UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

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LEARNING GOOD FROM SKELETONS: ETHICAL LITERACIES IN *UNDERTALE*

A THESIS

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By

DYLAN ALFORD
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LEARNING GOOD FROM SKELETONS: ETHICAL LITERACIES IN *UNDERTALE*

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY

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Abstract

Current studies of game narrative and design, particularly with regard to morality, have focused mainly on direct player engagement. However, this otherwise reasonable perspective omits the other ways in which people experience and engage with games. This project examines the discourse around the game Undertale and how its community engages with the game and its moral impostions, as well as the complications that are posed to the player-centric experience by Let's Players and Speedrunners, who transform games into grounds for spectacles on their own terms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my mother, my father, and my extended family, to whom I owe everything and without whom I would never have considered going to graduate school. I would also like to thank my committee of Will Kurlinkus, Bill Endres, and Gabriela Raquel Rios. With their guidance and support during my writing process for this project, writing became a generative process rather than an extractive one. In the same spirit, I'd like to thank the rest of the English faculty at the University of Oklahoma, who each helped me in their own way when I needed it and without whose support I would have quite twenty times over. In particular, I would like to thank Amit Baishya, whose support as my mentor these last few years fostered a relentless intellectual curiosity that propelled me through this project, as well as many others, and likely those I've yet to explore. My appreciation cannot be overstated.

I would also like to thank Larissa Runyan, Charles Lee, Hayden Bozarth, Ashley Jeffalone, and the other members of my English cohort. Without the mutual support, aid, and encouragement I received, I don't know that I would have been able to complete this project or the program at all. Lastly, I would like to thank the bands Drug Church, Blanck Mass, Pallbearer, and deafheaven, whose music made my process possible.

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Dylan Alford

Master's Thesis

Chair: Dr. William Kurlinkus

Defense: 26 Apr. 2019

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I. Introduction: How to Use This Thing

This thesis is composed in a webpage-based format using the popular software Twine. Included with this document is the thesis in its native format and, as such, should be viewed first and foremost on those terms and not via .pdf format, otherwise the multimodal elements will go unseen. Also, it would probably be hard to read, as the formatting conventions are completely different compared to a normal text document. However, the following is an excerpt from the introduction within the project itself, which details why I created it in such a fashion:

> This is a multimodal, digital project that contains textual, audible, and visual elements including pictures, screencaptures, and video. The structure of the project is such that one might jump from one idea to another, creating a new web of understanding the particular topics at hand. I have chosen this kind of structure, as it not only emulates the networked way online discourse manifests, but also because it reflects choice structures that can be found in Role Playing Games. As online beings in the 21st century, we are no doubt keenly aware of the ways in which the Internet begs an ethos of wondering and wandering.

To view the project as intended, simply go to the folder containing the format suited to the kind of computer you are using and open the associated .html file on the root of the folder. One note, however: **this project reads best when opened in Google Chrome. Firefox also seems to work, however I make no guarantees beyond this. Safari has trouble with Twine files made on Windows computers.**

II. Source Code

The following pages contain the complete source code for the project with every passage represented exactly as it is written in the Twine editor. With this project, as in other Twine projects, the full source is viewable via the Proofing Copy function in the editor. Also, as I am not a programmer by nature or training, this code will likely be very frustrating to read in terms of formatting for those well-versed in things like HTML and CSS.

Learning Good From Skeletons: Ethical Literacies in Undertale

”

(font:"GHOUL")[Learning Good From Skeletons: Ethical Literacies in Undertale]

By Dylan Alford - //dylan.a.alford@ou.edu//

<figure>
<figcaption>The character Sans in developer Toby Fox's game //Undertale// (2015). The dialogue comes from a late game encounter with the character after a violent playthrough.</figcaption></figure>

<blockquote>//ABSTRACT: Current studies of game narrative and design, particularly with regard to morality, have focused mainly on direct player engagement. However, this otherwise reasonable perspective omits the other ways in which people experience and engage with games. This project examines the discourse around the game //Undertale// and how its community engages with the game, as well as the complications that are posed to the player-centric experience by Let's Players and Speedrunners, who transform games into grounds for spectacles on their own terms.// </blockquote>

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I recommend starting [[here|Intro]]. However, if you don't prefer to wander around the text, I've included a table of contents in an order that most would probably appreciate, as it is easy to imagine the anxieties that can come with such wondering and wandering. Yellow links denote a new passage that can be read. Blue links denote passages that have already been read, although there is a quirk with them: clicking the 'undo' button in the top left-hand corner will go back to the passage you came from and makes the link yellow again, as though you unread it. The ideal method of moving through the project, as I see it, is constantly moving forward and going back to the table of contents if one is lost.

But whichever way you decide to read it, feel free to read, reread, and skip around as you see fit!

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[[Theoretical Lens|theoretical lens]]

[[Literacy|make us feel like we know things]], [[contd.|a variety of different literacies]] [[Shame|shame]] [[Genre Conventions|RPGs and Remediations]]

[[Narrative Paths|narrative paths]] [[The Genocide Route|genocide route]] [[The Audience|audiences]] [[Interviews with fans Tyler|Tyler and Dillon]] and [[Dillon|Tyler and Dillon 2]] [[Fan Discourse|fans]] [[Example 1|fans discourse]], [[Example 2|fans discourse 2]], [[Example 3|fans discourse 3]] [[How Performing Games Complicates Moral Choice Poetics|complication]] [[Streamers and Let's Plays section 1|Streamers]], [[2|streamers 2]], and [[3|streamers 3]] [[Speedrunners]], [[contd.|Speedrunners 2]] [[Takeaways and Conclusions|Takeaways]], [[contd.|conclusion]]

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//Title Font: "Ghouls" by Eeve Somepx//

<u>//Undertale//</u>

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/1Hojv0m3TqA" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>
<figcaption>Trailer for Undertale (2015)</figcaption></figure>
//Undertale// is a game released in 2015 by Toby Fox. It was originally available solely on the PC, but it could soon be found on a number of different consoles and platforms, with the latest version being found on the Nintendo Switch.

In the game, you play as a nondescript protagonist figure wearing a striped shirt and whose name—Frisk—you're only likely to learn after multiple playthroughs. Thrust abruptly into an unknown world, you move the character through this space filled with encounters that oscillate between danger, comedic moments, intense sadnesses, and light-heartedness.

It is a game perhaps best described as being part of the RPG or "role-playing game" genre, which today encompasses many different features and stylizations. However, common to most of the [[games in the genre|RPGs and Remediations]] is an emphasis on characterization and story. For instance, the differences between //Undertale// and //Tetris// are quite evident, whereas the differences between //Undertale// and something of the same genre like //Final Fantasy// are a bit finer and necessitate a closer analysis. Its pixellated art style, for instance, is evocative of a particular moment in video games that has been continuously [[remediated|RPGs and Remediations]].

<figure>

<figcaption>On the surface, the tone of the game is very light. However, Undertale's story gets heavy fairly quickly.</figcaption></figure>By all accounts, the game quickly attained status as a sort of modern indie classic, being developed by a very small team and achieving a sizable following across critical and popular audiences in a very short amount of time - by the July of 2018, just the PC version is estimated to have a player count of 3.5 million. It's no small feat, considering that the game arose not just out of personal investment by the team itself, but also from <a

href="https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1002143342/undertale" target="_blank">a crowd-funding campaign via the website Kickstarter.

Most crucial for this project, however, are the various communities that sprung up for and around the game, contributing to the discourse around it with tremendous fervor. It is this discourse that begat a curious way of describing the different narrative pathways through the game: the [[neutral, pacifist, and genocide playthroughs|narrative paths]].

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<u>Intro</u>

Hello everyone! My name is Dylan Alford, an English student who, among other things, is very much interested in video games. Particularly, I became interested in exploring the nature of choices in games, since that seems to be [[what sets them apart from other media]]. Moreover, my interests lately have been about what and how games //teach// us things. We obviously learn from things like books and television and the internet today, so games should surely do the same.
<figure><img src="images\heavyrain.webp" style="width:75%;">

<figcaption>Scene from the game Heavy Rain (2010) by developer Quantic Dream. Button prompts appear for the player to decide whether the character Ethan Mars should forgive or reject Madison Paige's advances.</figcaption></figure>

In a more straightforward sense, I am not so much interested in how games teach us necessarily, but rather how they [[make us feel like we know things]]. Additionally, I wanted to examine the disjunction between what the designers of a game intend versus how [[particular audiences or communities|audiences]] receive them. How might these intended and unintended ways of playing the game complicate what it is trying to say?

By way of analyzing [[literacy and choices|theoretical lens]], I also wish to take up the challenge of analyzing morality in games. In their introduction to the special "Morality Play" issue of the //Games and Culture// journal, Ryan et al. explain the special problems that games pose when trying to analyze them in terms of ethics and morality:

<blockquote>First, players often regard video games as moral vacuums where playful experimentation, taboo breaking, or maximizing outcomes are preferred modes of engagement...Second, putting the player in control means authoring stories and systems where player's choices have meaningful ethical consequences. While morally charges themes such as

crime or war have always been present in games, comparatively few games invite us to engage deeply with the morality of the worlds they depict or the behaviors they encourage us to adopt.</blockquote>

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/1Hojv0m3TqA" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>

<figcaption>Trailer for Toby Fox's Undertale (2015)</figcaption></figure>

With these kinds of challenges in mind, I can't think of a more interesting game and community to examine than //[[Undertale]]//—a game whose story is revealed through multiple playthroughs contingent on player choices and moral behavior. In my analysis, however, [[I will show that the player community around //Undertale// is capable of treating the moral aspects of the game both flippantly and with great care and deliberation.|Intro 2]]

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<u>What Makes Games Special</u>

<figure><img src="images\chooseyourown.jpg" alt="Image of a Choose Your Own Adventure-style of book Treasure Hunt by Alan George" style="width: 20%;">

<figcaption>Image of a Choose Your Own Adventure-style of book Treasure Hunt, by Alan George</figcaption></figure>

Obviously—or perhaps not obviously—there are certainly multiple things you can do with a book itself besides read in the Western top-down, left-to-right manner. You could read it backwards, for instance, or skim around. You could read passages without finishing the whole, perhaps just looking up something particular that you wanted to use as inspiration for a paper or a single poem or story. The above image of a Choose-Your-Own Adventure book is probably the clearest example of this, where the pages are out of order and one must jump around from page to page. But you could also think of skimming through an anthology as a kind of personal curation of experience that invokes the same kind of decision making ethos called for in games.

When beginning his book //How to Talk About Videogames//, critic Ian Bogost suggests that "games are something more than just nondescript vessels that deliver varying dosages of video pleasure" (Location 70). He writes: <blockquote>They include characters and personas with whom we can identify and empathize, like we might do with a novel or film...But then, games also extend well beyond the usual payloads of those other media, into frustration, anguish, physical exhaustion, and addictive desperation.</blockquote>In contrast to books and films, which with certain exception represent a linearity of narrative, games are all consuming, and when we think about them, we need to

recognize that the order in which one person plays the game can be fundamentally different than someone else's. Their experiences with the text are totally different, as a consequence, and this is even before we think about differences in interpretation. The numerous intended and unintended choices that could be available to the player at any given moment necessarily create a different experience every time, although the impact of particular choices varies as wildly within games as between the games themselves.

