

Undertale: Violence in Context

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Abstract

The following capstone paper analyses the communication of non-violence and killing in the digital computer game *Undertale* (TobyFox, 2015). I discuss the implications this has for how we speak and think about violence and (virtual) pacifism in games and game spaces. I conclude that we need to consider a more nuanced approach to discussing violence in digital games. I further argue that *Undertale*, and related Indie games, bridge the (artificial) gap between serious games and entertainment games. The line that exists academically and economically between these two sectors ultimately contributes to an extreme understanding of games on either side that limits our understanding of what games are and what they can do that is ultimately harmful to both sides. I therefore encourage a reconsideration of these two game genres.

Keywords: digital games; pacifism; Undertale; serious games; non-violence, gamergate

*For my family, whose tireless love and support
has made it possible for me to be here,*

And for Mel.

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Chapter 1.

Background

1.1. Introduction

In 2015, Toby Fox, an independent game developer, released the critically acclaimed computer game *Undertale* on the entertainment game market. The self-proclaimed friendly role-playing game (RPG), where no one has to die criticises the so typical act of killing in RPGs as something inherently negative and harmful. Although created on a very small budget by just one person, it sold over two million copies on the digital distribution platform Steam alone (SteamSpy, n.d.). It also generated an incredible amount of discussion among gamers online, often centred around the game's central message of "don't kill and don't be killed", the games' definition of pacifism (e.g., Julius, 2016; Dinicola, 2016). While using digital games to teach and communicate with players about pacifism and non-violent conflict resolution is not a new idea among serious game developers and researchers, it is still relatively unexplored in entertainment game research, where debates often centre around the negative effects of digital games.

Outside of its relevance for peace studies, *Undertale's* (TobyFox, 2015) success is culturally relevant given the current political climate in mainstream entertainment game spaces such as online forums like Reddit, social media like Twitter or web services such as Twitch. The ongoing effort by members of the so-called GamerGate movement to keep 'politics', which in many cases means women and minorities, out of positions of power and authority in the entertainment game market has created a hostile environment for any sort of 'political' criticism of games (Alexander, 2014). A number of indie games, a booming area of the entertainment game sector, has received excessive backlash for the way they address more serious social issues and have been accused as pandering to minorities (WolvDragon, 2015). The fact that *Undertale* was commercially successful in such a climate was unexpected and has been attributed to its succeeding as a game, first and foremost (Reddit, 2016). This throws up important questions, such as how we define serious and entertainment games and what the academic and market separation of these two areas of game studies mean for them.

Given *Undertale*'s ethical message and cultural significance, this study aims to discover how *Undertale* communicates its ethical message and what implications this has for non-violence research in serious and entertainment games. To that end, I first survey the relevant literature regarding pacifism and non-violence in entertainment and serious games. In chapter 2, I introduce the actual game and its cultural relevance. Chapter 3 covers my methodology. In Chapter 4, I present my close reading of three of the game's elements: sound design, graphics and game mechanics. Chapter 5 discusses the implication of my findings for the study of pacifism and non-violence in digital games, as well as the larger cultural importance of *Undertale* (TobyFox, 2015) and its implications for both entertainment and serious games.

1.2. Defining serious and entertainment games

According to Djaouti, Alvarez, Jessel & Rampnoux (2011), the digital game sector in North America first became divided between serious and entertainment games in 2002, when developers amass latched on to the new label introduced by Sawyer and Rejeski (2002). Sawyer and Rejeski had introduced the concept of serious games, i.e. games with a purpose other than "amusement" (p.9) by Abt (1970) to the technology of 21st century digital games. According to *Origin of Serious Games*, by Djaouti, Alvarez, Jessel and Rampnoux (2011), the reason for this sudden mass-adoption of the new term lies in the socio-economic history of digital games in North America.

After the crash of the video game industry in the US in 1983, digital games became largely known as leisure entertainment for children. However, due to the eventual appearance of child-inappropriate content in games, such as overt violence, public opinion had turned sour. At the same time, developers and other parties, including the American Army, were using or at least considered using digital games for their own mean, for example education. Considering the public opinion of digital games as potential harmful children's entertainment, many developers were eager to adopt a label that separated them from other games, both in terms of purpose and target audience. (Djaouti, Alvarez, Jessel and Rampnoux, 2011).

Since then, there has been an extensive, ongoing debate about the definition of serious games. The dominant idea in the industry seems to be that there is a set of characteristics that sets serious games apart from entertainment games aimed at the

mainstream video game market, and that a common definition must also encompass all parties involved the broader serious game industry (Corti, 2007; Djaouti, Alvarez & Jessel, 2011). The most widely accepted definitions seem to follow the line of thought of Chen & Michael (2005), who define serious games as “Games that do not have entertainment, enjoyment or fun as their primary purpose” (p.40). Meaning that the defining difference between entertainment and serious games is what their aim is. Others have built on this by adding that the burden of providing said purpose generally lies with the developer of the game and taking into consideration that the purpose of a game might shift or be altered by other parties (Djaouti, Alvarez & Jessel, 2011). This focus on developer purpose has also been criticized. Jantke & Gaudle (2010), for example, argue that a developer’s intention is highly inaccessible and argue for a more complex approach that takes player experience into consideration, an aspect that seems to often go ignored. On the other side, Marsh (2011) has raised the question whether or not some serious games should be categorized as games at all. The argument being that typical game characteristics, such as play, fun or challenge might be socially or culturally inappropriate considering the sometimes heavy issues serious games can address and that there is more to them than “competitiveness and levelling-up” (p. 62). He therefor extends his definition to also include software with little to no game characteristics.

“[Serious games are] digital games, simulations, virtual environments and mixed reality/media that provide opportunities to engage in activities through responsive narrative/story, gameplay or encounters to inform, influence, for well-being, and/or experience to convey meaning. The quality or success of serious games is characterized by the degree to which purpose has been fulfilled. Serious games are identified along a continuum from games for purpose on one end, through to experiential environments with minimal or no gaming characteristics for experience at the other end.” (p. 63)

This of course brings up the question what exactly we consider to be a game, a debate that is also on-going in the mainstream game community, especially in respect to newer game genres. Reducing them to “competitiveness and leveling-up” seems incredibly reductive and limiting considering the wide variety of entertainment games on the market. This definition has also been criticized due to the conflation of challenge and fun as exclusively game characteristics, and the implication that entertainment cannot be serious (Champion, 2016).

Finally, Djaouti, Alvarez, Jessel and Rampoux (2011) offer a more market focused definition of serious games. They suggest that serious games differ from entertainment games primarily through their business model. Where entertainment games finance themselves through individual sales, serious games are usually funded by a single client and sale numbers are a secondary or non-existent concern. While their definition is not inclusive of all games that would probably be considered serious, such as education games sold to students, they do bring up the so-far neglected economic factor. It would certainly go a long way to explain why players are a neglected fraction in the definition debate. Since the market is not dependent on their views, they go ignored. It is also maybe the only definition that actually draws a tangible line between serious and entertainment games.

Taking all of this into consideration, it cannot be said that there is a clear definition that separates serious from entertainment games. Nevertheless, they are treated as separate genres in academia, most likely based on three factors: their primary purpose (entertainment/ serious), target market (mainstream digital game players/ anyone else) and their business model (individual sales/ client based), with purpose being seen as the most important.

1.3. Pacifism and Non-violence in digital entertainment games

Pacifism in digital entertainment game spaces is not a new concept. It is occasionally a subject of debate on discussion boards, often in conjunction with whether or not pacifists can or should enjoy certain games, or when making lists for players who do not want to play violent games (e.g., Melio, n.d.); It also comes up during debates about violent games who may or may not offer non-violent forms of conflict resolution (PlayR489, 2016). Often, and related to the last point, it comes up when players are talking about so-called pacifist runs. Broadly speaking, pacifist runs refers to players beating a violent game in a non-violent fashion. As with the other ways pacifism is debated, players hardly ever take the time to define what exactly they mean by it. Definitions vary widely, sometimes referring to the use of no (physical) violence, sometimes no killing and sometimes even to just killing unavoidable enemies. The term “pacifism” is therefor used loosely.

Academically, not much research seems to have been done on pacifism in these mainstream game spaces. A study by Payne from 2014 analysis the game *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) for its criticism of military First- and Third-Person-Shooters and their skewed portrayal of war and the military. A more recent study by Stamenkovic, Jacevic and Wildfeuer (2016) focuses on the persuasive power of digital games through their multimodality and interactivity, using discourse theory to analyze the persuasive potential of *Metal Gear Solids*’ (Kojima, 1998) anti-war and killing message. However, neither of these studies ever use the terms pacifist or even non-violence, instead opting to use the terms anti-war, anti-military or simply against killing.

