

TIME **EXTEND**

# Undertale

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Violence, pacifism and consequences: a decade later, how does Toby Fox's smash RPG hold up?

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Developer/publisher Toby Fox Format PC Release 2015

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**B**e it the pummelling of soft, fleshy faces or the crushing of bones and sinew, games are often marked by a startling degree of violence, led by military shooters and the action-adventure genre in particular. Causing violence of some kind is one of the de facto 'base' interactions in videogames, something that feels as fundamental as jumping, collecting items or using the main menu.

But not in *Undertale*. When it was released in 2015, the RPG's explicit message of pacifism may have felt, at least at first, anomalous amid gaming's routine brutality. Described by its creator, Toby Fox, as the "RPG where you don't have to destroy anyone", rather than simply killing them, *Undertale* allows you to spare the monsters that you meet in combat. The game plays upon the long-established conventions of the genre: though you can use attacks to whittle an enemy's HP down to zero, via an almost identical mechanism you can also speak with them, build an understanding of them, and spare their life.

*Undertale's* encounters are modelled on the turn-based fights of a traditional JRPG, and when you want to engage an opponent, you have four tools or 'moves' from which to choose. The 'Fight' and 'Item' options are self-explanatory and familiar, enabling you to attack foes or consume stat-boosting items respectively. But unique to *Undertale* are 'Act' and 'Mercy'. Act opens special dialogue choices that let you speak to, and perhaps even bond with, your opponent; if you pick Mercy, you can let them go without killing them. However, you can only use Mercy after you have selected and completed the right Act sequence – when you've spoken with your would-be opponent, learned about their personality and inner life, and developed a sympathy that makes you want them to live. One example comes during a battle with the Royal Guards, two monsters you can subtly encourage to pursue their attraction to one another before letting them walk away to spend their lives together.

The fact that you can let your opponents live isn't made immediately clear, however. This is a problem, because when the

possibility of a nonviolent approach isn't apparent, it's tempting – in fact, natural – to revert to the familiar path of combat. Yet when you eventually realise that Act and Mercy allow you to negotiate 'battles' without resorting to killing, and are thereby confronted with the fact that some of the monsters you killed earlier in the game might have been spared, it adds greater depth to *Undertale's* considerations of violence. Games often give you no choice but to kill. *Undertale*, by contrast, makes pacifism available to you from the beginning. In that context, if you *do* kill anybody, it feels like the result of entrenched, almost reflexive behaviours – as if you did it because that's just what you're 'meant to do'. That opens up the question: why do we, whether players or developers, always assume violence as the first, often only recourse?

**Despite its exploration** of violence, *Undertale* doesn't spin a relentlessly bleak story. It's about making friends with quirky, amiable monsters, some self-effacing, others temperamental, but all deeply sincere. Papyrus, one of the first monsters you meet, is a lovable doofus who makes really awful spaghetti. His brother, Sans, is a lazy, outrageous prankster who enjoys sleeping when he should be working. Even Froggit, a minor character who can only speak in ribbits, has a personality you can warm to, being a helpful, knowledgeable but easily intimidated monster who introduces the basics of combat and mercy. While most monsters *can* be engaged in combat, their earnestness makes hurting or killing them profoundly disconcerting. Choosing to spare their lives opens up new conversations, letting you learn a little bit more about them. This is how *Undertale* nudges you towards pacifism through empathy. Killing someone you can relate to instinctively becomes an abhorrently cruel act.

But, for a pacifist game, *Undertale* still offers you the option to slaughter – a lot. It might seem unnecessary: if the game promotes pacifism as not only a viable but preferable alternative to the violence we normally enact in games, then why allow violence at all? However, in order to fully appreciate *Undertale's* pacifist spirit, the contrast needs to exist. This is why you ►



can play a ‘genocide run’, where you aim to accumulate EXP and increase your LV – familiar initials wickedly spun to stand for ‘Execution Points’ and ‘Level of Violence’. Here, you become strong enough to eliminate most monsters with one hit. You hear them beg for mercy or lament their demise before dissipating into nothingness. You walk into empty towns, where other monsters are being evacuated before your arrival. In this sense, *Undertale* equates violence with power.

But in the run’s later stages, it becomes an immensely difficult mechanical challenge. Combat encounters with characters such as Undyne and Sans demand enormous dexterity, their bullet-hell attack patterns only offering the tiniest windows for avoiding projectiles – Sans’ battle in particular demands rapid-fire reflexes, as he



Bratty and Catty may be enthusiastic about the end of humanity, but they aren’t antagonistic, and will even sell you some healing items. You won’t encounter them in the genocide route, however

were being judged for something that wasn’t your fault. Likewise, if pacifism were the only option, and *Undertale* gave you a pat on the back every time you did something peaceful, it would also feel empty – there’s no such thing as a good choice if the only choice is to be good. In *Undertale*, violence begets hardship, while pacifism, though it presents challenges, at least offers the optimism of a better ending.

## EVEN IN THE FEEL-GOOD, PACIFIST ENDING, ASRIEL ASKS, “DON’T YOU HAVE ANYTHING BETTER TO DO?”

shoves and shakes the entire platform that you’re navigating and tries to throw you off balance. The genocide run is a deliberately onerous, heartwrenching path. At every turn, the game tries to dissuade you from completing the run by appealing to what remains of your compassion (you can chance across a note left behind by the fleeing Snowdin shopkeeper that reads, “Please don’t kill my family”), or by attempting to kill you. And if you finish the route regardless, *Undertale* reveals its most damning secret yet: that you’re enabling the demonic Chara, the world-rendering rot at the core of its universe.