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315"
src="https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/S_78_BWyNyU" frameborder="0"
allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture"
allowfullscreen></iframe>
<figcaption>Trailer for the game <a href="https://www.tetriseffect.game/"
target="_blank">Tetris Effect (2018) by developers Monstars Inc. and
Resonair.</figcaption></figure>

For example, as can be seen in its latest iteration above, choice as interaction is present even in a game as simple as //Tetris//, where the selection of blocks, their positioning, and the manipulation thereof create tense situations due to the speed and time-sensitivity of those choices. Choice is also extremely foregrounded in games like //Life is Strange// or //The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt// or any of the Telltale games where drastic consequences of a choice might be obscured to you on the first go-around. In these games, choices are often represented contextually through a radial menu of options or, as in Dontnod's <a href="https://store.steampowered.com/app/319630/Life_is_Strange__Episode_1/"

target="_blank">//Life is Strange//, where the choices of the player character are represented in a binary manner that have the power to change the past:

<figure><img src="images\lifeisstrange.jpg" alt="Image of a choice in Life is Strange where the player must decide whether or not to leave or steal money." style="width: 75%;">
<figcaption>In Dontnod's Life is Strange (2015), players as the main character Max must make choices in order to change the past, which often have far reaching, unintended consequences.</figcaption></figure>

Obviously, these are all very different kinds of choices, but they are choices nonetheless, and each affects the way the game flows from that moment on in ways both large and small.

Take for instance this link, which leads to a walkthrough for a particular questline within the game //The Witcher 3//. In it, the player character Geralt must decide whether you want to save or destroy a mysterious spirit inhabiting a tree. As the article indicates, there are numerous consequences based on the particular decision the player character makes, with lives hanging in the balance.

No matter what your decision is, you can't take it back unless you're willing to reload a previous saved game or, more likely, start the entire game over again. The weight of the choices—characters dying or disappearing—is something that necessitates a certain amount of

pause compared to the ambiguity of the above choice in //Life is Strange// or the low-level, almost instinctive and sports-like choices made during a hectic game like //Tetris//.

<figure>

<figcaption>In this dialogue encounter in CDProjekt's The Witcher 3 (2015), Geralt has a number of available retorts, though they are pretty self-explanatory.</figcaption></figure>

Incidentally, game walkthroughs are an excellent way to apprehend the formal boundaries of a game's narrative boundaries. After all, every possibility for a choice is often listed, such as in //The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt// walkthrough above.

In a sense, then, choice rules everything around me and, I would contend, //[[Undertale]]// demonstrates some of the most interesting design choices that I've seen in games—one that goes beyond radial menus of binary choices with obvious good and bad consequences.

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<u>Why this project?</u>

Academic interest in games is nothing new, of course. When talking about choice in games to those in the know, it's not hard to come across people talking about games like //Bioshock// or //Mass Effect//—especially when it comes to moral choices, which often manifest in terms of binary GOOD or EVIL button prompts. But for as important as they seem to be in the video gaming world, it's been several years since the moment for those games has passed.

<figure><img src="images\bioshock.jpg" alt="Image of encounter between player character and a Little Sister character in Bioshock. The button prompts read HARVEST or RESCUE" style="width: 75%;">
<figcaption>Screenshot from 2K Boston's Bioshock (2007). Note the very lurid button prompts denoting whether to save or kill the Little Sister character.</figcaption></figure>

What interests me the most, however, is how people respond to the games themselves. For this project, I've decided to examine the game //Undertale//, which was developed by Toby Fox.

In an interview with The Mary Sue, Fox said something quite interesting about choice and the relationship between games and choices of whether or not to be violent:

//<blockquote>
Because it’s way more complex to include it as a potential option. Also, hurting things is normalized and has loads of established ways to make it feel fun. You really can’t just do it.</blockquote>//

This fascinates me for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that it feels very amoral in its tone, whereas the game itself seems to be making very pointed impositions on you. For instance, within the game, you still aren't allowed to "just do" violence, which is what Fox identifies as a main criticism of his. In many ways, you are materially rewarded by the game for performing violent acts. But in other ways, you are very much punished for embracing that very violence.

In other words, the game is far less neutral than Fox would have us see it.

The goal, then, for this project is to ascertain what the game is doing and how people are interpreting and reinterpreting it. The stakes are large, since I've already talked about how games

can teach us. Perhaps we might take that further and try to think about games as sites of learning values. More importantly, we might regard games as uniquely positioned to create the feeling of literacy or expertise when it comes to evaluating what is right and wrong.

In order to serve this goal, I use a number of [[theoretical perspectives|theoretical lens]] regarding choice [[while examining the community of player audiences surrounding it|audiences]].

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<u>Literacy</u>

If we were, for instance, to describe how games make us feel like we know things, we'd be describing a sense of //literacy// that they make us feel. Specifically, in the context of the game //Undertale//, that often entails [[players feeling bad or good for the decisions they make|shame]].

The first association that often springs to mind when we hear the word 'literacy' is whether someone is able to read and write, usually focusing on ideas of comprehension and mastery. However, it would perhaps be better to consider the idea of being literate in something as being a form of expertise that occurs across different forms of engagement.

In other words, we might do well to think of literacy as not just regarding reading or writing, but rather as collections of expertises one might accrue and demonstrate on perhaps a daily basis in what we'd call literacy events and in the very specific spaces of the participants in question.

For this definition, I'm invoking [[David Barton and his book //Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language//|Barton]]. In it, he suggests that we center our analyses on those active processes that emerge from literate activities (Barton 34).

In this sense, video games demonstrate the necessity for understanding [[a variety of different literacies]] that act in concert.

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<u>Genre Conventions</u>

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/9EGWUQjrZYM?start=1087" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>

<figcaption>Gameplay video of HAL Laboratory and Ape Inc.'s Earthbound (1994). In just the first minute or two, note the animations, perspective, and user interface. Undertale shares in some of these design conventions.<figcaption></figure>

While there are other games that //Undertale// liberally cribs from, the pre-eminent text that Undertale riffs on is definitely //Earthbound//, published by Nintendo in 1994. There are other forebears for Undertale but, immediately, just looking at the imagery in Earthbound we can see clear through-lines in the art style, the menu designs, the fight screens, etc. More importantly, we can also see a sort of similarity in tone, with both games generally feeling rather lighthearted at times, though they both can get quite dark when you get far enough into them.

Drawing on ideas found in Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's //Remediation: Understanding New Media//, we can see how //Undertale// repurposes the stylistic and structural forms of previous games. Where once, you would play Earthbound on a Super Nintendo hooked up to a big ole CRT television, now you can play them on more or less any computer. Moreover, the design considerations taken into account in order to produce the images on the CRT screen are markedly different now. Today, even in a two-dimensional art style like this, we can use sharper and higher-definition imagery, yet people continue to make art in the same vein. What was once absolute necessity due to constraints is now an artistic convention—remediation in the service of nostalgia.

Aesthetically, it's in these generic conventions that //Undertale// wants to mess with its players' expectations. These remediated characteristics, along with how //Undertale// [[presents its choices|narrative paths]], subvert expectations and make players more conscious of the individual choices that they make at any moment. Fighting, in this game, is not nearly as much of a foregone conclusion as it is in other games of the genre.

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<u>Literacy, contd.</u>

Games themselves, clearly, are all about various degrees of competency and expertise. Such expertise emerges out of the player's social interactions with others regarding games, as well as out of their skills with other media. For example, video games like //Undertale// certainly rely on people's ability to read a particular language, and so the skills one builds when reading books certainly translates. But it also relies on the skills built by watching movies and television. Figuring out what the symbols and animations on the screen mean is a large part of video games, which have [[remediated|RPGs and Remediations]] particular visual conventions.
<figure><img src="images\froggit.jpg" alt="In the above image, note the array of options available under the "ACT" tab, as opposed to the "FIGHT" tab, which does not contain any options in and of itself and only leads to your character striking a blow on the poor Froggit." style="width:75%;">

<figcaption>An example of the battle scenario involving a Froggit monster from the game Undertale. Note the array of options available under the "ACT" tab, as opposed to the "FIGHT" tab, which does not contain any options in and of itself and only leads to your character striking a blow on the poor Froggit.</figcaption>

Since our subject is how people react to //Undertale's// moral impositions, however, I want to focus on two sets of literacies in particular:

<blockquote>

1) The comprehension and expertise necessitated by //[[Undertale]]// as a game and, in particular, [[a game within in the RPG genre|RPGs and Remediations]].

//and//

2) The feeling of expertise in terms of morality. That is, knowing the difference between what is right and wrong, given one's circumstances.

</blockquote>

The first form of literacy, I would say, is fairly straightforward. There's a certain amount of manual dexterity required to play games, certainly, as well as the ability to know what various interactions of symbols mean during a battle sequence or something like that.

The second form of literacy is a bit harder to get at, though I think a good 'in' for us here is through a certain understanding of [[shame]] and how it functions. I'd contend that shame is one of the primary means by which //Undertale// is trying to teach its players. Whether or not that

lesson lands for a particular player is another matter entirely and, as we shall see, people from different groups definitely have different reactions to what the game has to offer.

More than just what the game does, however, is the social component inherent to any game-playing experience today. People can often be seen talking about their decisions in the game on social media. Often, this sense of shame is deployed and deflected during the discussions that arise from the posts.

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<figure>
<figcaption>David Barton's Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language, (Blackwell Publishing, 2007).</figcaption>

David Barton is the director of the Literacy Research Centre at Lancaster University. In his book, //Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language//, he argues that, when analyzing a form of literacy, we must look to "people's uses of literacy, not from their formal learning of literacy" (Barton 34).

Beyond just the idea that literacy encompasses more than just our ideas of reading and writing skills, what this gets at is literacies are often culturally and materially particular. Insofar as we are considering games as constructive when it comes to a literacy of moral choices, we must look to the social functions of literacy. Different communities and groups have different ideas for what it means to be literate.

In his book, Barton suggests that we look at literacy from different perspectives: social, psychological, and historical. He identifies eight crucial ways that we may do so, though for our purposes, I mainly wish to focus some of the social aspects that he describes. Found in full on pages 34 and 35 of the 2007 edition, I include an abbreviated version of his list here, with parts elided and emphasis added:

<blockquote>1) Literacy is a social activity and can best be described in terms of people's literacy practices which they draw upon in literacy events...
3) People's literacy practices are situated in broader social relations. This makes it necessary to //describe the social setting// of literacy events...
5) Literacy is a symbolic system used for representing the world to ourselves. //Literacy is part of our thinking.// It is part of the technology of thought.
6) We have //awareness, attitudes, and values// with respect to literacy and these attitudes and values //guide our actions...//

8) A literacy event also has a social history. //Current practices are created out of the past.//</blockquote>

Barton illustrates this by recounting the various forms of literacy that he engages with at just the beginning of every day: listening to the radio, reading the mail, having a conversation with family. Each of these activities necessitates some form or another of expertise when it comes to decoding the various messages encountered. Moreover, Barton's breakfast situation gives us a sense of how these literacies aren't necessarily discrete and may overlap (4).

