

in these systems are often somewhat cartoonish, offering only the choice between playing the

saint and acting the devil." They continue with, "As a result these systems are often extremely

shallow, offering few genuine opportunities for real moral reflection" (2-3). This argues that the

violence in the video games does not offer a reasonable moral dilemma for the player because it

is considered outside the realm of reality. While it does not offer significant moral reflection in

the long run, it still seems to elicit emotions from the player. Further looking at moral systems, in a study conducted by Amanda Lange regarding moral choices in video games,

> 63 percent said that their first playthrough was the good one, 27 percent said they play on a choice-by-choice basis, and only 9 percent chose evil for their first playthrough. 49 percent of those who played the game more than once said that the evil playthrough corresponded to their second playthrough. (6)

This is used to reason that most characters choose to be good when presented with a moral option in video games. In *Undertale,* most players will end up with either a Neutral or True Pacifist ending their first time, which falls in line with this study.

Undertale was released in 2015 and was nominated for many awards. The game follows a young human who falls down into the "Underground" a mysterious world where monsters lay trapped. Their king, King Asgore, is collecting human SOULs to break the barrier that separates them from the surface. The player character is the last human SOUL the monsters need to escape. As the player travels through the Underground, making friends or choosing to kill, the player is haunted by the story of Prince Asriel and his human companion, both of whom supposedly died after trying to go to the surface. It is revealed that the human was actually the reason they tried to go to the surface. They were left a shell of themselves afterwards, a cruel ghost who still haunts the underground. The human is later learned to be named Chara—the "True Name" as the game puts it. Should the player choose to be a pacifist, the monsters are released from the Underground. If the player chooses to be evil, the monsters are wiped out by the player character until the game is reset(Fox).

During its release, it was marketed as "the Friendly RPG where nobody has to die" ("UNDERTALE Release Trailer"). Instead of a normal turn-based battle system, *Undertale*

implements a system where the player character's SOUL—a small red heart—is controllable during enemy attacks. The player can move the heart around to avoid damage. During the player's turn, they can either FIGHT, in which they attack with a number of strange weapons like ballet shoes, or they can choose the ACT option which offers a number of non-violent options for the player to do. When the right combination of actions have been chosen, the player can SPARE the enemy (Fox). Because of this dynamic, there are three main endings for the game—Genocide, True Pacifist and Neutral (or No Mercy)—with small differences between each depending on smaller choices the player makes throughout the journey. For this paper, there will be a focus only on the Genocide and True Pacifist endings. The morality system in *Undertale* "underscores the rhetoric of what is easy (violence) versus what is difficult (caring). Playing as a pacifist is harder than playing as a murderer" (Ruberg). And this is seen in how most of the bosses in the Genocide run do not fight you, whereas you must talk them down in a True Pacifist Run all while they are trying to kill you.

While looking at *Undertale'*s moral system through the lens of Heron and Bedford, the question of the moral choices being too shallow is an interesting one. While the choices in the game do ultimately boil down to being a saint or being a devil, there are nuances in the game that differ from described. In his review of *Undertale,* Jake Krajewski shares his experience playing the game. He starts off the article with, "'I know what you did.' Those are the first words that greet you if you kill the first boss of [*Undertale*], then reset your save file and spare them instead" (Krajewski). What he is referring to is if the player character decides to kill the tutorial boss Toriel, who acts as a surrogate mother to the player as they try to find their way home. Unlike all other encounters up to that point, the player cannot talk Toriel down; she must go through her entire dialogue before the battle can end (Fox). For many players, this can lead to

them killing her because they do not think that MERCY is an option. When players reset their mistake and spare her, they are met with a recurring antagonist named Flowey who snidely remarks the above line—"I know what you did." He further states, "You murdered her. And then you went back because you regretted it" (Fox). For *Undertale,* the players actions have consequences.