The first to use the term pacifism in relation to entertainment games might be Calka (2012), who uses cluster analysis to examine the performance of pacifism as a marginalized identity in the massive-multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). Set in the fictional world of Azeroth, players choose one of two factions, Hord or Alliance, that are constantly pitted against each other. While the game does offer non-violent forms of interaction, such as crafting items, the obviously intended form of gameplay is battle. This can either occur between player characters, or with computer generated monsters. Fighting allows characters to level up and progress in the game. The no-longer existing evangelical pacifist guild “Sisters of the Forsaken” rejects this form of game play. They consciously put themselves against what they perceive to be an endless cycle of mindless killing perpetuated by the fact that the game is never-ending and no fraction will ever win for good. Guild members are encouraged to use non-violent means to end conflict, such as running away or having their avatars perform actions to show good-will. Calka points out that playing as a pacifist in a game where violence is the dominant form of gameplay is a political choice:

“Perhaps they chose a PvP server because they want to reach the most violent of players with their ideology. However, it seems more likely that they perform a marginalized identity for performance’s sake: They perform as a deliberate act of resistance and as a statement that there are multiple ways of being in the (virtual) world.”

Where Calka (2012) uses (virtual) pacifism to describe the actions of the Sisters of the Forsaken, Largent (2013) argues that (virtual) non-violence is a more accurate term to define the subversive actions of players. In her dissertation, *Screen Peace: How virtual pacifism and virtual nonviolence can impact peace education*, she focuses on three players who received moderate online fame by playing non-violently in the popular

RPG *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011). As Largent points out, players usually do pacifist runs for two reasons: either as a new, more challenging form of game play (i.e. for bragging rights in the community), or as a political statement. The former is more common: While players acknowledge that playing-non-violently in a game that does not want you to can be interpreted as a form of resistance to a dominant ideology, that is not the reason why most of them do it. Nevertheless, she argues that even if the action is not politically motivated, through gamification these violent games can be used by educators to spark discussions about the nature of violence and nonviolent resistance. Largent (2013) is the only one to offer a formal definition of pacifism and non-violence. She draws on Kurlansky (2006), who argues that where pacifism is a passive (and therefore harmless) belief against war and violence, non-violence is its active counterpart, a form of civil disobedience. "Non-violence, exactly like violence, is a means of persuasion" (Kurlansky, 2006, p.6. as cited in Largent, 2013 2006, p. 14). For this paper, I choose to follow the same definitions of pacifism as the passive belief against war, killing and violence and non-violence as its active enactment and form of resistance against violence, war and killing.

Unfortunately, I was unable to find other research that deals specifically with pacifism and non-violence in mainstream games and their communities. In her dissertations, Largent (2013) points out a similar issue, leading me to believe that this area of research might be relatively new and still sparsely populated. It is however possible that there is research that does technically address pacifism and non-violence, but does not explicitly mention these terms and instead frames their research through a lens of anti-war, anti-military, anti-killing and anti-violence, as seen in Payne (2014) and Stamenkovic, Jacevic and Wildfeuer (2016). They could therefore have fallen through the cracks or been mistaken for research focused on the academic discourse surrounding the real-life effects of violence in video games on players. Nevertheless, research specifically about pacifism and non-violence in entertainment game spaces seems to still be rare. In the field of serious games research, however, that is not so much the case.

1.4. Serious games for peace education

Peace education and interactive conflict resolution are largely based around the "social contact" hypothesis, which argues that the less contact social groups have with

each other, the more biases and prejudice they will have against each other, creating an in-group, out-group mentality (Hewstone & Greenland, 2000). The way to reverse this effect, is more social contact to disproof stereotypes and encourage mutual humanization (Pettigrew, 1986; Cuhadar & Dayton, 2011). The idea is to build a shared narrative about the conflict, self-reflection on one's own contributions to it, mutual humanization, empathy and encourage non-violent behavior (Salomon & Nevo, 2002). This should then ideally lead to a mutual understanding and non-violent solution to conflicts. Traditionally, role-playing and simulations have been common methods to accomplish this (Hatipoglu, Müftüler-bağ & Murphy, 2014).

While the use of digital games for peace education has recently received a resurgence in public attention (Campbell, 2017) due to a working paper by Davarsi (2016) on behalf of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the idea has existed longer than that. Fontana and Beckerman suggested the use of digital games for peace education in children as early as 2004 in their study *Childhood Violence Prevention Education Using Video Games* where they analyzed the effectiveness of the experimental educational video game *Peace Rangers* on teaching elementary school children non-violent conflict resolution in a class-room setting. They found that the game's fun-factor and its ability to be played unsupervised were valuable for teaching pro-social attitudes.

Since then, researchers have suggested that digital games have unique properties, such as their multimodality and interactivity (Nilsen, LeDonne, Klemperer & Olund, 2011; Smethursts & Craps, 2015) that are advantageous when educating people about conflicts, encourage perspective taking, build empathy, and provide a more sophisticated and accessible learning environment (e.g., Davarsi, 2016; Cuhadar & Kampf, 2015). Studies have shown substantial evidence that various serious games are effective for peace education, such as *Global Conflicts* (Serious Games Interactive, 2007) or *Peace Maker* (Impact Games, 2007) (e.g., Cuhadar & Kampf, 2015; Cuhadar & Kampf, 2014).

Research into non-violence in entertainment games and serious games for peace education both have a similar focus: How digital games can and do communicate and teach messages about non-violence and non-violent conflict resolution. However, when comparing the two areas, two things stand out. First, there is very little overlap

between serious and entertainment game research. Either “side” seems to only rarely, if at all, refer to each other. Part of this can of course be traced back to the fact that non-violence in entertainment game spaces seems to be a relatively new area of study, but that cannot explain all of it. It gives the impression that both sides largely ignore each other.

Second, and maybe related, is the fact that either side seems to use slightly different terminology. Payne (2014) and Stamenkovic, Jacevic and Wildfeuer (2016), for example, frame their research as focused on anti-killing and anti-war, while serious game researchers use non-violence and peace. This difference seems small, but conjure entirely different mental images.

This leads me to conclude that serious and entertainment game research with a similar focus exist in two different spheres that never quite seem to overlap. Additionally, there seems to be a focus on positive effects and terminology among serious games, while entertainment games are trying to negate negative effects. In the next chapter, I will introduce *Undertale* (TobyFox, 2015), the game that is the focus of this study, discuss its cultural significance and explain why the separation of serious and entertainment games is related to both.

Chapter 2.

Undertale and its cultural significance

2.1. The game

Undertale (TobyFox, 2015) is an RPG first released for PC and Mac in September 2015, with a port for the PlayStation 4 and Vita to be released in 2017 (Undertale, 2017). The game was created almost entirely by one person, independent game developer Toby Fox. It was at least partly financed through crowd funding via Kickstarter in 2013, where it exceeded its initial goal of US\$5,000 tenfold. In an interview with Polygon before the game's release, Fox stated that he created *Undertale* because he was tired of violence and increasing character statistics as the standard game mechanic in RPGs: "What kind of lesson is that giving players and kids that play the game? I think that we can develop more games that show that there are non-violent ways of dealing with conflicts and that teach people to be friendlier." (in Farokhmanesh, 2013) He wanted also wanted a game where he could get to know the monsters/enemies, something that he would personally enjoy playing (Farokhmanesh, 2013). Fox had two goals in mind when creating *Undertale*: To make a game that he would personally find entertaining and to explicitly communicate a message against violence to the player.

2.1.1. Plot

Undertale is set in a world where humans and monsters used to live together in harmony on the surface of the earth. Monsters were generally much weaker than humans, due to the nature of their different SOULs, but these very SOULs allowed monsters to use magic, which humans eventually came to fear. They started a war, eventually banishing the monsters into the Underground, a cave system underneath the surface of the earth. The only two exits were protected by barriers: Anything could come in, but leaving required both a human and a monster soul. Breaking the barrier requires the power of seven human SOULs. In the year 201X, a human child, which hates humanity, climbs the mountain containing one of the exits and falls into the Underground. The child gets taken in by the royal family as one of their own and

considered the hope of both monsters and humans. In an attempt to help their new family, the child kills themselves so that their adoptive brother, Asriel, can absorb their SOUL and cross the barrier to gather the remaining human SOULs. Instead, Asriel gets attacked when the humans see him with the child's corpse. Instead of fighting back, Asriel escapes back into the Underground, where he dies. Stricken with grief, the King declares war on humans, stating all humans who fall into the Underground shall be killed to collect their SOULs. In response, the Queen leaves for the other side of the Underground, vowing to protect every child that falls in.