In this respect, if we still consider literacy to revolve around signs and symbols, then we might be invited to consider players negotiating systemic choices in games as a form of literacy that is both particular to the game in question as well as evocative of similar media that necessitate the same kind of "choice literacy."

Moreover, the forms of literacy invoked by these situations of choice also draw from other choice-based competencies. For this project, that means examining how games call upon us to draw upon culturally situated literacies of morality. How does one respond to a threat or a character that is in trouble? How do we treat our neighbor or people that we've just met? The cultural logics that we bring into the game with us inform and are transformed by engaging with games like //Undertale// and the communities that form around it.

It is in this sense of literacy that I am going to examine [[the various literacies|a variety of different literacies]] that people engage with while playing //Undertale//. These are, at times, in contrast with the pure sense of reading and writing literacy that we're often most familiar with. However, such as we may define being "literate" as being "competent and knowledgeable in specialized areas," then we cannot help but recognize the emergent literacies at play in video games (19).

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<u>Streamers and Let's Plays, cont'd.</u>

When talking about video games in the year 2019, you're missing a large part of the discourse if you do not address the impact that spectatorship has had upon the medium. Specifically, I am referring to the practice of streaming one's playthrough for an audience, as well as uploading playthroughs to video sharing sites like Youtube, usually with the prefix of "Let's Play..." For example, you can see the likes of this below in the work of Seán McLoughlin, a.k.a. "JackSepticEye":

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/PlbkpzDwfJU" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>
<figcaption>The first video in JackSepticEye's //Undertale// Genocide Run series. From the very beginning of the video until 1:26, he explains his justification for doing such a playthrough, saying that it came from both the community's demands as well as his own desire to see everything the game has to offer.</figcaption></figure>

In this particular video, he begins his Genocide Run, but not as someone playing for the first time, or even doing it because they want to. Jack mentions clearly that he had no intention of playing the game another time for a particular video, though he did start doing a Genocide Route playthrough in his spare time. Rather, "almost every comment was people asking him to do the Genocide Route." His motivation, therefore, exists in part outside of his own interest.

There is, in a sense, a performance that the Youtube or streaming personality does whenever they play games, making decisions not only for themselves, but also with the audience in mind? What will they think? What would get more viewers or cost some? These are considerations that one must make when they make a living from putting videos up on the internet. As such, we can see a different motivation for the way they are playing the game besides just for their own interest or amusement.

But it is also important to note, per our [[complication]] how the game's lessons are transformed by the act of playing the game for an audience. McLoughlin is visibly tense due in no small part to having a certain knowledge of what he's about to do and, importantly, doesn't go into the game cold. For one, he's played the game before. For another, he knows a lot about what constitutes a Genocide Run due to discussions with both the game's own fan community as well as his fans in comments and chat messages.

Via performing a particular way in the game for his audience and reacting in a particular manner, McLoughlin changes the basis for choosing actions in a game from individual consideration to a communal deliberation. Being uncomfortable but willing and interacting with an audience that would like to see him undergo the consequences for particular choices generates a particular dynamic. That's to say, it ends up forming its own kind of moral discourse between McLoughlin himself and his fans, using the gameplay as the grounds to negotiate certain moral limits or boundaries.

This sort of performative aspect of a game can be seen from another angle, as well, with [[performers deliberately undermining audience wishes in the service of a joke|streamers 2]], which can be its own kind of moral negotiation.

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<u>Speedrunners</u>

In contrast to the earnest [[fans]] of games, and along with [[streamers and 'Let's Players'|Streamers]], speedrunners also work to subvert intended uses of video games. As the 'speed' in the term might suggest, speedrunners attempt to make it from the beginning of the game to the end in as fast a manner as possible.

<figure><iframe src="https://player.twitch.tv/?autoplay=false&video=v321455560" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen="true" scrolling="no" height="378" width="620"></iframe>
<figcaption>The most-current world record True Pacifist playthrough time in //Undertale//, coming in at around an hour and twenty-six minutes. Note his play at 30:00, mashing buttons to trigger glitches, thereby allowing him to skip crucial dialogue and combat encounters. While doing this, he also has time to talk with the chat box he has next to his stream about matters unrelated to the game itself.</figcaption></figure>
In the above video, we can see the player, Shayy, carrying on conversation with people watching him in his chat, hearing him talk among all of the rapid-fire button taps that let him skip the

game's dialogue as quickly as possible. His indifferent attitude towards what is happening in the game is understandable—it's something he's likely experienced untold dozens of times in attempts to break the record.

But it's not just skipping through dialogue that makes his playthrough the fastest. He also runs from every single random encounter possible and only engages with the mandatory fights to the extent that particular choices will allow him to leave the fight sooner. Moreover, he makes ample use of particular glitches through the game, such as leaving in mid-dialogue with characters, or moving the character in such a way as to traverse the environment faster.

It is probably evident, but this way of reducing a game to a set of obstacles one has to overcome, then progressing through with the goal of moving as quickly as possible means that, much like with the [[streamers|Streamers]], the game's imposed choices are subverted. For the speedrunner, these dilemmas are not sites of reflection or intense thought, but rather forgone conclusions. Much research goes into finding the fastest route, as well as developing glitches that allow one to skip certain segments. There is neither time nor interest on part of the speedrunner for moral questions in a playthrough such as this. It is important to note that of course people likely experience the game earnestly the first time through or perhaps in their own time aside from during a speedrun. But an experience has different resonances after you've done it for the 900th time, no?

It is through returning to choice poetics, however, that we can see how the speedrunning of games changes the arithmetic provided to the player by various choices. Mawhorter et al. perform an analysis of the choices that a game presents based on the goals that the player might be trying to achieve, describing those choices as "enabling," "hindering," "advancing," or "threatening" those goals ("Choice Poetics by Example", 7). Normally, the choices in a neutral, pacifist, or genocidal playthrough of //Undertale// broken down into such categories. In a speedrun, though, these categories are reformatted. Instead of evaluating choices based on whether or not they get you XP or gold or the opportunity to show mercy, all considerations are subordinate to what make get one through the game fastest. Committing to a speedrun elides other narrative considerations that a game may put forward.

To get another sense of how speedrunners side-step those narrative choices of //Undertale// for an audience, [[we can look at a speedrun done for the Awesome Games Done Quick event|Speedrunners 2]].

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<u>//Undertale//'s Discourse Community</u>

Presumably, at the forefront of every game developer's mind is the type of gamer that will earnestly play through various experiences that they've set up for them. Sometimes, that

experience is like a guided tour through various plot beats and scenarios that the developer has laid out. //Undertale//, with its narrative focus, falls well within that category, though there's certainly a lot of [[choices to be made|narrative paths]] for the players themselves. In fact, it's by no means exceptional for the average gamer to sit down for hours at a time playing //Undertale// or other games like it, as one might read a favorite book or watch a new season of their favorite Netflix series.

<figure><img src="images\binge.jpg" alt="Image collage of a series of tweets that emphasize 'binge-playing' the game Undertale" style="width: 80%;">
<figcaption>Image collage of a series of tweets that emphasize 'binge-playing' the game Undertale.</figcaption></figure>

Gamers invest so much of themselves into any given game that they play. It's a significant amount of thought and time that goes into the playing of a game. As such, people get very engaged when it comes to discussing who did what when and for whichever reason. For //Undertale//, this includes discussions about what kind of playthrough they were shooting for and how it impacted them.

Moreover, it is out of these kinds of everyday discourse that we can see the social, the psychological, and the historical dimensions of literacy being developed. For Barton, literacy functions at all of these levels simultaneously:

<blockquote>When weaving them together it soon becomes obvious that these are not really separable or distinct areas...it is a system for representing the world to ourselves—a psychological phenomenon...it is a system for representing the would to others—a social phenomenon...an integrated historical notion of literacy has an individual sense of a person's history along with the social sense of history as the development of culture: bringing together these two senses can shed light on the process of learning (Barton, 33-34)</blockquote>

With the proliferation of the internet, online discourse has allowed all kinds of multifarious literacies to develop. For our purposes, we are of course looking to those that emerge around the game //[[Undertale]]//, though it would be trivial in terms of difficulty to turn this kind of lens on another game.

<figure><img src="images\changed.png" style="width: 90%;" alt="Reddit post by user SammyConnor. Titled 'Today I bought Undertale. It's changed my life,' it reads 'Today, I purchased Undertale, having fallen in love with the soundtrack.

I played for 12 hours straight. I am a true pacifist. I won't be true resetting.

The game changed my life. My entire outlook, my hopes, my dreams.

For the last seven years I've been trapped in my hourse, suffering from crippling anxiety, depression.

Undertale flipped my world upside down. I nearly cried just during the conversation with Toriel at the ruins exit. Everything that followed broke me down and built me back up.

I made friends, persevered, took the high ground, acted justly. I enjoyed every second, and I don't want to do it again, they're all so happy.

I've been uplifted, filled with so many hopes and dreams. Life is beautiful again, and as I sit here in bed, typing this on my tablet, blubbering like a big baby, I want to thank everyone. Toby Fox, all the players, all my friends. Thank you for helping me break the barrier

Just keep on being.

Thank you, everyone. You filled me with determination.">

<figcaption>For some players, such as this one that felt compelled enough by their experience to post on popular internet messageboard Reddit, their time with Undertale has changed their worldview for the better.</figcaption></figure>

The post above from Reddit—clearly popular with an upvoted score of 802 and 317 comments—taps into the sort of positive potential that can be found in //Undertale//. I've certainly been moved in this way by games, books, albums, and films. This player's experience on the game's Pacifist Route was, in their words, lifechanging.

The post also clearly gestures at the community that surrounds the game as partially responsible for that positivity, thanking "all the players" and then using direct address for the whole of reddit.com/r/undertale itself.

However, the make-up of the game's fanbase is more complicated than that, as we can see with [[their discussions of the Genocide Route|fans discourse]].

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<u>Shame</u>

Having played a lot of RPGs that often feature narrative choices with various trade-offs, I became very interested in the idea of shame as a way of approaching the question of moral choice. To know more about shame, I of course went back to Aristotle, who noted that shame was a “pain or disturbance” in our feelings caused by thoughts and actions that “are imagined to entail disrepute” (The Art of Rhetoric, 74).

<figure><img src="images\aristotle.jpg" alt="An image of the cover of Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric, translated by Robin Waterfield and published by Oxford University Press">
<figcaption>Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric, translated by Robin Waterfield, (Oxford University Press, 2018).</figcaption></figure>

There seems to be a kind of affective and emotional reaction that occurs when do something we consider shameful—literally, as a "pain" that perhaps makes some of us contort in anguish!