**This is the** big, nasty twist. If you had no choice but to commit violence and the game punished you for it nevertheless, it would feel disingenuous, as though you

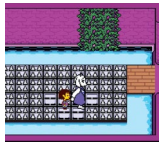
To that extent, the game doesn’t equivocate about a moral position. It doesn’t take the easier route of saying that violence and non-violence are equal, just so long as they’re both the product of player agency.

But then it goes further and disparages the (extremely videogame-y) concept of completionism. Violence may be corruptive, but *Undertale* reminds you not to overindulge in general – even in the feel-good, pacifist ending, Asriel asks, “Don’t you have anything better to do?” Here, *Undertale* seems to suggest that completionism is itself a kind of violence, whereby we wring a game world dry of all its narrative details and ‘content’, inviting comparison to the consumption of natural resources in the real world.

The damage wrought by your violence in the genocide route is persistent. There’s no



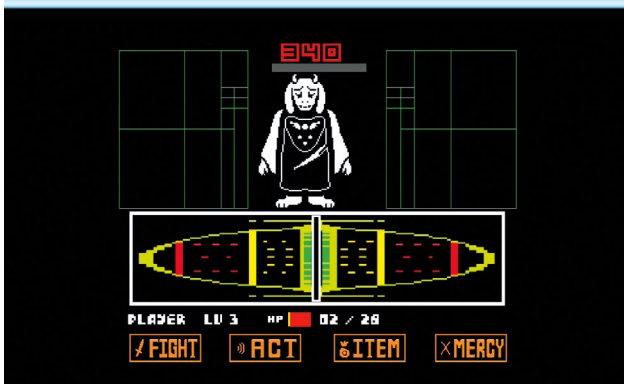
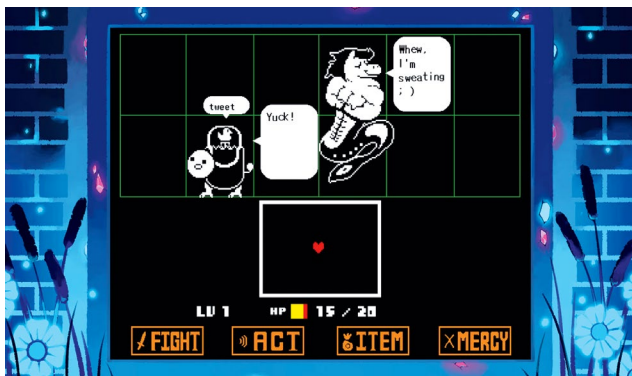
Despite her kindness, Toriel is actually the first boss you encounter, as she’ll try to stop you leaving the Ruins



## MERCIFUL QUEEN

Toriel, the kindly queen who oversees the underground monster kingdom, represents *Undertale's* inherently pacifist spirit. She's only the second character that you meet, and she's introduced as a motherly figure who takes care of the subterranean ruins. She eventually starts to care for you, too, fending off any monsters who threaten you and encouraging you to demonstrate kindness to others, as well as holding your hand through the initial puzzle. Originally, she was meant to be killed off, but this was changed before the release of *Undertale's* demo. After making this alteration, Toby Fox was inspired to implement the game-defining Mercy system.

Monsters comes in all forms, such as Aaron the vaguely flirty and creepy merhorse. Engage in a bicep-flexing competition with him if you wish to become friends



The battle with Toriel isn't challenging, but chances are you'll end up killing her on your first run. In the event you're losing, however, Toriel tries to avoid hurting you – she just wants you to stay in the Ruins, after all

reprieve or rewards for your efforts; Chara materialises only to sink the world into an abyss or reset reality to their whims. Even trying to rectify the world by completing a subsequent pacifist run offers no salvation – playthroughs after your genocide run will always conclude with Chara's appearance, evidence that the world of *Undertale*, owing to your desire to complete every style of playthrough and indulge in the optional violence, is spoiled irrevocably. The message starts to become clearer: even though *Undertale*, like a lot of games, features and facilitates violence, that alone isn't reason enough to *be violent*. You don't have to explore it just because it's a possibility.

There's a solipsistic pleasure to shooting baddies in games such as *Battlefield* or *Call Of Duty*. Nailing headshots is fun. But it's hard to deny that combat has, for a long time, felt like the default language that

games use to communicate their worlds and their meanings. Games such as *Stardew Valley*, which focuses on the pastoral joys of farming, and *Abzû*, which celebrates the kaleidoscopic splendour of the underwater, feel like responses to the norm.

Nevertheless, it's hard to think of another game that has explored pacifism and, in contrast, violence, with *Undertale's* incisiveness and introspection. Perhaps this is why, even as more games emerge that are rooted in nonviolent mechanics, the considerations and representations of violence in games continue to feel primitive. In influential games such as *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *Fallout 4* and *Mass Effect*, a binary system prevails, where some decisions are superficially characterised as 'good' and others as 'evil'. While this system allows for a certain mechanical clarity, it doesn't reflect or characterise the real weight of the consequences of violence.

And so, even ten years on, *Undertale* provides a fresh framework for our pacifistic decisions. It contemplates why pacifism matters, not by shying away from combat, but in amplifying the horrors of inflicting pain on sympathetic monsters – on characters you can befriend. To *Undertale*, violence is more than just morally repugnant. The game borrows the lexicon of RPGs to provoke conversations about the hostility inherent in the genre's structure, while explaining why you don't have to experience everything in a game for it to be gratifying. Doing so may be world-rending, after all. ■