The actual game is set years after these events, when the main character and player avatar, a gender-non-specific child named Frisk, falls into the Underground and must now find their way out. Although the player is unaware of this for most of the game, after falling in, Frisk lands on the grave of the first human child. The child's spirit is awakened by the determination in Frisk's SOUL, who they attach themselves to. Without a SOUL of their own, the first child is without emotion or a sense of wrong and right, and their view of the world is largely shaped by whichever action the player decides to take during the game. This child is who the character the player names at the beginning of their first play through. As the player/ Frisk/ the first child try to find a way out, they encounter a variety of monsters, whose goal is to capture the child's SOUL for the king, so he can finally break the barrier and lead the monsters back to the surface. Through the power of their determination, Frisk/ the player is able to SAVE and RESET, a power some of the game's characters are aware of and that is part of the game's narrative. It means that within the context of the game, it is acknowledged that the player can never truly die, because they can just return to their last safe spot as often as they want. The only actual way to die is to give up on playing the game. If the player uses the reset option on the start menu, they start over at the beginning of a play through, but some of the characters will remember fragments of the main character and their actions and Flowey, the game's antagonist, will remember everything.

2.1.2. Game play

On the surface, *Undertale*'s gameplay seems to follow the genre convention of old-school Japanese turn-based RPGs, in the vain of *Earthbound* (Nintendo, 1989) and the early *Final Fantasy games* (Square Enix, 1987). The player has statistics describing their strength, such as Attack, Defense and Health points. Defeating an enemy gains

them EXP (usually short for Experience). After gaining enough EXP, their LV (usually short for Level) increases, which in turn increases their statistics. They also gain Gold which can be used to buy healing items, armor or weapons. Enemy encounters vary between random and scripted.

It is only late in the game that the player finds out that in *Undertale*, EXP is actually short for Execution Points and LV is LOVE, another acronym that stands for Level of Violence, a numerical value for the player's capability to hurt others by emotionally distancing themselves from the world. While this re-definition does not change their function, it does alter their context. It is one of many ways *Undertale* subverts the expectations of frequent RPG players.

The battle system is generally turn-based as opposed to real-time, although some battles break this rule. At the start of each round, the player can choose one of four options: Attack, Act, Item and Mercy. Attack is straightforward: the player attacks the enemy with whichever weapon they have equipped, or even their bare fists. Act gives the player multiple options to interact with the opponent in non-violent ways. They are tailored to each enemy, but usually include talking and checking the opponent's statistics. Items allows the player to use an item during battle. The Mercy option is a feature unique to *Undertale*. It allows the player to either flee from the battle – or to spare the opponent. To spare someone, the player must first meet criteria unique to each enemy, usually involving different options from the act menu or surviving a certain number of rounds. During the enemy attack, the player sees their SOUL represented as a red heart in a box and has to direct it to avoid enemy attacks in a bullet hell style mini-game. Occasionally, the game will break its own battle system, for example by having the enemy attack the player while they are planning their next move, or by breaking one of the buttons.



Figure 1.

Note:

Defense mini-game during battle sequences

Undertale, (2015) *Battle against Flowey*. [Game screenshot], taken 8th July, 2017



Figure 2. Example of a typical response after choosing ACT in the game
 Note: Undertale, (2015) *Battle against Lesser Dog*. [Game screenshot], taken 8th July, 2017

2.1.3. Endings

Undertale has multiple endings, which the game's fan community has sorted into three different categories: (True) Pacifist, Neutral and Genocide (Undertale Wiki, n.d.). The (True) Pacifist ending is the happy ending. The final boss is pacified and befriended, the barrier is broken and the monsters get to peacefully live out their dream life on the surface. To achieve this, the player must not kill any monsters during random encounters and spare and befriend boss monsters. During the neutral endings, Frisk manages to take the King's SOUL to cross the barrier. On their way they receive a phone call from one of the characters updating them on the current situation in the Underground. What exactly is being said depends on which characters the player has killed and spared during their play through. To achieve the Genocide ending, the player has to go out of their way to kill every enemy in every area. During this play through, the

fallen child becomes so corrupted that they end up partly taking over Frisk's body at the end, with the goal of destroying the world. Whether the player agrees or refuses, the fallen child turns on them. This ending causes the game screen to appear completely black for ten minutes before the fallen child appears to offer to restore the world in return for the player's (Frisk's) soul. This ending permanently corrupts the very end of the pacifist run, because the fallen child takes over Frisk's body.

2.2. Cultural relevance

After its release, *Undertale* received much attention and rave reviews from major video game publications. Among others, IGN gave it a perfect 10/10, calling it a "Masterpiece" and named it the PC game of the year 2015 (IGN, 2015). It won Rock, Paper, Shotgun's 2015 Funniest Game on PC Award (Rock, Paper, Shotgun, 2015) and received an aggregated critic score of 92 and a user score of 8.3 on Metacritics (Metacritics, 2017). It even went on to win GameFAQ's best game ever contest for 2015, voted by users, beating out the 2009 winner *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998) in the finals (GameFAQs, 2015). In 2015, it became the second most reblogged digital game on microblogging platform tumblr, only beaten by franchise giant *Pokemon* (Nintendo, 1996), and ahead of other established game series such as *Dragon Age* (BioWare, 2009) and *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986) (fandommetrics, 2015). In 2016, the release year of *Pokemon Go* (Niantics), it actually overtook *Pokemon* and placed first (fandommetrics, 2016). *Undertale*'s success would have been outstanding for any Indie game, but what made it even more remarkable is the combination of its ethical message versus the time of its release.

2.2.1. Ethics in Undertale

Undertale's ethical message can best be summarized with the words of one of its characters, Asriel: "Don't kill and don't be killed, that's the best we can strive for" (*Undertale*, 2015). The mainstream game community has translated this simply into 'pacifism'. As stated by the developer himself, the game is a criticism of the frequent and often thoughtless use of violence as a game mechanic in RPGs. *Undertale*'s perspective on senseless killing is by no means deeply hidden in the game. In fact, it is so overt, that the game both spells it out to the player, as quoted above, and explicitly punishes them

with the permanent corruption of the “happy ending” at the end of a genocide run. Even before the game’s release, Polyon described *Undertale* as “classic RPG gameplay with a pacifist twist” (Farokhmanesh, 2013). Other outlets also explicitly used the word “pacifism” or “pacifist” when talking about *Undertale* (e.g., Arauz, 2016; Hughes, 2015).

Despite being created for and marketed to an entertainment game audience, *Undertale*’s message has had a deep impact its fan community, most of which consider the pacifist ending of the game to be the true, real ending of the game (e.g., Faridian, 2015) and sparked discussions surrounding the use of violence within gaming spaces and outside of them (e.g., Shutup&Stidown, 2016; 1Up Culture, 2016):

„Plenty of games nowadays, have a singular focus on a violent to solution to the games problem. Consequences be damned. Unless it be rewarding a bodycount. Where-as Undertale it feels so unbelievably satisfying simply by achieving peace with your foe. The effect multiplies tenfold with likes of *Undyne* and *Papyrus*, who through a peaceful resolution reward the player with SO much more than the industry-standard experience points, perks, etc. *You don't eliminate your enemies. You win friends. You aren't the most badass killer in existence. You're the guy with most friends.*“ – El-Moo (2016)

„This game [...] [has] really solidified a new outlook in life for me this year. Just because something seems to be an enemy that you can justify brushing off and/or hating, you find out that there's always some way to instead go about this something or someone in a more pacifistic manner. It's easier to just hate things you don't understand or have hurt you, but you'd be surprised how relatable others are when you open up your options and try to reach peaceful resolutions. Stereotypes and simplifying your outlook encourages a lot of unfounded prejudices, and seeing this game [...] portray the benefit of looking beyond these stereotypes to come to a resolution without hate or conflict is truly a marvel. I always try to think of ways to be positive in tricky situations now, even though it can be hard or doesn't seem like I can avoid trouble, and I feel this pacifism has really helped form a healthier and less stress mind set for me and opened up a lot of more connections.“ – CaptnPenguin (2016)

“To destroy an evil person may get rid of the evil, but it wastes the person isn't it a more complete victory to make them good instead? Isn't that the best ending you could hope for? Its not as sexy as violence. Its not as fun. But it's better. It takes more courage. And it's something I can actually aspire for. Since I've played Undertale, I've been looking for chances to be a better person. I've been trying to improve myself so I can be strong enough, brave enough, to embrace those I would have, not long ago, liked to have attacked. It's not easy. It's not convenient. But it's not supposed to be. if Undertale wasn't so mired in video game tropes, and if it didn't rely so much on an understanding of RPG's to get its message across, I think it

could be a game that could SAVE the world. But even if it won't save the world, at the very least, I firmly believe Undertale has made me a better person. A more compassionate, sympathetic, empathetic person--or at least, someone who would prioritize empathy over hatred and greed. Someone who now truly understands and respects other self-sacrificing figures like MLK, the people who had the courage to keep their swords sheathed while the world tried to draw their blood. [...] And since video games haven't made me more violent yet, I can say finding a game that'll make me less violent, more loving, is quite the feat." – pocru (2016)

Finally, one player was so convinced of *Undertale*'s message of peace that he gifted a download code of the game to the pope. In early 2016, YouTube star and gamer MatPat had the chance to meet with the Pope as part of a summit on how the Internet brings people together (Hernandez, 2016). As he explains in his video *Game Theory: Why I Gave the Pope UNDERTALE* it is customary to bring the pope a gift when meeting him. "I gave the Pope this game because it speaks his language. This year is his self-proclaimed year of mercy for the Catholic church, a period celebrating forgiveness and compassion when one could otherwise choose to harm a person. And what's the recurring theme throughout *Undertale*? Mercy."