But a character calling out the player for their actions and violence does not necessarily constitute creating a moral system in which there is moral reflection. However, the deeper implications is that the game *remembers* the player's violence. Once a player completes True Genocide run, they give their soul over to Chara, the first human who fell into the *Underground.* Due to this, if a True Pacifist ending is played again, it will be revealed that Chara still possesses the player character and implies that the monsters are still in danger (Fox). Even if the player does not save, even after they start a new run, the game remembers their choices. By remembering the choices a player makes, it deepens the moral challenges of the story. Suddenly the bad choice does not disappear when the player chooses to restart. Like in real life, the choice follows them. In a True Pacifist run after a Genocide run, the good ending is not good. The player chose to be evil previously, and that is not something that can be forgotten. J. Cameron Moore states, "when evil choices lead to the good ending in exactly the same manner that good choices do, evil is not distinguishable from good in any traditional sense" (75). This complicates the morality system and makes it deeper than Heron and Bedford think of other games.

Heron and Bedford also said of most morality systems, "As far as our ability to texture our choices goes, we are also left with few genuine opportunities within a game to explain ourselves." And while *Undertale* does not provide the player with the ability to explain their actions, it does explain their actions for them. In the final battle of the Genocide run, Sans, a

friend the player could have made in the True Pacifist route, states, "Yeah, you're the type or person who won't EVER be happy. You'll keep consuming timelines over and over… No matter what, you'll just keep going. Not out of any desire for good or evil. . . But just because you think you can. And because you 'can'... You 'have to'" (Fox) *Undertale* posits that there is no explanation for the actions the player chooses. Once they finish the pacifist option, the "nice" option, they will move on to be evil to experience all the content the game has. The players chose to be good and chose to be evil not because that is what the game wants.

This mirrors Lange's finding about moral choices in games. As stated above, 63% choose to be good on their first run through of a game. After that, 49% said that they chose to be evil on their second run (Lange 6). The player is never happy. They seek each ending because "moral decisions in video games are more about locking and unlocking content paths than they are about presenting the player with complex, nuanced scenarios to contemplate" (Heron 2). While this dialogue of the game points to supporting this, *Undertale* complicates the morality system by also choosing to make the Genocide route painful for those who experienced the True Pacifist route. Most players will play either a Neutral or a True Pacifist run first because it is incredibly hard for a player to lock themselves into a Genocide run. In order to do that, the player must voluntarily stay in each area until no more random encounters happen, killing each monster they encounter (Fox). Because it is so hard to figure out how to start a Genocide run (which also makes a statement about the intentionality behind the violence), the players must first play through the game making friends with everyone. They do side quests where they go on dates with characters. They watch them talk about their hopes and dreams. And then the game asks you to rip that all away by killing every single one of them if the player wants to do a Genocide

run. While it unlocks new content, it is locked behind the death of friends, and that is a complex, nuanced scenario to contemplate.

It is almost impossible to figure out how to do a Genocide run without looking it up. Trying to get the ending "have encouraged the player community to discuss attitudes towards violence both in games and in real life" (Mawhorter). By encouraging players to talk to one another, it fosters a conversation about the morality and violence found in the game. This conversation can lead to a deep look at player choices and how it affects the game. The player can choose to be violent, but characters in the game then mistake the player for a monster. The player has to kill the friends they made in previous runs. The conversations started have made the players question how they perceive violence in real life—it does not encourage them to act violently. It encourages the opposite: a critical look at how violence affects the player (which will be discussed more in depth later in the paper). All of these are examined in the community as it is needed to really even find out about the second main ending.

Considering Genocide is one of the main three endings, it is no wonder that a review expressed how "every aspect of the Genocide Route is tailored to a gaming mindset… There is no way to cleanse oneself of the Genocide Route's consequences. It puts perspective on the way we play video games and enacts harsh, unavoidable punishment on violent players" (Krajewski). This contradicts the mindset that, as a participant in Lange's study states, "It's a game... not reality. The decision I take [sic] in the game have no impact on my life" (9). There are mentions in the Undertale subreddit about the game where people have no interest in ever completing a Genocide route ("r/Undertale"). As a personal anecdote, I never played the Genocide rought because it felt wrong to kill the friends that I made made. Land states, "56 percent of responders said they never had a situation where they refused to commit an act in a game. Many participants

were adamant that evil acts remain in games" (9). However, it is powerful that despite the act of violence staying in the game, players refuse to play an entire route because the moral compass the game creates.