The language of affect, then, becomes useful here. Brian Massumi notes in his translation of Deleuze and Guattari's //Mille Plateaux// that

<blockquote>//L 'affect// (Spinoza's affectus) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. //L'affection// (Spinoza's affectio) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include "mental" or

ideal bodies). (Translator's Notes).</blockquote> That is to say, affect is the realm of experience and sensation, which is at least one of the levels upon which shame is operating according to Aristotle above. For example, whenever I feel ashamed—explicably or otherwise—it might very well lead to a panic attack—my heartbeat raises and my vision becomes vignetted. My materiality is thus acted upon by the situation. For someone else, it may manifest as an immediate desire to flee the shameful situation. In //Undertale//, if you press a button and something untoward happens to a character during a fight, that "OH NO, OH NO" feeling that makes your hair stand up is the affective reaction to the game acting upon you.

In addition, philosopher Nathan Rotenstreich notes in his essay "On Shame" that when we feel ashamed of something, it’s not necessarily because we’re ashamed by the outcome of our actions:

<blockquote>As accountable we take upon ourselves the outcome of our deeds...Yet, before taking upon ourselves, logically and temporally, the results of a deed or misdeed, we take upon ourselves the very deed, or misdeed...the relation of ourselves to the deed...</blockquote> It is not the result that shames us, but the shameful deed itself. Moreover, we can only be accountable to ourselves if we recognize the act itself is shameful. Shame is a kind of active process that we engage in. Recognition is necessary, and those that don't know shame can't feel it!

<blockquote>What really matters is the recognition; there is no accountability without recognizing ourselves in our deeds as doers of the deeds...</blockquote>Shame, therefore, also functions in a reflective, emotive mode, as well.

What we can say, then, is that there is an interaction when playing games between the player and the game itself, but then also the player and the discourse communities to which they belong. In playing the game by one's self, gamers are experiencing a kind of simulated community in the game, but it's not necessarily the same as interacting and reflecting on one's decisions within a larger context. Certainly, there is an affective charge from doing bad or good, but in communicating or reporting those feelings, you're entering the social realm.

//Undertale// is clearly playing with the idea of shame—in terms of both its unpleasant affective components and its social-emotional ones—when it comes to the [[Genocide Route|genocide route]] as a [[narrative path|narrative paths]] through the game. Understanding shame is crucial to understanding the game, as well as my [[means of analysis|theoretical lens]] of player choices in it.

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<u>Narrative Paths</u>

In //[[Undertale]]//, there are three main forms of endings that you can receive based upon the choices largely made during battle encounters—a Pacifist Route, a Neutral Route, and a Genocide Route.

In the battle encounters, such as the one seen below, you have four main options available to you when you're faced with another creature: "FIGHT," "ACT," "ITEM," and "MERCY." Selecting FIGHT means for you to attack the creature in an attempt to defeat it, usually, and upon vanquishing most foes, you are rewarded in a number of ways. Selecting ACT, however, yields more interesting options, such as talking with the opposite being, perhaps flattering them or convincing them to stand down if they seem aggressive. Maybe they're just looking for a friend. In any case, if you pacify them to the game's satisfaction, you're allowed to take mercy on them, or run away entirely at any point from said encounter.

<figure><img src="images\encounter.jpg" alt="An image of the first 'enemy' encounter in the game: a training dummy" style="width: 75%;">
<figcaption>The first, true combat encounter in the game with a formidable foe: the training dummy. Of course, you may fight it. But you are also able to run from it, as well as bore it into leaving by sparing it through the MERCY menu, or talk to it via the ACT menu. In either case, the fight sequence ends without bloodshed.</figcaption></figure>The endings you can obtain throughout the game are determined by the amount of enemies you FIGHT and destroy. While the encounters are determined by a randomized timer whenever you're in a particular area of the

game, there are a finite number of them. Hence, it is possible to destroy nearly everyone you meet throughout the game. Obviously, this kind of playstyle nets you a particular ending, whereas sparing everyone you meet and doing a mixture of the two get you other endings.

Colloquially, these playthrough styles are referred to as the Pacifist Route, the Neutral Route, and the Genocide Route. Additionally, players also collectively discovered the True Pacifist Route, which requires multiple non-violent playthroughs of the game in order to execute. In having multiple ways to playthrough the game based on your actions, //Undertale// makes a significant break with its [[forebears|RPGs and Remediations]], which often only have one sort of ending, such as the game below, //Final Fantasy VI// (1994).

<figure><img src="images\final fantasy VI.png" alt="An image from the game Final Fantasy VI, featuring the Kefka boss fight" style="width: 75%;">
<figcaption>Image from Squaresoft's //Final Fantasy VI// (1994) depicting a fight sequence with primary antagonist Kefka</figcaption></figure>As a means of analyzing the choices posed to the player, Mawhorter et al. note through their articulation of 'Choice Poetics' that, often in //Undertale//, choices are not so clear cut from a goal-oriented perspective. In //Undertale//'s combat encounters, while choices are limited to a set number of actions, they can be read via a choice poetics framework as furthering or hindering certain goals. If your goal is to become really powerful, it behooves you to fight, as that is the best way to get experience and gold. If you want to be a pacifist and

desire that particular ending or content, it behooves you to find a way to spare your enemies or run.

Therefore, in addition to the temperament of the person playing and their conception of how they want the story to go, there are also material consequences within the systems of the game that players must contend with in order to see it all the way through, with the more violent and aggressive playthrough yielding the [[Genocide Route|genocide route]] ending, and less aggressive choices leading to the more Neutral or Pacifist ones.

The multiplicity of ways to play the game means that the structure of the game itself encourages multiple playthroughs if one wants to see all that the game has to offer. And this has a social aspect to it, as well. As Mawhorter et al note when discussing the game that "//Undertale// fosters dialogue between its players, because once they learn of each others' disparate experiences, they will naturally be curious as to how those experiences were unlocked."

However, what choice poetics misses as a form of analysis are the secondary audiences that might be encountering these choices through someone else's gameplay. This isn't necessarily a limitation if you are just looking at players and the games that they play. However, it doesn't account for audiences of people that play games online, such as the fans of streamers and speedrunners. These secondary audiences experience the decisions of others, and their impact on

the choices is motivated by altogether different goals. It is in this space that there exists a gap in research, as the impact of streamers and speedrunners on games is nascent.

For our purposes here, we shall focus predominantly on player interactions related to the [[Genocide Route|genocide route]], although the other routes are valuable due to their stark contrast with one another and the Genocide Route.

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<u>The Audience</u>

Using my particular [[theoretical lens]], we can examine how different groups of players respond to //Undertale//'s choices:
<blockquote>1) [[Fans and average players|fans]]—including [[my own friends|Tyler and Dillon]]—who are remarkable for their earnest attempts at engaging with the game as such,
2) [[Streamers and 'Let's Play'ers|Streamers]], who record their playing of a game for an audience, real or imaginary, and
3) [[Speedrunners]], who attempt to play a game from the beginning to the end, negotiating all or most of its content, with the goal of completing it as quickly as possible.</blockquote> Each of these different categories, which neither exhausts every kind of person that plays games nor is

exclusive to //Undertale//, offers us alternative ways of considering how choices are taken by players. Their differences [[complicate|complication]] both our analysis of narrative choices in games, as well as the process of narrative design from the developer's side. As different audiences engage with those moral choices, the valences of those choices change.

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<u>Intro, contd.</u>

<figure>

style="width: 70%;">
<figcaption>A screencap of a tweet that talks about something colloquially referred to as the "Genocide Run" in //Undertale//.</figcaption></figure>

To most people that haven't played //Undertale//, the mention of genocide in the context of a video game and internet meme is, at the very least, eyebrow-raising if not totally unsettling. But for someone involved in the community around //Undertale//, such a sight isn't at all unusual. We can see, for instance, that the tweet is clearly part of a larger discourse about the game, where

one's curiosity of this "genocide run" was cause enough for another to deem them evil. Clearly, digging into this topic will be of use to people.

<figure><img src="images\lara.png" alt="Tweet featuring an image meme of Lara Flynn Boyle sobbing in the show Twin Peaks. The accompanying text reads, "When you show your boyfriend Undertale and he immediately does the genocide run without a care while I'm beside him sobbing because he just tried to kill Napstablook." style="width: 70%;">
<figcaption>A screencap of a tweet—since deleted—showing the depth of someone's emotional attachment to Undertale characters through meme format.</figcaption></figure>
But [[why]] are these snippets of culture important? And, moreover, how am I going to go about this business of examining how //[[Undertale]]// teaches us? What are games doing that makes [[these kinds of discussions|what sets them apart from other media]] different than those one might have about a book?

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<u>The Theoretical Lens</u>

For considering //Undertale// and how it teaches people, I propose that we consider it and its community through the dual-lens of literacy and shame.

With [[David Barton's|Barton]] social articulation of [[literacy|make us feel like we know things]] and the idea of [[shame]] as a means of self-reflection on one's actions, we can develop the idea of a literacy of morality, and that shame is a measure or manifestation of that literacy. After all, it is only through a knowledge and familiarity with particular mores and taboos, both large and small, that people feel shame for breaking them.

In this way, when we see people discussing the moral impositions of //[[Undertale]]// and games like it, we might see them as contestations of expertise over ideas of right and wrong.

Along with this perspective to understand the impact of the choices, I'm keeping in mind the idea of choice poetics, developed by Mawhorter et al, as a means of thinking about the form of choice in //Undertale//, specifically in how it relates to [[the different narrative paths|narrative paths]]

However, even with this relatively straightforward lens that we're using, things [[get even more interesting|complication]] when we add in the more social aspects of literacy. At that point, we are dealing with more than just the players of game - we are also thinking about those who watch people play.

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<u>The Genocide Route</u>

In Undertale, through the negative consequences inherent in taking the sort of genocidal route through the game, you're actively being [[shamed|shame]] by the developer and the game. As you do bad stuff, the game becomes progressively more difficult in many ways. Also, a lot of the interactions between your character and the others in the game are either closed-off entirely or rather brusque and sad.

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315"
src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/NwI8yHZAwSE?start=6" frameborder="0"
allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture"
allowfullscreen></iframe>
<figcaption>This video shows encounters in Snowdin during a Pacifist playthrough. The music is delightful and the town seems to be preparing for a Christmas-esque kind of celebration. Note the fun shopkeeper interaction starting at 0:08 and the various characters scattered around town from about 3:30 onward.</figcaption></figure>

For example, there is a marked difference between each kind of playthrough by the time players get to the town of Snowdin. In the Pacifist or Neutral playthroughs, the town will be lively, with characters more or less ready to talk to you. Once a player commits to a Genocide playthrough, however, doors are closed and boarded up. Players are left only with their character's internal thoughts and the suggestion that the residents of Snowdin are hiding in fear. Moreover, the music

track that plays normally while walking through the town becomes much slower in tempo and distorted.