As these comments illustrate, *Undertale* got its fan base thinking and talking about violence in games and outside of it. Players reported feeling more emphatic, trying to see things from other people's perspective more often and more likely to aim for a peaceful solution to a conflict even when it is harder. Both empathy building and perspective taking are elements of peace education. So despite not being considered a serious game, *Undertale* managed to push players into a similar direction.

2.2.2. Culture war

August 2014, just one year before *Undertale*'s release, marked the beginning of the Gamergate (GG) movement on Twitter (Stuart, 2014), a self-proclaimed consumer revolt for ethics in journalism and against the politicization of video games (Stehl, 2016). It involved the threatening and harassing of prominent women in entertainment game spaces and anyone who stood with them (Heron, Belford, & Goker, 2014; Mortensen, 2016). GG has two related goals: demanding ethical game journalism and keeping "politics out of gaming" (Stehl, 2016). The first goal refers to the accusation that game developer Zoe Quinn had slept with a Kotaku reviewer to gain a positive review for her

game *Depression Quest*. GG did not feel that *Depression Quest* was a “fun” or a “real game”, and that there for the review must have been faked (Parkin, 2014). It later turned out that the reviewer in question had never reviewed the game in the first place (Totilo, 2014).

Keeping “politics out of gaming” either refers to keeping games from becoming tools for political messages at the cost of the game experience, or to pushing back against “SJW’s (Social-Justice-Warriors, a derogatory term used to describe people who speak out about issues of social injustice) who have co-opted gaming to force their politically-correct nonsense into it” (Stehl, 2016; Samra, 2015). The GG movement as well as the resulting conflict may very well be interpreted as a reflection of the larger ongoing cultural war in the United States, especially considering that supporters and members of the movement have aligned themselves with the Alt-Right movement (Lees, 2016), man’s rights activists and pick up artists (Mortensen, 2016). While the hashtag ultimately died down, the underlying conflict about visibility and representation of marginalized groups in the mainstream is still ongoing.

In the next section I will argue that the ongoing culture war is indirectly related to the separation of the serious and entertainment game sector.

2.2.3. Gamergate, serious games and Undertale

The culture war in entertainment games comes down to one thing: a battle over who gets to participate in the mediums’ mainstream and that power struggle is inherently linked to the question of what, exactly, constitutes a game. Are walking simulators games, even if they are not fun, or lacking in challenge, or too text heavy or maybe too serious for some of the people who consider themselves the real gamers? I find that this struggle in part mirrors the identity crisis that is happening in the field of serious games, maybe because they steam from the same root cause: the fact that video games have been marketed as children’s entertainment, specifically for boys, after the industry crash (Polygon, 2013; Djaouti, Alvarez, Jessel & Ramboux, 2011).

In the late 80s and the 90s, game companies in North America started efforts of gender marketing. Since boys were the slightly larger demographic, they became the focus of add campaigns. Women, who were still players, were erased from the public

narrative of games. That same marketing also began the idea of gamer as an identity, not something to grow out of. The media's focus on violent games in the news coverage and in relation to mass-shootings in the following years lead to two things: On one side, it meant that the target audience of these games, largely male players, became the loudest and most visible game demographic (Polygon, 2013) and second, it caused the separation for the digital game sector into two: entertainment and serious games.

In the serious game sector, due to the power structures steaming from their largely separate economic model, the industry players left in charge of setting the boundaries of their genre are clients, developers and researcher. The actual users and players of the game are often left out of the debate since they do not hold a position of market power. The people who have the power in-turn arguably still have an economic interest in keeping serious games away from entertainment games due to the latter's reputation. They therefore emphasize the serious over the game factor, like Marsh (2011) going so far as to argue that the word "game" might not be appropriate to define them. While this is meant to address the fact that serious issues they aim to address. It completely ignores the fact that many narratives in entertainment games address serious topics as well (e.g., *Metal Gear Solid*, Kojima, 1998; *Tales of Symphonia*, Namco Tales Studio, 2003). Therefore, it could be said that the separation of serious and entertainment games on the side of the serious game sector is driven by a desire to establish themselves as more positive or more valuable on a societal level than entertainment games.

Meanwhile, the entertainment game sector largely does not refer to itself as such, which is a problem. It means that entertainment and game have become synonyms that are intrinsically connected to each other; i.e. if something is not primarily entertaining, or for entertainment, it's not considered a game. Due to their business model, the negotiation of what constitutes a game is up to developers, game reviewers and of course the customers. The latter hold substantial market power, as entertainment games are reliant on individual sales. In the past, the power of the customer segment lay squarely with the loud majority: white men, who largely defined a game's worth by what they found entertaining. I.e. by how much the game catered to them and their interests or views, how challenging it was and how good the game mechanics were. This definition would devalue games that do not cater to their specific interests and do not, for example, rely on difficulty or challenge.

As digital entertainment games have entered the mainstream and the medium has matured, demographics have shifted. In 2016, women above the age of 18 made up 31 percent of the game-playing population in North America, while boys age 18 or younger make up only 18 percent (Entertainment Software Association, 2017). Between 2009 and 2014, the number of female game developers has doubled and is now at around 22 percent (Tassi, 2014). This shift has caused more and more women, but also other members of marginalized groups to speak out about a lack of representation as well as stereotyping in video games (e.g., Anita Sarkeesian on her YouTube channel *feministfrequency*, 2009), including game reviewers. In some cases, this criticism has lead developers to change content of their games (Mulkerin, 2017). This has increased the visibility of women and minorities as customers.

At the same time, advances in technology, such as digital distribution, as well as new funding opportunities such as crowd funding have made game development and publishing more accessible, leading to an increase in independent developers (Serebrin, 2017), which has made the industry more accessible. Being less bound to industry conventions and having complete creative control over their games has also led these developers to push the medium into new directions (Parkin, 2014). There has been an increase in walking-simulators, art games and games that address serious stigmatized issues such Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest* (2013). The increasing visibility of other customer segments means that these groups now hold power over defining what is considered a game, because women and minorities have more diverse views on what they find entertaining than the traditional game demographic. They might be willing to play a less traditionally fun game, if it makes it up by having, for example, a message or cause that speaks to them.

And that brings us back to games such as *Depression Quest* (Zoe Quinn, 2013) and *Undertale* (TobyFox, 2015), that tend to be at the centre of the entertainment game culture war. If we assume that serious games are defined by their purpose (serious) and historically by their business model (client-based) and target audience (not children, or rather not people who play entertainment games), this means that entertainment games are defined by their economic model (sales numbers), their target audience (people who play entertainment games) and their purpose (entertainment); Then *Undertale* is very clearly a mix of both: While copies were sold individually, the game was funded by multiple "clients" on Kickstarter and solely informed by the vision of one person, the

developer; It was created because the he wanted something he would enjoy playing (entertainment) but also to criticise the current standard of often senseless violence as gameplay and to teach people non-violent conflict resolution (serious); and finally, it was marketed successfully at people in mainstream entertainment game spaces. Except for the last point, most of this also applies to *Depression Quest*, which triggered GG, and other games that have faced the majority of the backlash.

The GG movement, although long in the making, was effectively triggered by three things: First, the creation of a game with a primary intent that is not to entertain, Second, the fact that this game was marketed at an entertainment audience, and third, that it received space and positive attention from influential people in entertainment game spaces. In essence, the invasion of a serious game in an entertainment game space was perceived as a threat and GG was created as a form upholding the current statues quo.

It could therefor be argued that the separation of serious and entertainment games into strictly separate silos did not happen because it was particularly useful academically or happened organically, but simply due to the socio-economic force of marketing. And it continues to persist due to a mutual sense of protectionism that aims at devaluing the other for their own benefit. At least in the entertainment game sector, which is more aware of them, games like *Undertale*, *Depression Quest* and many others that have come out in the last few years, are there for seen as a threat to existing power structures.