So now the cycle of violence. In regards to violence in video games, PBS Idea Channel defines violence as "the potentially aggressive removal of an actor's choice in a situation." They then go on to define two separate types of violence in video games, narrative and structural violence. Narrative violence is "harm caused to some set of on screen pixels" and structural violence is "the set of walls and borders keeping you on rails… Not being able to get through a game without killing or maiming someone if you would prefer not to" ("Is Undertale"). As stated several times, *Undertale* allows the player to play the game completely pacifically. This removes the structural violence and leaves the choice of narrative violence to the players. However, there are consequences for the removal of the narrative violence—the game becomes harder. The player gains no EXP or LVs for completing battles without violence (Fox). This means that they never gain more hit points to better survive attacks. While you can complete it nonviolently, "Pacifism does let players resolve encounters peacefully, but it doesn't provide an easy, conflict-free way through the game. In fact, in some ways, playing as a pacifist in *Undertale increases* the difficulty of the game" (Dungan). *Undertale* posits that pacifism is the difficult option. Caring is difficult.

PBS Idea Channel argues that in most video games, "Player is hero. Opponents are other. Defeat the other. Narrative violence set within structural violence" ("Is Undertale"). This structure in video games is constantly challenged in *Undertale* as it takes great strides to humanize the monsters you fight. The game de-others the others within the game. In the game, the player has the option to go on "dates" with several of the characters, which really just act as

ways to become better friends with them (Fox). By having narrative violence not be the only option, *Undertale* allows for the player to get closer to NPCs (or non-playable characters) and humanize them. This makes violence incredibly hard as it brings the "other" closer to the player and makes them realize that they are people as well. The game makes it *hard* to kill them but also shows that it is the tougher option in a video game. A reviewer stated:

> You see, the game characterizes random enemy encounters not as mindless beasts, but as people who have hopes, dreams, and families, just like you…Yes, it is easier to simply kill your opponents than to reason with them, but that's because the game is making a statement. Violence IS easy! Hurting people is easy. Caring about people…is what's difficult (Ruberg).

The game, through the humanizing of the NPCs and use of SAVE within the narrative, makes a statement about cyclical violence.

As stated above, by completing a True Pacifist run, the player does not gain any EXP or LVs. When the player approaches Asgore for the final fight in either run, they are faced with Sans. He then looks at the player's EXP and LVs—which he explains is short for LOVE. He then flips the traditional RPG script by telling the player that EXP stands for Execution Points and LV (LOVE) is short for Level of Violence (Fox). These totally normal RPG facets—experience points and levels—are then shown to be what they really are: badges of the violence the player committed. Fox intentionally takes what players do in every other RPG and makes them contemplate what violence they are committing against those characters. Sans states, "The more you kill, the easier it becomes to distance yourself. The more you distance yourself, the less you will hurt. The more easily you can bring yourself to hurt others" (Fox). Sans describes the cycle in which most players fall into (and the possible dangers of real life

violence): Kill the enemy, realize that it is easy and that they gain benefits, then continue to kill enemies as it becomes easier and you gain more powerful weapons and tools.

Now, *Undertale* is not suggesting that by committing acts of violence within the game itself makes it easier to commit violence in real life. Instead, "*Undertale* doesn't just portray the difficulties that come along with pacifism, it tells players the emotional dangers of relying on violence" (Dungan). Instead of promoting violence, it promotes peace and the *dangers* of violence. Not only that, but *Undertale* draws clear lines between power as a player and power as a real person. Players act as a sort of God within the game, as evident by their power to SAVE and change the timelines. The power they hold is outside the realm of reality. It would seem, instead, that *Undertale* is examining the nature of power and how it complicates the idea of pacifism. The player has the power to do whatever they want within the game. They can play the pacifist, or they can go on a rampage and kill everyone—simply because, as Sans states, they can and that means they have to.

No, *Undertale* does not suggest that the fate of the monsters can translate to real life violence, but it does translate to real pacifism. When not killing everyone, the player still holds the power to SAVE, but it is not used to continue to come back and try to kill an enemy that bested them, it is used to come back and try to be their friend. It allows for players to work on problem solving—working to figure out the correct solution for each monster to become friends with them, despite them attacking them each turn. Because of this,"*Undertale* allows players to experiment with a more realistic version of pacifism. People who adhere to pacifism face real problems… they constantly have to make the choice to remain nonviolent in the face of violent confrontation." *Undertale* does not try to teach people violence, "it tells players the emotional dangers of relying on violence" (Dungan), and uses that to instead seek to teach people how the

cyclical nature of violence and to teach people about pacifism. Violence makes the game easier, but it forever taints the experience and, well, the player loses the connection to the characters and game that is gained from talking to them and making friends.