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315"
src="https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/_iPXD9pguCE" frameborder="0"
allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture"
allowfullscreen></iframe>
<figcaption>Video showing the town of Snowdin after having committed to a Genocide Run. Note that upon entering the town, the town's theme is a heavily distorted version of the original. At 20:29, the shopkeep encounter is completely different. And at 21:36, the Monster Kid character informs you that everyone has run away.</figcaption></figure>

It is easy to imagine the affective impact of this sequence, with the distorted theme accentuating the already oppressive mood. The intense feeling of empty loneliness is broken only by the naïve and innocent figure in Monster Kid, who doesn't know that the townsfolk had a pretty good reason to clear out of town. Moreover, it is clear that the game is trying to deny you a certain kind of experience based upon your choices and is, therefore, punishing or attempting to shame a particular kind of play.

Upon finishing the game via a Genocide playthrough, it will actually remember that you have done so and will not let you start again for ten full minutes, at which point, the following sequence plays:

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315"
src="https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/j9aHXzft-_Y" frameborder="0"
allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture"
allowfullscreen></iframe>
<figcaption>Video of post-game sequence that plays upon completion of a route where every non-player character has been killed. A sound effect of rushing wind plays throughout.</figcaption></figure>

The whole experience is rather dramatic. Even if you delete all of your information and the game from your hard-drive, for instance, it still leaves something on your computer that it checks to see what you've done and holds you accountable. So this is already interesting, I think. The game experience is full of all kinds of pathos and it can be pretty gut-wrenching to do bad things in it.

When you play through //Undertale// with the Genocide Route in mind, it is very clear that the game is trying to teach you something through [[shaming|shame]] you. By withholding particular aspects of the [[RPG genre|RPGs and Remediations]] that are otherwise within the game—such

as interesting dialogues and storylines with the game's characters—the game does seek to actively shame the player as the trade-off for either their interest in destroying every character in the game or their decision to forsake everyone else in the quest for power, i.e. levels, though even this is undermined somewhat by the game's otherwise-unskippable boss encounters becoming more difficult as a result of the aggressive choices.

However, it should also be noted that there is a contingent of //Undertale//'s playerbase that value the difficulty that the Genocide route represents when it comes to the skill aspect of the game. Take this boss fight below as an example of what faces players when they commit to such a playstyle:

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Vr4IYjeplJA" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>
<figcaption>Video of late-game boss battle with the character Sans during a Genocide Run. The fight is extremely difficult from the very beginning, consisting of hard-to-time button presses and requiring immaculate dexterity to completely avoid damage. Battle phases are broken up with bits of dialogue from the character giving expository dialog about the story with additional details that one would not receive through another playthrough.</figcaption></figure>

Given the complex nature of the game's systems—balancing material gain with narrative opportunities withheld—an enduring [[fanbase|audiences]] has emerged around the game that is quite willing to discuss the surprisingly heavy themes found within.

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Creates a hovering text, but you need to make the text itself a different color, or people will be confused:

<a data-passage="test" title="Hover text">Test

Endless scrolling

with sidebar of link

<u>How Performing Games Complicates Moral Choice Poetics</u>

For regular fans, they receive the game largely as a developer intends, barring any unforeseeable bugs that break the experience. They play the game, get something out of it, then make productive and sometimes unproductive arguments about what the game truly means.

However, our analysis of how gamers respond to choice is complicated by all of the different ways that people play games, which especially includes those who watch others play games on the internet, whether through videos on Youtube, live on Twitch, or via small clips that might appear on social media.

For this secondary audience that is watching others play games, there is a rupture that happens when the moral impositions of a game get undermined by people that don't see them as such. In this way, these impositions mutate and become something else entirely: for the audiences of those that play games, the social and parasocial interactions—as illustrated by Horton and Wohl—create new valences for those decisions surplus to the game's original intent.

<blockquote>One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media...is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in a primary group. The most remote and illustrious men are met //as if// they were in the circle of one's peers the same is true of a character in a story who comes to life in these media in an especially vivid and arresting way. We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a //para-social relationship// (Horton & Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction").</blockquote>

Much work has been done of late within the realm of presumed intimacy and parasociality with regard to Youtubers, vloggers, and other forms of social media celebrity. Appropriately enough, video essays on Youtube are often a place of trenchant critique for a topic like this. Parasocial interaction is altogether different from the kinds of one-on-one interactions that we've seen through the discussions on Reddit, for instance. There is an inability to meaningfully reciprocate the discussion of the video's content. After all, what content creator willfully sifts through ten thousand comments about the same thing, making the same joke.

Parasocial behavior can range from the innocuous, overly-familiar comment on someone's Tweet to feeling like someone is your best friend because you've listened to hundreds and hundreds of hours of a podcast that they do. There are, of course, opportunities for true engagement in things like threaded comments, where both creators and viewers as well as between viewers themselves can talk and respond to things in as serious or non-serious a manner as they want. However, these are few in number compared to the frankly overwhelming commentariat.

It is important, however, that we not dilute the theory of parasociality. The relationships examined in this project are not the unidirectional, parasocial variety. The [[examples contained herein|Streamers]] are bidirectional discourses between fans and performers on the internet, where the performers do incorporate responses to fans into their ethos and their content itself.

Regardless of the quality of the relationship between the social media creator and their audience, the game's message changes somewhere along the line when it is mediated by someone else playing it for you. For my purposes here, I've limited the scope to two broad subclasses of gamers—[[streamers|Streamers]], like [[my friend Dillon|Tyler and Dillon]] who makes a living producing content for Youtube, and [[speedrunners|Speedrunners]], who pit themselves against the game in a form of competition to see who can get through the game the fastest.

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<u>Takeaways and Conclusions</u>

It should be very clear now that the gaming community, at least insofar as it has formed around the game //Undertale//, is incredibly varied in the way that they discuss the topics like genocide and ideas of what is right and wrong. While there's not necessarily consistent agreement about such things, it is evident through [[such discussions|fans discourse 2]] that a certain amount of complexity makes its way into players' arguments. This literacy of morals that //Undertale// puts forward develops through players' engagement with not only the game, but with their community. The social function of literacy shines through here, whether in discussions on Reddit or between friends.

However, there is a problem for a totalizing sense of moral engagement by its player base, and this can be seen in the specific communities of [[streamers|Streamers]] and [[speedrunners|Speedrunners]], although they are not the only ones. In contrast to players that earnestly engage with a game's systems, moral or otherwise, streamers take those as opportunities to perform for their audience. And speedrunners elide or dodge those decisions altogether, only engaging with them to the extent that they have to or in the search for a faster time through the game.

In playing games on a stream or as a competition, the spectacle of the game-playing itself generates a different form of moral literacy than that of the game itself. The game becomes a vehicle for its players to transmit their own ideas about what is or is not important and what they value, acting it out in real time. In doing this, the game provides the grounds not just for players to decide what is right or wrong, but specifically what constitutes right and wrong within their own discursive space. This could mean people gathered around a television at home cracking jokes about the narrative, a streamer bemoaning to their audience about how serious a particular character is acting, or a speedrunner nonchalantly committing a digital genocide for an unbothered audience.

And while Choice Poetics and other choice-centric analyses offer us a clear view into analyzing the material tradeoffs associated with incentivizing and discouraging particular acts, they don't really get at the full scope of the player base, which is composed of players with wildly different

motivations behind their decisions. Nor does it really consider the secondary audiences for those gameplay choices. While earnest players often do make certain kinds of cost-benefit analyses as part of their decisions on their first playthrough, that doesn't account for the people going into the game in order to perform their decisions for their own audience, or the people that ignore the narrative and moral stakes of those decisions entirely in favor of some other goal.

We must approach our ways of looking at games, first and foremost, with an understanding of the complexity of the ways that people receive games. They play them certainly. But there are all kinds of players. And there are also spectators to think about as well. In going along for the ride with their favorite streamer or speedrunner, the audience is just as involved as the person playing the game!

There are, of course, [[interesting and exciting issues that arise|conclusion]] from taking an approach such as this one, though.

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<u>Takeaways and Conclusions, contd.</u>

James Paul Gee is perhaps one of the foremost minds when it comes to looking at video games with a particular eye to literacy. He describes what is at stake when we come to "learn a new semiotic domain in a more active way," which is something often entailed by games: <blockquote>1. We learn to experience (see, feel, and operate on) the world in new ways.
2. Since semiotic domains usually are shared by groups of people who carry them on as distinctive social practices, we gain the potential to join this social group, to become affiliated with such kinds of people (even though we may never see all of them, or any of them, face to face).
3. We gain resources that prepare us for future learning and problem solving in the domain and, perhaps, more important, in related domains (//What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy//, 23).</blockquote>

When we look at games as the semiotic domain that Gee describes, and with a special attention to moral decision making this might be a problem with very high stakes. After examining the myriad types audiences for //Undertale//, we are left with some lingering questions. What does it mean for a game to broach the topic of genocide in a way that might teach its audience a particular lesson, letting them ask questions that they had not thought about before, and in complex ways? On the flipside, what might the value of that lesson be when the act genocide, in this context, can be taken as entertainment?

<figure><img src="images\pacifist.png" alt="A landscape image of the major characters in Undertale - a scene visible upon completion of the Pacifist Route">
<Figcaption>Panorama of //Undertale//'s characters upon completing the Pacifist Route</figcaption></figure>

These are definitely not easy questions to answer, and the answers themselves, if we can even form them, are likely not stable. Gaming culture, as all culture, contains the potential to discuss topics with profound depth and sensitivity. It also contains a not-insignificant amount of people that aren't as interested in taking things seriously.

Certainly, we as consumers and critics can more or less easily adjust our ways of seeing games. But developers and designers have a much larger problem on their hands. Do they account for speedrunners and streamers when it comes to people taking their intentions seriously? And if so, how do they do that? Such is, perhaps, the most important question: If we want to make more complex moral situations for people to navigate, how do we get them to take things seriously?

But there is, of course, some inkling of increased sophistication already present out there on the internet. Certainly, I've shown that //Undertale// [[can have far reaching impacts in people's lives|fans]] beyond just video games. Even when there's contestation over ideas of right and wrong within the game, players still manage to have incredibly sophisticated discussions about the moral choices they've had to make.

What I can say is that when thinking about games in terms of just the game and the player, the analysis obtained from such a method is necessarily limited. When you look at games and players from the perspective of literacy within discourse communities, it allows us the possibility to account for additional actors that impact our engagement with games.

I'm interested in seeing what people come up with when it comes to these problems. To that end, and along with this project, I include the [[bibliography]] with many of the readings that inspired these various passages. Hopefully, it will be useful to anyone interested in such questions as those above!