Having said that, unlike most of the other indie games that could be categorized as from of serious games, *Undertale*'s reception in the mainstream game community was much more positive than the others. While it was met with some backlash – as is anything that reaches a certain level of popularity will, criticism was largely either level at the overzealous fan base (Greggler, 2016), or came from people who had a specific point of criticism regarding the game design, such as graphics or the battle system (Plastic Memes, 2016). Even on message boards explicitly associated with GG, *Undertale* seems to have been received favourably (Reddit, 2016). Overall, it is clear that while *Undertale* did draw some polarizing opinions, the game was ultimately received much more positively than other games with an explicit ethical messages, such as *Depression Quest* (Zoe Quinn, 2013). And what *Undertale*'s fanbase has taken away

from it is a lesson about pacifism, non-violence, kindness and human understanding. In light of *Undertale*'s unique cultural position and reception in gaming I ask the following research question: How does *Undertale* communicate its ethical message to the player? The next chapter will describe the methodology I use to answer this question.

Chapter 3.

Methodology

3.1. Close reading

To find out how *Undertale* communicates its ethical message, I decided to do a close reading of the game. Close reading is a methodology originally adopted from literary studies. In terms of digital games, it is based on the idea that games, like books or films, are a form of (interactive) media text that can be read to discern meaning. Reading in this case meaning the “detailed, observation, deconstruction, and analysis of a text” (Bizzocchi, Tanenbaum, 2012). While there has been some debate among game researchers about whether digital games can actually be considered texts or not, due to their sometimes limited narrative and their interactivity (e.g., Crawford and Gosling, 2009; Juul, 2001), close reading has since become a common and widely accepted research method for digital games. I chose close reading specifically because this method seems to come closest to how players themselves talk about and analyse video games. Considering my research question is concerned with the communication to the player, it seemed intuitive. I also decided to occasionally supplement my findings with public comments from players for the same reason. The comments were taken from common video game discussion boards, such as the *Undertale* discussion board on Reddit, tumblr or Steam forums.

3.2. The experienced player

I choose to frame my analysis of the game text through the perspective of what I call the experienced player. In essence, the experienced player is someone who has a lot of experience with playing digital games. That does not necessarily imply that they are good at playing them, just that they are deeply familiar with a particular genre – in *Undertale*’s case, RPGs. They know their tropes and genre convention in terms of both narrative and game play. Outside of the game itself, they are someone who is familiar with online gaming communities, including commonly used phrases and jokes. Approaching my reading of the game text from this perspective is important, because the experienced player is *Undertale*’s target audience: Much of the game’s appeal, i.e. its

subversiveness, humor and even art style, relies on the player being deeply familiar with RPGs, possible even retro games, being familiar with and enjoying online memes. The game also features hidden secrets in the code itself, indicating that it is addressed at people who will take the code apart. In addition, the game was funded on Kickstarter and eventually sold via Steam and the game's website. Players who only occasionally engage with games and do not consider themselves a part of gaming subculture are unlikely to even hear about it. In my analysis of *Undertale*, I will assume that an experienced player would first achieve a neutral ending, because they are still sometimes adhering to genre convention; then the pacifist ending, as they have learned one way or another that sparing monsters is the way to achieve it; and then genocide. I assume a player would play the latter last because this possible run is not hinted at within the game and is within the game world framed as something done by player who aim for completion.

3.3. Elements of analysis

For my reading of *Undertale*, I decided to focus on ludic elements of the game design over the games plot, written text or dialogue. I made this decision for two reasons: First, *Undertale* is not the first game with a message against violence, killing or war. As described by Stamenkovic, Jacevic and Wildfeuer (2016), *Metal Gear Solid* (Kojima, 1998) also has a message against killing and war. So do *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) and *OFF!* (Ghost, 2007). Yet none of these games received the same kind of attention for their message or were as commonly associated with pacifism as *Undertale*. Second, a study by Dhaya (2009) has found that for games to be effective at conveying a message, "the game's intentions [have to be] thoroughly embedded in playable, procedural elements, thoughtfully designed within the game's larger constraints, reflecting to some degree the complex layers of the situation(s) represented in the game" (p. 4). For these two reasons, I assume that other aspects of *Undertale* might necessarily play a more important role in conveying its message than its plot.

I decided to focus my research on three elements of the game: Sound design, graphics/ visual representation, and game mechanics. I chose sound design, because *Undertale*'s developer is a self-taught composer, who first made a name for himself by producing (fan-) songs for other games and web comics. He also stated that while

producing *Undertale*, he composed the music before programming individual scenes, which is unusual in game development (Jones, 2016). I further chose graphics/ visual representation for a similar reason. *Undertale*'s art style has often been criticized as lazy, uninspiring or boring (e.g., FoolishMan, 2017). Yet Fox has stated that even with more funding, the art style was a conscious choice and would likely remain the same (Bennet, 2015). Finally, I chose game mechanics, because they have been described as unique and genre subversive by players (Bartholomew, 2015), making them a potentially revealing game element.

3.4. Procedure

I purchased *Undertale* via the Steam store, updated to the latest version, 1.001. The computer I used to play it is a MacBook Pro from 2015, running OS X El Capitan. Later, I also purchased the soundtrack. I played the game multiple time, usually aiming for different endings, for which I occasionally used an online guide, to make sure I had not missed one of the many possible neutral endings. Since the previous play troughs can influence later ones, I reset the game exactly once, after my first play through.

The first time, I played the game as a player, rather than a researcher. I had encountered spoilers before – an inevitability if one is involved in game communities online. New players are encouraged by the creator to enter the game blind. Even though this was not possible for me anymore, I feel this was important to get an authentic grasp on the game and experience it the way it is intended to be. While playing, I realized that although I had heard a lot about the game already, there was still much that was completely new to me, so I feel the experience ultimately came close to that of someone going in blind. I achieved a neutral ending, after which I reset the game.

Approaching the game with a research perspective, I first played through a neutral ending, then the true pacifist ending. After that, I completed each neutral ending, before doing a genocide run last, as I knew it might affect the pacifist run. I frequently took screenshots as well as notes to document my observations, experiences and thoughts. I loosely categorized them according to which ending I was aiming for, which element of game design stood out to me, and what my response as a player was. I used these notes to decide which scenes to analyze in greater detail for which element. The next chapter will cover my reading of the text.

Chapter 4.

Analysis

4.1. Sound design

“SANS! STOP PLAGUING MY LIFE WITH INCIDENTAL

MUSIC!” – Papyrus

Due to the technical constraints of digital games in the past, music was often an afterthought of game design (“Hip” Tanaka, cited in Brandon, 2002). The first games and consoles were completely silent, with Pong being the first game that featured any kind of sound (McDonald, 2005) at all. As technology has advanced, however, music and sound have become not just important, but even their own entire genre (e.g., *Dance Dance Revolution*, Konami, 1998; *Guitar Hero*, Red Octaine, 2005). Today, game soundtracks are often included in special editions of a game, and some have reached such a cult status that they have been performed by live orchestras world wide (e.g., The Legend of Zelda – Symphony of the Goddess, by Jason Michael Paul Entertainment, inc. & Nintendo, 2017).

As with the rest of its design, the music in *Undertale* is inspired by the chiptune sounds of old SNES games. It can be bought separately and consists of 101 songs that vary greatly in length. “Dogbass” is only seven seconds long, “Undertale” is longer than six minutes. It includes most of the music used in the game, though not absolutely everything. The game has received copious praise for its music online (Jones, 2016). The following sections will describe some of the ways *Undertale* uses music and sound to communicate its ethics on killing.

4.1.1. Music of death

Music in digital games is generally used for two broad reasons: creating immersion and setting the emotional tone of the scene (Stockburger, 2013). It can also be used as cue or to accompany a certain player action. In *Undertale*, the music is of vital importance for the game’s emotional impact. As one player put it: “In fact, I would

classify the score as being so integral to the emotional impact of the plot that I would imagine the experience would likely ring hollow without it.” (Thibeault, 2016). What is notable is that the music during the genocide run is severely altered. During a pacifist or neutral play through, it covers a wide range of emotion: energetic, slow, hopeful. The genocide music sets the emotional scene for the majority of the run. With a few exceptions, it consists largely of slowed down tracks from the other play throughs. It has been perceived as unsettling, creepy or “creating [an] uneasy feeling of dread” (Gin, 2015). Some have directly stated that the music makes it “[feel] like [they are] playing a horror game” (Mollycious, 2015).

Imagine this: You have completed a neutral run. You have completed a pacifist run. Despite the game telling you not to reset after that, you know there is more to it. An ending you have not yet seen. You decide to do a genocide run. You make your way through the first area of the game, the ruins. As soon as you have freedom to move on your own, you abandon Toriel and the other monster’s advice on sparing and mercy: You kill every enemy you come across. After a while, save points start showing you how many enemies are left to kill: 3, 2, 1 – 0. You return from the battle screen to the over world, and abruptly, the music changes. Its eerie and dark and entirely different than before: You have just triggered the genocide run. As you keep walking, now on your way out, you trigger another random encounter. Instead of enemy’s appearing, the battle screen shows you an unsettling message: But nobody came. The music changes: slower, deeper. As you go through the genocide run, this pattern repeats. First, the over world music is the same as in any other run, just very slowed down. After killing enough enemies, the music changes to something eerie and creepy. As you move on, you find yourself sparing Papyrus, the harmless skeleton guard who offers you a hug. The music changes back to normal. You are no longer on a genocide run.