This concept comes to a head during the end of a Genocide run. It was previously stated that once a Genocide run is completed, a True Pacifist run can never be the same. What was not stated is that when Chara (who is referred to with they/them pronouns in game) comes to make the deal with the player—comes to barter for the player character's SOUL—they shut down the game. The game crashes. When rebooted, all that is left is a black screen. Then Chara speaks:

> Now we have reached the absolute. There is nothing left for us here. Let us erase this pointless world, and move on to the next. Interesting. You want to go back. You want to go back to the world you destroyed. It was you who pushed everything to its edge. It was you who led the world to its destruction. But you cannot accept it. You think you are above consequence… Perhaps [we] can reach a compromise. You still have something I want. Give it to me. And I will bring this world back (Fox).

If the player agrees to this deal, Chara takes the player's SOUL. If the player refuses, Chara states, "Then stay here for all eternity" (Fox). The game is then thrown into an unplayable state, with the only option to continue being the player handing over their SOUL. Again, Chara reiterates the common thought that players are above consequences in the game—and while they technically are, there are emotional consequences as the player is forced to give up ever having a happy ending in the game again.

By having this ending, *Undertale* makes the argument that violence alters and taints everything it touches until there is nothing left except to "move on to the next." The next game. The next ending. The next cycle in which the player is hero, opponents are other. One article

articulates the questions *Undertale* asks of the player: "Can you forgive someone who's done nothing to deserve it?" And "Can you forgive someone who doesn't feel remorse for what they've done" ("Shades of Mercy")? While these questions are ultimately about Flowey and Chara, they are also directed at the player. The player committed Genocide against a race that, most likely, they befriended in a previous run, all because they could. Most players do not feel remorse because they actively sought out the Genocide route. Why would the player deserve to play a True Pacifist run, when in the end, they are not pacifists. They have proven to the game that they are capable of great evil and do not feel remorse—they only want to continue playing for more content. The game gives every character the option for MERCY except for Chara and the player themselves.

Does the player deserve MERCY? In a game where "no one is beneath mercy, and there is no action that removes someone from the consideration of receiving mercy" ("Shades of Mercy"), does the player deserve that same courtesy? It would seem that the game does not give a firm answer. It leaves it up to the player and what they choose to do with the game experience. One analysis is that the "only thing that makes you unforgivable, is how you feel about your own actions" ("Shades of Mercy"). While *Undertale* makes clear divisions between the violence in the game and violence in real life, it does make the player question their actions as a result of their violence. In turn, this could then make the player question their own actions outside of the game. Will the player just move on to more violent games once this one is finished? *Undertale* does not encourage violence with the Genocide run so much as it encourages critical thought about the consequences of violence on oneself and those around them. By enacting violence on the characters of *Undertale*, the player moves further and further in the realm of not deserving

MERCY. And that is all thrown back at them when they are confronted by Chara and told exactly what they did—they destroyed the world.

Does the player deserve MERCY for "harm caused to some set of on screen pixels" ("Is Undertale"). For the narrative violence that they would not think twice about in other games? And that is where *Undertale*'s thesis—that only those that feel no remorse are undeserving of MERCY—takes hold. The player does not deserve MERCY should they play *Undertale* the way they play any other game. There is no remorse for the death of those NPCs. *Undertale* seeks to create the understanding that violence, even within a video game, is deserving of thought and mourning. Players form connections to the characters on screen and their death should not just be "harm caused to some set of on screen pixels." Violence should be considered violence even on screen and therefore worthy of moral contemplation.

Undertale works to create a rich world where one can explore and make friends, but also destroy and conquer. While the two different play styles clash, they offer a complete picture of *Undertale* thoughts on morality and violence both in video games and in real life. While the game in no way promotes real life violence, it promotes a deeper look at violence and pacifism. Ultimately, the way in which *Undertale* is constructed—from character interactions, the different endings, and the game remembering choices—lends itself to a message about violence and the consequences of actions, whether that be forgiveness or otherwise.

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