Thank you very much for reading,

Dylan Alford

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<u>Fans Discourse Example 1</u>

<figure><img src="images\notemotional.png" alt="Reddit post of

an image meme. The title reads, '[spoilers]Whenever a person posts about how they tried genocide, but they 'got too emotional and couldn't bring themselves to complete it" Below this, an image macro of a coy Spongebob face, with text overlaid saying 'YOU COULDN'T BEAT SANS COULD YOU, OP?" style="width: 100%;">

<figcaption>A screencap of an original post on a Reddit discussion at r/Undertale.</figcaption></figure>

In this particular example of a fan engaging in //Undertale// discourse on Reddit, we can see someone using the coy Spongebob image macro, screencapped from a scene where he knows Squidward is saying something dishonest. Within this popular post—it has an upvoted score of over 1.6k—we can see a number of assertions happening. In this context, the Spongebob meme is used to convey how the author believes people are being dishonest when they insist that their emotional response to the Genocide Run causes them to abandon it. Instead, the author suggests that those players are unable to beat the late-game boss character, Sans.

The post is clearly making fun of people for their perceived lack of skill. Still, when taken with the post on the previous page that effusively praised the Pacifist Route, we can see the post as indicative of the myriad ways that people are able to appreciate the game. Specifically, this post also suggests that the author, at least in part, values the difficult experience that the Genocide Route poses. The challenge inherent in dealing with these more difficult encounters offers a more significant test of skill—a wholly different and equally valid form of literacy than the one that we've been talking about, where being "to emotional" and unable to "bring themselves to

complete it" due to the affective charge the game provides demonstrates that there is a kind of moral literacy that the game is trying to engage with.

This moral literacy—one focused on knowing the differences between right and wrong and following through—is [[a site of contestation within the community|fans discourse 2]] in many other posts.

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<u>Bibliography</u>

What follows is a collection of sources either directly utilized within this project or as a springboard for theorization and research. While my research was by no means exhaustive, much of my attention was paid to figuring out how moral choices in games function. Consequently, many sources here would likely be useful for anyone considering further research in the field.

Also, it is regrettable that some of these are locked behind various database paywalls. For that, I apologize. However, there are sources that are accessible to everyone. And, certainly, many of these are 'googleable' in some sense, so there should be accessible versions of them in some form or another.

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<u>Fans Discourse Example 2</u>

The social development of literacies is especially evident in the discourse surrounding the Genocide Route. Take, for example, the following Reddit thread:

<figure><img src="images\shouldnotbe.png" alt="Image of a Reddit post entitled '(Genocide Spoilers) There should NOT be a 'True Genocide Ending." The main message says the following:

I've been seeing a lot of fan made concepts about a boss fight with Chara and such, and while I think they're really cool and well made, a boss fight with Chara defeats the whole purpose of the Genocide run: That you WEREN'T supposed to do a Genocide run! You just killed an entire cast of charming characters out of boredom and cold blood. No part of this run is supposed to give you any sort of satisfaction, much less the ending. Even when you kill a hard boss, you just killed an awesome character! The whole point of this ending is the Genocide ending is that you should NOT have done what you just did. Papyrus told you that he believed in you and that you could take a different path, even at death. Undyne showed that SHE was the hero and that YOU were the villain in this scenario. Sans WARNS you several times before-hand that you're not going to like what happens in this run. You had EVERY opportunity to turn back and take a different path, but you DIDN'T. And now you're facing the consequences. You don't deserve to

fight Chara and get a satisfying conclusion. THIS is the point of the Genocide run and the Genocide runs ending.

(Of course, this is all null and void if you edit save files.)" style="width: 100%;">
<figcaption>Another post from r/Undertale. This post is critical of those who believe there should be an additional form of Genocide Run ending available. Note their argument that the Genocide Run is not "supposed to give you any sort of satisfaction..."</figcaption></figure>
While not nearly as popular as the other posts we've examined, there is still a lot going on here that can be unpacked. In addressing then-recent discussion of whether or not the Genocide Route should have a more comprehensive ending, the author makes the observation that any further elaboration via the Genocide Route would undermine the game's message: "you WEREN'T supposed to do a Genocide run!..No part of this run is supposed to give you any sort of satisfaction, much less the ending." The poster is referring to the nature of authorial intent and giving it more emphasis than the interpretative, interactive power of the audience.

To the author, the game is clearly trying to teach you some sort of lesson, and invokes the idea of [[shame]] as a way to understand it: "You had EVERY opportunity to turn back and take a different path, but you DIDN'T." Clearly, the game is demonstrating a clear sense of right and wrong values to its players, according to the author, though we might also say that this missive allows us to see how the author's own values.

As one might imagine, though, other people were rather keen to respond, as well. This is just a snippet of one of the top responses:

<figure><a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/3rydc2/genocide_spoilers_there_should_not_be_a_true/cwsij52" target="_blank"><img src="images\shouldnotbe2.png" alt="A chain of nested replies to the previous image. The first response reads: Where is this attitude coming from that we aren't supposed to do genocide runs? Every area of the game is altered by doing a genocide run; zone design, artwork, entire music tracks, battles and dialog that you won't see otherwise. All of it thoughtfully and deliberately designed to be experienced by those who choose to.

People seem to be taking Sans dialog about "you did it because you could and therefore you had to" a little too directly. He's a character. It's story telling.

It would be like saying that Romeo and Juliet isn't supposed to be read / watched because it has a sad ending.

In a reply to that comment, the original author writes: But Sans's line there is MEANT to be taken directly. He's criticizing you for taking this path. Just because he's a fictional character does not mean it shouldn't be taken seriously.

And comparing a run in which you kill tons of innocent characters to a tragedy most schools force their students to read is a bit odd.

Finally, the original respondant replies: You can take it seriously if you want, but it is just a single viewpoint. You don't have to agree with it. The game lets you play the villain and there is a lot of content available for those who enjoy that style of gameplay. In fact, I would argue that genocide was designed to reward completionists due to the great amount of work put into it as well as the finale of one the most challenging battles of the game. The irony in San's statement is that pokes fun at the completionist attitude while simultaneously rewarding it.

My only reason for comparing to Romeo and Juliet is that happiness isn't the only form of art worth appreciating. Art can convey any emotion and allow us to reflect on it's meaning.

Genocide is simply a painting hung in a gallery with the words 'do not view me' on it. It's meant to be viewed and for those viewing it to discuss and share the irony of a work that begs itself not to be seen."

style="width: 100%;">

<figcaption>Screencap of the back and forth conversation replying to the above topic, discussing the merits of the Genocide Run.</figcaption></figure>

Here, we have competing values on display. It is a good example of an argument often seen: one person, highly invested in the story, believes it should be interpreted one way. In this case, the author thinks that the buck stops with the designer on moral matters. However, for the responding poster, it's not at all a question of morals, at least in terms of the game. By saying, "It's story telling," the responder shows a more relaxed appreciation for the game. In the same post, they also show that they highly value being able to see everything the game has to offer: "Every area of the game is altered by doing a genocide run...that you won't see otherwise. All of it thoughtfully and deliberately designed to be experienced by those who choose to."

They go on in a further post to say that "Genocide is simply a painting hung in a gallery with the words 'do not view me' on it. It's meant to be viewed and for those viewing it to discuss and share the irony of a work that begs itself not to be seen." This sentiment gestures at the ambivalent way in which //Undertale// wears its morals on its sleeve: if the game didn't want to do 'bad', then why does it let you? Taking the position of the original author into account, it's possible to say that the juxtaposition of routes makes the game's moral argument all the more convincing. With the respondent's argument in mind, however, we might say that the developers are being hypocritical if they want to forward a moral argument, given how much time they've spent on making sure that evil felt fun.

Both comments demonstrate a kind of moral expertise. For the original poster, they took the game's choice poetics and read them as moral impositions, placing value in the author's intent to

shame destructive behavior. For the respondent, they did not read the choices so much as ones with meaningful, moral implications as gating mechanisms to meaningfully different content that it might be good to experience. That is to say, they placed value in experiencing all the content the game had to offer more than its ability to provide some kind of moral dilemma. The respondent also makes the incredibly astute point that the game "pokes fun at the completionist attitude while simultaneously rewarding it" and that, in //Undertale//, the genocidal manner of play is akin to "a painting hung in a gallery with the words 'do not view me' written on it."

This question of [[whether or not enjoyment is possible|fans discourse 3]] during a particular playthrough comes up again and again when people discuss //Undertale//.

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<u>Streamers and Let's Plays 2</u>

[[In the interview|Tyler and Dillon]] conducted with my friend Dillon Downing—editor of and personality in many of FWOB's videos—he says just as much: <blockquote>//Undertale// is a big meme game online and popular with kids who are often known for ruining things...We kinda lean into that—we're just playing //Undertale// because 'it's what the kids want.' Then we'll just do the Neutral Route every single time because people would probably expect us to pick one of the other routes, since we did it the first time. And the second time. And the third time, hahaha.

It's moreso as a joke than because we're sitting there to experience the game.</blockquote>He goes on to jokingly say that "going the middle route isn't as rewarding as committing to one route or another...but it's the least time-consuming and the easiest."

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/xKTdEh2x4ng?start=1905" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>
<figcaption>A section of the Friends Without Benefits video series showing off a Neutral playthrough, which contains the least amount of story beats and represents a mixed set of decisions on the part of the player. During this playthrough, many characters died. However, it's crucial that not all of them were killed. This is why the ending starting at 31:45 is so abrupt.</figcaption></figure>

For this example, we turn our attention to the Friends Without Benefits channel on Youtube. They often get quite rowdy in their videos, with explicit language and such, though this is not altogether rare among gaming personalities on the internet—Youtube or otherwise. Their energy, much like that of JackSepticEye, is very exuberant, discussing all manner of things outside of the game while playing at the same time.

In the video above, however, they reach the end of the game and get a Neutral Route ending in an incredibly fast time, as opposed to the comprehensive Genocide Route ending that they'd said

they'd do at the beginning of the series of playthrough videos. The otherwise serious decisions made in the game are rendered comedic for an ever-present audience. Additionally, the expectations of the audience are also something that can be subverted. Participation in a game, and playing it in a certain way, can serve a means by which streamers can mess with their audience.

<figure><img src="images\fwobresponses.jpg" style="width: 80%;" alt="Various responses to the end of the playthrough above, as well as the rest of the video series. Comments read as follows:

From user Zturtle, "REALLY?!? this is the 3rd Undertale playthrough on this channel and GOE is playing the game too COME ON! Still gonna watch it though."

From user TheDankHold, "Not just the 3rd upload of Undertale but the third time they've uploaded a neutral playthrough. At least do genocide or pacifist my guys."

From user Norain, "Yeah no. I definitely don't dig the whole no caring playthrough of a story based game."