The onset of the music works as a cue: It is the first indicator in the game that the player is now on a much different path, and it is also the best way to tell if they are still on it. In essence, the genocide music establishes a genre shift in the narrative: You are no longer playing an RPG. As long as you are killing everyone, you are in a horror game. The only way to exit from this musical space, to go back to playing a friendly RPG is to abandon the genocide run by choosing to spare someone. In that case, the music switches back and everything is normal again.

Furthermore, both the first song that plays in the ruins after the player has started the genocide run, and the music that plays after the “but nobody came” encounters, are extremely slowed down versions of the song “Your best friend”. “Your best friend” is the character song of Flowey the Flower, the only monster without a SOUL. In *Undertale*, not having a SOUL makes someone incapable of feeling emotions, especially empathy. Flowey is the closest thing *Undertale* has to an antagonist. Incidentally, Flowey is also the only character aside from the player that ever possessed the ability to save and re-load, which he misused to see all the possible ways the monsters could possibly react to him and his actions. Narratively, the use of Flowey’s theme as background music for the much of the player’s play through ties their act committing mass murder in each area of the game world directly to Flowey. They are becoming like him, a cruel, SOULless being, and the monster in the horror game that is the genocide run.

During a genocide run, the music establishes ties between the actions of the game’s main antagonist and the player character. In combination with the feeling of unease and dread the music creates, it establishes the player as the antagonist in a horror game, thus framing their act of mindless killing as horrifying, monstrous and evil.

4.1.2. The sound of silence

Aside from emotional support, music is also used to create a sense of immersion (Stockburger, 2013). It keeps the player’s focus on the game, instead of their surroundings. While games maybe aren’t quite as musically saturated as they used to be (Gibbons in Gibbons & Donnelly, 2014), actual prolonged silence is still uncommon. Especially RPGs want their players to feel immersed in their world, and music is a huge factor. While there might be moments of silence during cut-scenes, few games employ them during actual game play.

However, according to Spanos (n.d.), silence in games can be a powerful tool of sound design. By limiting one sensory input, players will inevitably focus more on their other senses. Their attention will shift towards the visual or physical elements of game play. In horror games, this is often used to heighten the player’s tension and fear. In *Wandering Tonalities*, Gibbons (2015) offers an analysis of the use of silence and ambient sounds in the action RPG *Shadow of the Colossus* (SCE Japan Studio, 2005). In the game, the player has to make their way across a sprawling landscape while

searching for a number of Colossus that they have to kill. They are accompanied by ambient sound, but no music until they find one. Gibbon explains that the silence breaks the player's immersion. It pulls them back into the present and forces them to think about the moral implications of their actions. In *Undertale*, the player is also met with prolonged moments of silence.

It is your first play through. At the beginning of your journey through the Underground's first area, you are saved from certain death by a goat-woman named Toriel. She is much kinder than the other monster you have met so far. She takes you by the hand and leads you through the ruins, a pink-purplish maze of rooms and hallways. She teaches you how to solve puzzles to disarm traps and how to solve conflicts by striking up a friendly conversation. She shoos away any other monster that approaches you. When she briefly leaves you alone to prepare a warm welcome for you, she provides you with a phone so you can call her anytime. You make the rest of the track to her home on your own before meeting up with her again on her doorstep, where she was coming to fetch you. She baked you a cinnamon butterscotch pie and gives you a room in her house. If you so choose to, you can even call her mom. It quickly becomes apparent: Toriel wants you to stay with her, where she can protect you and keep you safe. Except, you cannot stay – you have a world to return to. In the end, you are forced to face her in battle– she needs to know if you can survive out there. The learning phase, the (Tu)Toriel, is over – you are at the end of the beginning and this is your final test.

The game has told you that you can spare opponent, but finding out how to spare Toriel is difficult. You might try to attack, hoping that she will give up once you hit her often enough, as other enemies might. It does not work. At the half-way point, you get a critical hit, and Toriel dies. At the end of the battle, you find yourself stepping into a long hallway, the music cutting off abruptly. It stretches on seemingly forever. The only thing tells you that you are making progress at all while you walk is the changing color of the floor.

There is a similar scene, towards the end of the game. You have just spent hours walking through an unfamiliar environment, solving puzzles, avoiding traps, meeting friends or enemies. You have heard stories about the monster, the final boss, that you are about to face: Asgor, King of the Underground. You have heard he can be reasoned

with. You have heard that he will take your SOUL to slay humanity. You enter the elevator that will take you to the last area, his city – New Home. You know, both from experience and because the game tells you so, that this is the beginning of the end. As you step out, you find yourself in a long, gray hallway – and in absolute silence. Both seem to stretch on and on and on. These two scenes work as book ends for the player's journey

In *Undertale*, the moments of silence described above happen after and before significant moments of game play. Toriel is the first boss monster the player encounters. The game has previously gone out of its way to portray her as a caring, if over-protective mother figure. She is supposed to be a character the player will like and will not want to kill. The game has also told the player that there are other ways to end a battle than killing. Sparing Toriel is not intuitive though, she does not react to ACT commands and sparing her does nothing at first. The only way to end the battle peacefully is to spam the spare button more than 20 times, even if there is no indication that it is working. This is only briefly hinted at earlier in the game by a minor character. It is also very easy for a player to kill her accidentally, as she takes more damage the more often the player attacks. If they still play *Undertale* with the mindset of an RPG player, they might also come to assume that it is the only way to move forward, as is usually the case with boss fights. It is therefore extremely likely, that at least during their first play through, many players end up killing her. And right after this tricky fight, the player is dumped into total, absolute silence.

The second moment is set before the end of the game, and right before the reveal of more than one plot twist. The player enters it with conflicting information. Toriel has warned them about Asgor and the fact that he is collecting the SOULs of children is unsettling enough. But other monsters have described him as fluffy, kind and totally harmless. They have also described Asgor as their only hope to ever leave the Underground that makes them so miserable. Then after the corridor a first time player finds out the true tragedy behind the royal family, the loss of their two children. They also discover that LV and EXP are acronyms with a very different meaning in this game than in virtually every other RPG.

In both cases, the silence has a similar effect as in *Shadow of Colossus* (SCE Japan Studio, 2005). Visually, the hallways offer little to hold the player's attention: black

background, with a purple strip. Or gray background. There is no music, no sound effects to draw their attention. This inevitably leads to a break in player immersion. With nothing left to hold their attention, they are only left with their own thoughts. Due to the placement of that silence, players will find themselves contemplating either what just happened, or what lies ahead. In either case, the silence creates a moment of self-reflection and moral ambiguity: Was killing Toriel the right thing to do? Or was there another way? What will they do once they meet Asgor? Kill him and leave the Underground or spare him and be trapped forever? Have they done the right thing? Will they do the right thing? The silence creates a morally ambiguous space where the player is left to decide for themselves and find their own answers.

4.1.3. Victory Jingle

Individual sounds cues are often used to convey meaning in games. In platformers like Super Mario, little dings and beeps will tell us without looking at the screen which actions the character is performing. Is he jumping? Killing an enemy? Collecting a coin? Each of these actions are accompanied by a distinct sound. Often these sounds have associated meaning that goes beyond the simple action: collecting a coin is a good sound, running into an enemy is bad.

A staple sound of any turn based RPG is the victory jingle, also called victory transition (Taylor, 2014). It is an adaptive sound and usually occurs when the player has emerged victorious from a random encounter. While their experience increases and maybe even a level up occurs, a happy little melody plays to tell them that they have indeed just won and that this is good and worthy of celebration. The victory jingle is a form of auditory reward and some of them, like the *Final Fantasy* (Square Enix, 1987) Victory Fanfare, can become quite iconic and their absence will be noted (e.g., Parish, 2016). In more modern iterations of turn-based RPGs, such as *Bravely Default* (Square Enix, 2012), the jingle may even be accompanied by the character striking poses and voice acting.

The first time the player is left to their own devices in *Undertale* happens in the ruins. Toriel has just abandoned you in the ruins to prepare a surprise for you. She tells you to wait, but every RPG player knows that this means to go ahead on your own. So you start walking. After a few steps, the scene suddenly changes: A random encounter

with an enemy! Without Toriel around to scare the enemy off, you are left to solve this conflict on your own. Now, you know that you can spare enemies in this game, but it's your first encounter on your first play through. You do what you usually do in RPGs and go for the kill. Froggit goes down quickly: three hits, and its health drops to zero. As it dissolves into dust, a "whooshing" sound effect alerts you that you have defeated your enemy. The battle music tempers off. The text box informs you that you have gained 3 XP and 2 Gold. You wait for victory fanfare to kick in to celebrate your first success, but the music never comes. The battle screen fades and you find yourself back in the over world.

The lack of victory jingle in *Undertale* is highly unusual and unexpected. Genre convention dictates it be there and players will find its absence disconcerting. One player commented on it like this, after they killed Toriel: "There was no heroic fanfare upon her death, no flashing text congratulating me on my victory, [...] and there shouldn't have been. [...] I wasn't a hero. I was a murderer." (Barron, 2017). The absence of sound, of a musical cue that we are used to, is noticeable and makes us halt. Even if we are not actively paying attention to it, something feels off. It throws up an important question: If there is no music, no sound to reward you, did you really win? Do you feel like you did? *Undertale* leaves that question up to the player, because sparing opponents is not accompanied by a victory jingle either. If this was not a good thing to do, if it is not worthy of comment, then what does that make it? The player is left to decide for themselves if whichever action they took was good or bad. Like the hallways of silence, the absence of an explicit, expected reward creates another moment of moral ambiguity.

In general, *Undertale* uses music to generate a shift in mood and atmosphere of the game world if the player goes against what the game wants them to do. It uses silence to break player immersion so as to create spaces of moral ambiguity and room for self-reflection after and before pivotal player actions relating to violence and killing. The game does not wait for the player to pause or turn off the game or for the player to create these moments for themselves. It provides them naturally during game play, drawing their attention to the fact that there is a clear moral conflict in their actions. However, these moments also allow players to come to their own conclusions that may differ from how the game wants them to think and act.

4.2. Graphics and visualization

“Love, hope, compassion... This is what people say monster SOULs are made of. But the absolute nature of “SOUL” is unknown. After all, humans have proven their SOULs don’t need these things to exist.”

- A book in the Snowdin Library

Over the past few decades, digital game graphics have come as far, if not further, than their sound design. Technological advancements have made it possible that news outlets have mistaken game-screenshots for photos of actual cities (IGN, 2013). As many digital games push for more and more realistic graphics and life-like depictions, the pixel-retro-look of old SNES games is experiencing a revival among other parts of the game scene: Indie games (Madsen, n.d.). This revival might simply be due to budget constraints, as creating high-resolution 3D graphics is incredibly expensive and thus often simply not feasible or economical for small indie team. They might also be used to actively channel the spirit of the 8- and 16-bit games area for a sense of nostalgia. In addition, however, one also needs to consider that a game’s art style is not and should not be an arbitrary choice. In many cases, it is the first impression a player will have about a game, and therefore vitally important.

According to the concept of amplification through simplification (McCloud, 2003), the less detailed a visual is, the more universally recognizable it becomes. A smiley, for example, is more universal than a detailed, hyper realistic drawing of a face, which makes it easier for people to see themselves in it (McCloud, 1993). In addition, visual art is able to communicate generalities, or abstract ideas to the viewer: “When Picasso conveys to us in a painting the gentle ways in which a mother guides the first step of her unsteady walking child, we see gentleness as a general quality.” (Arnheim, 1997, as cited in Wu, 2008). These generalities can also change, depending on the viewer’s associations. A simple, or even minimalistic art style, like those of 8- and 16bit games can therefore not only make it easier to convey deeper concepts and meanings, but also make it easier for players to project themselves and their own ideas on the game.

4.2.1. Visualization of death

A common point of criticism for any violent game is their visual depictions of violence and death. To make games more marketable to younger audiences, there has been a trend of sanitizing or disguising the physical impact of violence by coloring blood green, or simply having enemies vanish into thin air when they die. Alternatively, the violence may be so overly graphic that it can come off as grotesque or even humorous. This often goes hand in hand with explicitly portraying the enemy as monsters or generally not human. This process of dehumanization allows players to justify their actions to themselves, because after all the victims do not feel pain like people do (Kocurek, 2015). In essence, violent games have a tendency to dehumanize player enemies to lessen the emotional impact of the violence and make it easier to do.

In *Undertale*, when a monster dies, it also turns to bloodless dust. This is explained in the narrative as monsters not just vanishing, but actually turning into dust. It clinging to the player's hands is remarked upon on the genocide route, but is never actually visible on the avatar. Especially with boss monsters, however, their death does not just end with them vanishing.

Towards the latter half of the game, you make your way through Hotland, a volcano-like area. While walking through its maze, you come across a spider bake sale. The seller, a spider-like monster named Muffet, is collecting money to save the spiders still locked in at the ruins. You might remember there having been a similar bake sale going on at the beginning of the game. Since her prices are outrageous and likely unaffordable, you move past her. Two rooms later you come across a giant spider web on the floor. Frisk sticks to it, unable to escape. That is when Muffet shows up: She heard that humans kill spiders and that the king is looking for you. She attacks. During the battle, a little spider will periodically appear to hold up a sign, signaling the nature of her next attack. If you kill Muffet, she will turn into dust like every other monster. But the scene does not end there. Instead, the little spider will re-appear at the right side of the screen. After seeing that Muffet is dead, it scuttles off, only to appear moments later, carrying a flower on its back. It moves to the centre of the screen, where Muffet stood and carefully puts the flower down. Then it quickly scrambles off again.

Muffet is a minor boss, a character without any real narrative ties to the plot. In fact, she was not even created by Toby Fox, but by one of the backers of his Kickstarter campaign. The player only met her two rooms before the fight, and she was less than friendly. Plot wise, there is no real reason why the player would feel bad about killing her. And yet, players have described that her death made them feel “horrible” and “dirty” and that it was “just not right” (i.e., Spooked, 2016).

The reason for that is the little spider with her flower. Here, *Undertale* uses a widely recognizable mourning ritual, putting flowers on a person’s grave, to convey more abstract concepts. This small act instantly conveys three things to the player: One, Muffet is missed. Someone, in this case someone very small, is sad enough about her death to leave flowers on her grave. Her death, the fact that the player killed her, has an emotional impact on someone. It is also an immediate reminder that the monsters in the Underground have feelings, just like humans do.

Second, Muffet is part of a community. Her death does not just leave behind people who missed her, but also people who relied on her, like the spiders she was trying to help with her bake sale. There is now no one left who can help them. A community has been left bereft of its leader, because the player killed them. Through that, the impact of the player’s action is given a social context.

Third, the way people mourn, the acts they perform and how they behave is a part of their culture. It is a ritual. The fact that the spiders have one, therefore establishes that they have a sense of culture themselves. At the same time, their ritual is not much different to how people around the world, but especially in North America and Europe mourn their dead. Putting flowers on a person’s grave is very common and widely recognized, thus establishing not only that spiders are sentient enough to have a culture, but also that it is not much different from our own.

Another moment that stands out for similar reasons is Toriel’s death. After the player has killed their established mother figure at the beginning of the game, Toriel’s dying words change depending on the player’s previous actions. The moment directly after she has turned to dust remains the same, however. The battle menu vanishes and the player sees their own SOUL, represented as a red heart, mirrored by the appearance of Toriel’s SOUL. Hers is white, but equally heart shaped. It shakes, before

cracking in half, and then shattering. The player is left staring at their own SOUL in complete darkness, before the scene fades back to the overworld.

Again, *Undertale* uses a widely recognizable symbol to convey abstract meaning. SOULs are an important element of *Undertale*'s plot, but this scene happens before the player is aware of that. What they do know is that the SOUL represents the culmination of their being, and they later learn that the SOUL is what makes it possible for monsters and humans to experience emotions. The idea that beings have souls is found in many religions and other forms of spirituality around the world, and is therefore easily recognizable. It is often seen as the part of a person that will live on after death and makes us who we are (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). Colloquially, we tend to refer to people who have shown to be cruel and lacking in empathy as SOUL-less, which is also an explicit plot element in *Undertale*. Confronting the player with Toriel's SOUL after they kill her, is therefore a reminder that the being they just killed is at its core the same as them. Just as capable of feeling emotions. Just as human. The use of the heart-shape to symbolize it emphasizes that fact further, and drives home the point that the player did not just hurt her physically – they broke her heart, destroyed her very being. Being killed by the player was emotionally painful for her. Killing her was both an act of physical and emotional violence against a breathing, feeling human being.

Undertale's very simplistic art style means that it is more reliant on symbolism to convey meaning. This is even more effective because while each symbol, the flower and the heart, have almost universal meanings, they also leave enough room for the player to project their own interpretation (McCloud, 1993). The simple act of putting flowers on a person's grave might bring up feelings and memories of loss in their own life. Toriel's breaking heart might remind them of times when they have hurt their own mother. Thus, the moments of both Toriel's and Muffet's deaths become universally recognizable but also on a very personal level.

Undertale does not just establish a social, emotional and cultural context for the act of killing someone, but also draws on universal and personal context at the same time. A person who might not personally be able to relate can relate on a general level, and a person who has trouble relating to broad experiences is able to project their personal feelings on both deaths.