From Leniel Villafane, "im glad theyre breezing through the game like this, its a whole different perspective"

From DT2K16, "that was so anticlimactic"

From Just Incompetent, "If you don't play pacifist on the channel, I'm calling the police"">
<figcaption>Various reactions to FWOB's playthrough series above were mixed, much to their own amusement. In any event, discussion of the choices made during the series were kept to a minimum, save their desire to see FWOB perform every kind of playthrough.</figcaption></figure>

In both of these examples of streamers and Let's Players, one gets the sense that these streamers-as-players are not receiving the game's imposed moral choices in an earnest manner. Rather, they are using the choices to provide entertainment for a curious audience, thereby subverting the game's message to a certain extent. Shame and shame-causing acts are never dealt with on a personal level in this instance, but rather treated as fodder for the entertainment of the audience. In this sense, the social aspect of literacy functions not through moral choices in the games, but rather as a cultural literacy through the in-jokes and meme between the streamer and the audience. David Barton describes how literacies can vary based on contexts of social relations:

<blockquote>People's literacy practices are situated in broader social relations. This makes it necessary to describe the social setting of literacy events, including the ways in which social institutions support particular literacies (Barton, 41).</blockquote>

The kind of moral literacy that can be observed when people are engaging with a game as players, then discussing their choices, is altogether different compared to the specific cultural literacy that emerges out of a relationship between an audience and performer. While these literacies can overlap for viewers that have also played the game, the audience-performer literacy involves understanding the verbal and non-verbal winks and nods between the multiple parties, whereas the literacy that the game develops with players emphasizes morality through choice-and-consequence signifiers that attempt to invoke shame. We can [[look at the two Let's Players|streamers 3]] and see this in action.

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<u>Fans Discourse Example 3</u>

<figure><img src="images\enjoypacifism1.png" alt="Image of Reddit thread. Original post reads as follows: People who have claimed that Undertale's pacifist run left them unwilling to enjoy killing game characters, how long did that last?

I'm more of a point and click adventure game type which often doesn't come with much killing so it wasn't really an issue for me, but I saw a bunch of people claiming this. Had the spell worn off by a day later? A week?" style="width: 100%;">

<figcaption>Screencap of a post from r/Undertale. Here, the author wants to know what the experiences of others are vis-a-vis the impact the game's Pacifist Run.</figcaption></figure>

In this post, a fan asks if anyone has had the experience of not enjoying killing characters in other games due to their experiences with //Undertale// and the kill-less, pacifist playthrough. There is a clear connection here to the affective/emotional implications that //Undertale// might have on other games. They attempt to explore this, trying to find out if the moral literacy arising from //Undertale//'s choice poetics was particular to //Undertale// or if it was a transferrable literacy. This prompt generated a number of responses from the community:

<a

href="https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/535c9q/people_who_have_claimed_that_undertales_pacifist/d7q5eb8" target="_blank"><img src="images\enjoypacifism2.png"

alt="Image shows response to the above question. Redditor baltosaa says, 'Undertale only made me feel bad for killing in Undertale.

I always feel good, or nothing, when killing in other games. Undertale never changed that for me, personally.'

The author of the original prompt responds with 'Fair enough.'" style="width: 100%;">

For one person, the pacifism playthrough only made them "feel bad for killing in Undertale." For them, the moral question, as well as the its consequences, isn't really there in other games as much as it can be felt in //Undertale//. More than this, however, they elaborate and say that killing is something that either feels good for them or engenders no feeling at all in other games.

While the thread itself is locked and follow-up questions are now impossible, we can see that, for at least some people, the implications of a game's particular moral systems seem to be felt by the people playing them in a localized fashion. However, this is not the entire story, and more responses to the thread show the issue as more complex:

<img src="images\enjoypacifism3.png" alt="Image shows response to the original prompt question. Redditor radblook says, 'I still do it when the enemies will kill you otherwise (i.e. in Kirby I'm not gonna try to 'hug' a Waddle Dee), but I still feel guilty about eliminating them..'" style="width: 100%;">

For this particular player, killing in games has been complicated by playing through //Undertale//. For them, where once killing or defeating foes was guiltless, they were more

conscious about the matter, feeling guilty. In their example of the Kirby series of games, Waddle Dee is an enemy, albeit a very cute one. While in some ways, it is possible to just avoid them, sometimes that is not the case. It is like this for other games as well, where the need to kill/defeat enemies is presupposed and thus normal.

For others still, the experience of //Undertale// has affected them to such a degree that, months later, they report a change in the way they approach games:

<img src="images\enjoypacifism4.png" alt="Image of Reddit user vsou812 responding with 'Played it months ago.

Still haven't.'" style="width: 100%;">

Taken altogether, these post show a range of responses to //Undertale//'s pacifism-style playthrough and how their experiences with such affect the way they receive other games. While some insist that their gameplay is unchanged or otherwise particular based on the game that they're playing at the time, others admit to being moved such that they at least give their actions more consideration, with feelings of guilt being mentioned as a catalyst for such. Yet still, others

find themselves so moved that it's fundamentally changed the way they approach playing games, however momentarily.

With all of these posts and countless more, we can see the invested, earnest fans of the game as diverse in their particular values, and that they use the moral impositions in their game of choice as a means to discuss and coordinate those values, whether they consider the discussion or game serious or not. It probably goes without saying, but discourse around a morally complex game like //Undertale// clearly yields an equally complex considerations of morals, moreso than a game with less complex systems of various endings or battle interactions, such as //Final Fantasy// or //Earthbound//.

However, there is also a [[complication]] when it comes to analyzing how people are receiving the game's potential choices with a lens of shame or morality. Today, games are not just played. They are watched by millions.

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<u>Tyler and Dillon - Fans of //Undertale//</u>

In order to get a sense of how the regular, gaming public engaged with //Undertale//, I decided to interview my friends Tyler and Dillon, whom I knew to be pretty big fans of the game.

<figure><iframe width="100%" height="200" scrolling="no" frameborder="no"
allow="autoplay"
src="https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/593856678&color=%23ff5500&auto_play=false&hide_related=true&show_comments=true&show_user=true&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true"></iframe>
<figcaption>Interview with Tyler. Timecodes can be found on [[this passage|Tyler Timecode]], as they are too numerous to include below.</figcaption></figure>

Like many other gamers, video games have figured into Tyler's life for years. "One of my earliest gaming memories, I guess, was playing //Pokémon Red// or //Yellow// on my Game Boy Color as like a four or five year old little baby," he says in the above interview.

Other major gaming touchstones for Tyler were //the Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion//, which puts puts you in the role of an adventurer attempting to stop the apocalypse after failing to avert an emperor's assassination, as well as <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Wars:_Knights_of_the_Old_Republic"

target="_blank">//Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic//, in which you play a jedi (anti)hero again trying to avert catastrophe.

However, both of these games, compared to //Undertale// have moral systems that, while not necessarily less complex, are more foregrounded. In //Oblivion// and the other games in the series, if you perform some action that is against the rules within the view of regular characters in the game, they'll more or less call the authorities on you. If you were to steal something from someone, for instance, guards would come take the stolen item from you and force you to pay a fine or get hauled off to jail for a certain amount of time. In any case, as soon as you do something wrong, there is usually an indication of such on the user interface. "X-number of Bounty added in Y-region" will appear in the corner of the screen - a very straightforward and pointed feedback system to make sure you understand the rules.

<figure><img src="images\oblivionguard.jpg" alt="Image shows guard dialogue encounter after crime in the Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. Scene shows the current bounty in upper left-hand corner of the screen. "Go to Jail" and "Resist Arrest" are the available dialogue options for the player." style="width: 100%;"><figcaption>
Guard dialogue in //Oblivion//</figcaption></figure>However, such a representation of moral choice where the feedback is so immediate and apparent doesn't lend much gravitas to the matter.

Bounties in //Oblivion// and the like don't have any narrative consequences beyond presenting slight, ephemeral gameplay challenges. It's fairly trivial in the situation above, for instance, to just spend a small amount of gold to avoid trouble, and then the incident is never mentioned again by anyone! In other words, there isn't anything really at stake in a game like this when it comes to ideas of right and wrong. Nothing appears to be off limits, and so nothing appears to be significant.

Tyler also notes that games these days could learn a lot from //Undertale// regarding how to make choices feel more significant:
<blockquote>"I'd like to see more games like //Undertale// where you get to feel the impact of your choices, like, //significantly//. There's a lot of games that'll give you the illusion of options—you can choose like option A, B, or C and then at the end of the game, nothing you did actually mattered."</blockquote> While he doesn't necessarily feel as though his experiences with //Undertale// have had some kind of lasting impact beyond it being an excellent game to experience, when talking about how enamoured other gamers are with the game, Tyler does acknowledge that it can be something that people really take to heart. "It's a powerful game. Falling in love with the characters and the story is really easy. I could definitely see why someone might forgo seeing the rest of the story just to not have to kill them," later adding that "//Undertale// would definitely be in the top echelon of games with important moral meanings," even though "one game can only do so much."

[[Dillon Downing, my other interviewee|Tyler and Dillon 2]], also echoes a lot of these sentiments when it comes to thinking about moral choices in games and how they are used to varying degrees of success.

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<u>Speedrunners, contd.</u>

<figure><iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/WnDBZTRXd7s" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>
<figcaption>Video capture of SnowieY101's pacifist playthrough during SGDQ 2018. Note at 38:35 onward how most of the discussion is about the various glitches being used. At 39:35, they talk about skipping a series of events entirely that end up letting the player circumvent an entire boss encounter completely—no dialogue nor moral choices to be made, at any rate.</figcaption></figure>

To get another sense of how speedrunning can create a sort of communal atmosphere and discussion, it's important to look at speedrunning as a means for dedicated players to show off cool tricks to others and not just as a competition to get a high score.

In the above video, for example, we see a speedrunner going through the game for the Summer Games Done Quick in 2018. The event itself is under the umbrella of the Awesome Games Done Quick series of events that serve as exhibitions of speedrunning talent for the purpose of fundraising for various charities. Speedrunners of games both popular and obscure convene on a single location at each of these seasonal events with the idea being to show off their skills while trying to do good in the process.

We can see just from the beginning that the speedrunner is skipping their way through the various encounters, playing through them as quickly as possible. However, this time, it's with the goal of getting Yellow Credits for each monster at the end of the game. In order to do that, they must be spared in every fight, which is different and more elaborate of a process than just running away from every single encounter, which would save more time. In any case, both the process and the rationale behind the play is different from someone making an earnest playthrough on their own time: the process is so rote as to be completed in just over 90 minutes and the rationale behind the choices is that it was a complication to the run introduced by a donation goal.

It may seem like a self-evident thing to mention, but the cheers from the audience during this person's run are not necessarily a celebration of the doing of good, but from the sheer display of skill on behalf of the runner.

In this example of people playing games for an audience, it's harder to tell which values are being displayed and enacted. Certainly, there is a communal interest in doing good and the game is a part of that - it's important to note that, whether at SGDQ or AGDQ, there are no Genocide speedruns. But, on the other hand, it feels like much of the impact of the game is elided in favor of just the pure celebration of athletic achievement. In any case, speedrunning doesn't really feel the ideal way to engage with narrative, except for those moments when all control is taken from the player. But if that's the case, is it really a game in those moments?

If they are taken along with the other player groups, speedrunners pose [[interesting complications|Takeaways]] to game narratives when it comes to analyzing the impact of player choice in games, as well as the moral implications of such.

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<u>Tyler and Dillon - Fans of //Undertale//, contd.</u>

<figure><iframe width="100%" height="200" scrolling="no" frameborder="no"
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src="https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/593896758&color=%23ff5500&auto_play=false&hide_related=true&show_comments=true&show_user=true&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true"></iframe>
<figcaption>Interview with Dillon. Timecodes can be found on [[this passage|Dillon Timecode]], as they are too numerous to include below.</figcaption></figure>

Dillon, who I've interviewed above, is a good friend of mine—much like Tyler—and someone for whom games are an incredibly vital piece of their life. For instance, playing games on a somewhat competitive basis was a more or less consistent source of income:<blockquote>I used to be a semi-professional //Super Smash Brothers// player. I would go to tournaments every week, sometimes a couple a week, and usually would, at least locally in Oklahoma, take first place and use that money to pay my bills.</blockquote> Moreover, especially within the context of competitive games, Dillon very much picks up on the quality of video games where, when you play them, it's like you're "learning how to learn."

<blockquote>If I'm really good at one iteration of //Smash Bros.//, for instance, and then the next one comes out, I haven't played it at all and it could be a whole new game in terms of gameplay, but I understand more than somebody who's just picking it up, like people's habits, what their mindsets are during certain situations, how

they respond to pressure, what they're thinking //I'm thinking//, and it gets very deep in that regard.</blockquote>Part and parcel with the idea of learning in this quote is also its nature as a social activity. This doesn't escape Dillon, either, who says that these kinds of competitive games are different than just the online-but-isolated, gameplay in seclusion that most people think games consist of. <blockquote>You actually have to go and talk to people. You have to hang out with the people for whom you may have just ruined their day and upset them and kicked them out of the tournament way early and they could be mad at you...or vice-versa, but you still have to interact with them.</blockquote> It should be clear to us, then, that games are an extremely formative part of Dillon's life. However, more than just the competitive games, those with moral choices definitely have a lot of appeal for him when he's playing by himself. //Mass Effect//, for instance, is one of his favorite game franchises and those games are all about choices and making decisions, though to him, the decisions in those games "won't have as large an impact on the story, because it'll just be 'Do you say this thing to piss this person off?' or 'Do you say this thing to make them happy?'" In other words, there's relatively little sophistication in the amount of options available to you within games like //Mass Effect//. "You know what the Nice Guy option is and you know what the Bad Guy option is every single time."

<figure><img src="images\paragonrenegade.png" alt="Image of radial dialogue menu in Mass Effect 3 with

several choices. Highlighted blue is the 'good guy' option: I can be reasonable. Highlighted red is the 'bad guy' option: I will hunt you down." style="width: 100%;"><figcaption>
Example from //Mass Effect 3// of the radial dialogue menus with color-coded Good Guy and Bad Guy options</figcaption></figure>//Undertale// is the same in some ways, however, with its routes, but the process of getting through the entire game while committing to a wholly different playstyle is a lot more complicated than selecting differently flavored dialogue options. When thinking about how he first wanted to play //Undertale//, Dillon decided to do the Genocide Route, as he knew ahead of time from what people said that it would be the hardest possible experience, gameplay-wise. A clear example of this can be seen in our earlier discussion of the [[genocide route]]. He says, "I wanted to see if my skills were good enough to beat a supposedly very difficult video game. I was seeking a challenge."

He goes on to say that another part of the appeal was seeing the game react the way that it did to this kind of playthrough and that it was something he "hadn't seen before."
<blockquote>I liked how the characters within the world evolve and react to your decisions not even necessarily at a critical juncture like other video games would do. Because what would happen in other storytelling video games is that you'd get to a certain point and they'd be like "Oh, Option A or Option B is gonna impact the story!..." Whereas, in //Undertale//, it's a constant experience where it just trickles and adds up. If you choose to kill the boss of Chapter 1, then maybe somebody in Chapter 5 will treat your character differently..."</blockquote>So, clearly the game's more complex moral system has a depth to it of which other games are only scraping

the surface. Both Tyler and Dillon are pretty big fans of the game and what it represents, but as Tyler suggests, he doesn't really go out and talk with other people about what the game means for him. While we have a good sense for the way people think about games as a whole, and some idea of what //Undertale// can mean to the individual, but we need to now examine some [[very online and very vocal|fans]] fans to see how the discourses surrounding //Undertale// include negotiating shared moral values.

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<u>Streamers and Let's Plays 3</u>

With JackSepticEye, his own personal interest in the game is subsumed by his audience's, leading to him making videos where he plays through the game acting out the voices and making game decisions in prescribed ways. It's impossible to tell if he would have been able to finish the Genocide Route in his own time. In any case, through performing a different kind of cultural literacy, the choices have a different valence.

With FWOB, the game is also a canvas for performance. Through the FIGHT and MERCY mechanic of the combat encounters, and the events that happen as a consequence of such, the game becomes a take part in a larger in-joke with a diverse audience that may be both aware and unaware of the joke, thereby developing their own, particular community literacy, as well. Here

too, the game has surplus meanings that communities use to their particular ends. With this in mind, the game can be seen as something more than a simplistic moral sounding board.

The message of the game, then, is transformed. In joking about doing a Genocide run or a Pacifism run, FWOB and its audience are establishing their own set of values wherein games aren't necessarily meant to be taken completely seriously. In never settling on what kind of route they want to take, FWOB is having fun at the expense of both those that are genuinely interested in the Genocide route as well as those looking for a Pacifist playthrough. The repeated playthroughs of the game in this manner serve as rebuttals to those wanting to see how Dillon and company will react to the various decisions they make.

This is important, because the value of the choices in the game for the streamer comes from the fact that they can be used to create a spectacle for their audience, not the pure goals of pacifism and violence that players are expected to gravitate towards when using the choice poetics model, where the "moral dichotomy" that arises from "a carefully crafted choice" that gets "players to think deeply about it as they attempt to justify their decisions to one another" (Mawhorter et al., "Choice Poetics by Example," 8-9). These choices and goals are only valuable to FWOB insofar as the opposite of their expected choice may be invoked to create an in-joke and mess with fans. "Thinking deeply" about the morality of the decision does not enter the framework.

The streamer does not read the game in the same way, or to the same end, as a typical player. This refusal to do exactly what some of their fans want, and thereby amusing the more knowledgeable in their audience, is part of a reciprocal discussion of moral acts that exists beyond just the player and the game. The particular game or developer's authorial intent—the affective charge that would come along with performing otherwise shameful acts—is sublimated. The discussion, then, turns away from ideas of right, wrong, and the impact of choices, and instead towards different ways of playing and the right ways to play.

But streamers are not the only group of players that complicate the way choice functions in games. Another group, called [[speedrunners|Speedrunners]], also subverts the choices posed by the developer, though in a wholly different manner. It's only through examining both streamers and speedrunners that we can start to develop some ideas about [[what this rupture means for games and the design of choices|Takeaways]].

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<u>Tyler Interview Timecodes</u>

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olor=%23ff5500&auto_play=false&hide_related=true&show_comments=true&show_user=true&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true"></iframe>

<figcaption>Interview with Tyler.</figcaption></figure>

Timecodes are as follows:

0:24 - Personal Gaming History

5:12 - Being good at games

9:37 - Narrative games and interacting with moral choices

14:23 - Playing a game multiple times with different decisions

15:58 - Appraising moral systems mechanics in games and their significance

18:35 - Games with moral choices: individualistic or social?

21:43 - "Do you think that games can teach you things? If so, what do you think they have to teach?"

24:14 - Personal history with //Undertale//

25:42 - Falling in love with the characters

26:45 - Foreknowledge of the different ways of playing

28:41 - Playing through the different routes

31:01 - Genocide playthrough and what makes it interesting; the impact of "killing all of the friends you just made"

32:23 - Affective/emotional reactions

33:33 - Genocide route content being different; more story

35:44 - "I think it would be actually impossible to stumble onto the Genocide Route without hearing about it"

37:13 - What happens after the game is done

38:32 - What is Undertale trying to teach us?

40:05 - "It's about your personal morality...You get to choose...It's about your morality and perseverance."

42:00 - "What do you think the creator's position is?.. Is it ambivalent or ambiguous?"

43:18 - "What would you say is the lasting impact //Undertale// has on you?"

44:01 - Discussing //Undertale// with other players

45:45 - //Undertale// is a powerful game

47:00 - "In this game, it feels like Toby Fox decided, 'What if the monsters that you killed had emotions and lives and backstories?'"

47:31 - In other games like this, "moral dilemmas aren't really the point"

49:30 - Lasting impacts of the game

51:55 - "Do you think that //Undertale// contributes to the development of moral literacies?...Where would you rank it?"

53:10 - Fingerprints of //Undertale// in other games

54:01 - Closing thoughts - What would you like to see out of games in the future?

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<u>Dillon Interview Timecodes</u>

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<figcaption>Interview with Dillon of Friends Without Benefits</figcaption></figure>

0:05 - Personal history with video games; "semi-professional" esports person
1:46 - Difference between playing competitively and playing for fun; "I generally have fun, but you don't always have to."
3:23 - Playing to relax vs. playing games for work; being competitive at games
4:19 - "If I wasn't playing it, I was usually watching a Twitch stream...I call it 80% entertainment, 20% studying."
5:10 - A shift: drive to improve being absent since gaming for Youtube

5:37 - For singleplayer games, getting better is "by speedrunning," or playing them "to completion"

7:05 - Video games teach people things, "absolutely."

8:05 - Competitive video games especially teach you "how to learn"

9:38 - Video games entail learning how to interact socially

10:45 - Differences when playing games in person compared to online; "We're both anonymous video game players"

12:50 - Games that include moral choices

14:35 - Defining the "visual novel" genre

15:37 - Reaction to moral choices in games and their impact on narrative

17:45 - Moral choices enhancing the narrative? "Too much freedom of choice in games will force you to take a trade-off in terms of a logical story."

18:45 "It's like taking a bunch of different stories and cobbling them all together."

19:33 - Games that incorporate choices well are games like //Heavy Rain//; Games that do this poorly are like Telltale's //The Walking Dead//

24:37 - How to choose and play games

26:08 - First encounter with //Undertale//

27:34 - Comparing //Undertale// to Earthbound, but not //Final Fantasy//; less "grandiose," more "kid adventure"

29:20 - Impact of having played other games before //Undertale//

30:28 - How he first played the game; Genocide Run; "seeking a challenge"; interesting distinctions between the game and others in the genre

34:11 - Multiple playthroughs; "I played through it A LOT"; "a running joke where we play through //Undertale// instead of another game that we haven't experienced"

34:55 - Difference between playing games for yourself vs. for an audience

36:22 - Value of the Neutral Route; easiest and least time-consuming; we like to "frustrate our audience"

37:50 - Learning moral lessons from //Undertale//; "If you see a good move, look for a better one"; it teaches you to "think outside the box" of the genre

40:19 - Distinctions between their Youtube channel and other similar gaming channels; developing an in-group and being non-serious - satirizing the Let's Play genre

42:27 - Final thoughts about //Undertale//'s moral impositions and what it tries to teach

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