Ultimately, *Undertale* uses widely recognized symbols to convey complex and emotionally heavy concepts: death, mourning, humanity and heartbreak. It instantly manages to create a social, cultural, emotional context for their murder that is both universal, but can also be deeply personal.

On a visual level, instead of creating hyper realistic displays of violence and death, *Undertale* utilizes its simple 2D graphics to convey meaning through symbolism. It uses them to convey abstract concepts and establish a universally recognizable emotional, social and cultural context for the death of characters at the hand of the player. The use of symbols also allows players to project their personal associations, feelings and memories, creating a more personal connection and context. These aspects help to humanize the opponents in the eye of the player, making it more difficult for them to emotionally distance themselves from their actions and to justify them. Here, the player receives immediate visual feedback for their actions that does not impact their game play in any way, but targets their personal feelings about their actions.

4.3. Game mechanics

*“There are consequences for the choices you make in the game, but it doesn’t appear to be holding some standard of morals over your head.
The game lets you choose.*

So I chose death, and that’s exactly what I got.”

- Allison Barron, 2016

Digital games, but especially RPGs, are constantly trying to increase player immersion by giving them the illusion of choice in the game, ways to impact the game world and the narrative. It is an illusion, because of course there are limitations to scripted game spaces. They will never be able to provide a player the same sense of agency as they experience in the real world. Therefore, I will instead use the definition given by Joyce, who defines player agency as the ability to make “meaningful choices within a closed system” (Joyce, n.d., p.2). In terms of morality, that means that players must have the ability to come to their own conclusion without the game dictating it to them and that choice is only meaningful if it is, in fact, an actual choice.

A common way to do that is through a morality system. In a morality system, there are usually two sides that are synonymous with good or evil. *Mass Effect* has

Paragons and Renegades (BioWare, 2007). *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* has Jedi and Sith (Electronic Arts, 2003). Depending on which actions the player takes during their play through, in the form of dialogue options, quests, etc., they are awarded a certain number of points for one side each time. Sometimes there is a certain threshold that must be reached, or a cut-off point in the game to choose a side. The number of points a player has usually impacts the game in some way, ranging from the availability of certain weapons to side quests, changes in the game's world and even a branching main story line with a different ending. Often both sides are put on equal ground in terms of gameplay, meaning that each route will be presented as equally entertaining and rewarding and that each provides a satisfying ending to the game.

Often, however, morality systems somewhat fail at actually providing players with the experience they are aiming for. Among others, that is because they tend to lack moral nuance, encourage of grinding for alignment points, are too obvious to the point of feeling unnatural, or ultimately do not affect the outcome of the game in any significant way (e.g. Joyce, n.d.). The latter caused public outcry in 2012 when the supposed last game of the *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007) franchise revealed that none of the player's choices over the last three games had any significant impact on the ending. This led players to feel as if they ultimately had no impact on the game's narrative, undercutting their sense of agency during their gameplay. The backlash was so severe that BioWare was forced to develop free additional content to alter the ending to somewhat satisfy public demand (Kaiser, 2012). The players' reactions illustrate how important their sense of agency over the narrative was to them, and that they wanted their choices to matter.

In *Undertale*, the player is also able to make choices and affect the game's narrative. Unlike with other games, however, players have frequently commented that they had a feeling that their choices mattered. The system is one of the core elements that set it apart from other RPGs and an important part of how *Undertale* addresses killing.

4.3.1. Choices, consequences and the magic circle

There are two different ways in the game that players are given choices: through dialogue and through action. What is interesting is that most dialogue options do not seem to matter much at all. This might be a parody of JRPGs, where player choices also

rarely matter much. Action, however, matters tremendously. One of those actions that affect the Underground is the game's spare and kill mechanic. Most first time players probably won't recognize the impact of their actions until they have already killed a few monsters from random encounters, because they assume that that is just how RPGs work. There, killing is often a necessity, either through boss fights to move on, or because your character needs level up to advance. As established, it is possible, and even necessary to reach a satisfying ending to the game by not killing anyone. In *Undertale*, killing is there for absolutely a choice. So what are the direct consequences of making that choice?

At the end of the first half of the game, you have to fight Undyne, a female fish monster and leader of the royal guard. Undyne is widely revered and hailed as a hero in the Underground. She hates humans for banishing them from the surface and has vowed to take your SOUL to king Asgor to free all monsters. She is also friends with Papyrus, her apprentice who you have to fight or spare one area earlier. If you have killed anyone until now, Undyne will confront you about the people that have gone missing since you showed up, that she just cannot find anymore, before she attacks. That could be Papyrus, but also monsters from random encounters. You can either kill her or spare her by fleeing into the next area, hotland, where Undyne will collapse from the heat.

Undyne's monologue about missing monsters is a direct consequence of the player deciding to kill them. If that character was Papyrus, Undyne notices his absence and misses him. It makes it impossible to befriend her because Papyrus is not there to introduce you in a friendly manner. And that makes perfect sense: Why would Undyne befriend someone who has murdered one of her closest friends? All characters in *Undertale* are connected through various social relationships: Toriel is Asgor's missing wife and friends with Sans, who is Papyrus' brother. Papyrus is friends with Undyne, who is in love with Alphys and a student of Asgor. Alphys is the creator of Metaton, a human killing robot and the Underground's idol, who contains the SOUL of Napstablook's cousin, and Napstablook happens to be Undyne's neighbor. When the player enters the Underground, they start to in some way disrupt this community with their choices: either by making friends and bringing the various characters together, or by killing some or all of them, thus disrupting or destroying the social balance in the Underground. The changes and the outcome of the different routes boil down to the

characters taking note of a new element in their lives, the player, and how that impacts them. Each action the player takes causes a reaction by at least one of *Undertale*'s characters, and sometimes alters the visual landscape as well. Killing all scripted encounters before arriving in the first town of Snowdin, for example, means that the local Pub will be almost empty of customers because you have killed them all. Alternatively, befriending characters offers extra content and the possibility to humorously date some of them. The extra content makes the pacifist route arguably the longest, which could be an incentive in and of itself to spare characters. This is, essentially, it. There are no other incentives for killing provided by the game other than wanting to see how the characters react, since the most direct consequence, leveling up, is unnecessary for beating the game.

The idea of choice and consequence in *Undertale*, however, extends beyond the idea of killing and sparing.

If you kill Toriel in the ruins, you can reload your save file and try again. If you spare her this time around and go on, Flowey is waiting for you at the end of the silent hallway. He informs you that he knows what you did. That you murdered Toriel and then went back because you regretted it. Then he lets you know that he will be watching you, before vanishing.

No player goes out of that moment unscathed. You did not save your file, the game is not supposed to remember what you did. Digital games are often considered to be safe-spaces where players are free to experiment with different actions that they would never take in real-life for fear of the consequences or because they simply are not accessible to them. In racing games, players can drive endlessly reckless and completely wreck the car and it does not matter. No real car was harmed and if the fictional damage is too severe, the player is usually free to load an old save file or to start a new game on a clean slate. The same can be said for virtually any game, generally including violent games. Players are free to try out what happens if they kill a certain character or not, if they declare war or not, and so on. If they do not like the outcome, they can start over, no harm done. Flowey calling you out on trying to erase your actions to avoid their consequences shatters that perception. More so, he is, essentially, holding the player accountable for all their actions, even the one's they would rather have

erased. Flowey is not the only character throughout the game who remembers your actions, though, and also not the only one who holds you accountable.

At the end of a genocide run, you have killed almost every major and minor character in the game. The last to fall are Asgor and Flowey and their deaths happen without the player's input – Frisk acts on their own. After hacking Flowey to death, the screen remains black and a character appears that looks very similar to Frisk. The only difference being their shirt and expression. They introduce themselves with whichever name the player gave the fallen child at the beginning of their first play through. They explain that they are the manifestation of the power rush players get when leveling up in games, and that they became strong when the player kept making the decision to kill. In the end, they offer them a choice: erase the world, or not? It does not matter which one the player chooses – their constant commitment to killing has made the choice for them. The character turns on the player. The attacking motion plays over the screen and it fills with red nines, indicating damage. The screen shakes and the game forcefully shuts down.

Opening it again only reveals a blank, black screen and static noises – the game world has been destroyed. After ten minutes of waiting, the character will speak to the player once more. They call them out on not being able to handle the consequences of their actions and offer to restore the world in exchange for the player's SOUL. If the player refuses, they vanish and it takes another ten minutes for them to show up again. If they accept, the game is restored and playable once again. At first, it does not seem as if much has changed. It is only upon finishing a pacifist run that the implications of completing a genocide run become clear: the final scene of the game is altered. If the player decides to live with Toriel at the end of the game, Frisk will reveal that their eyes and face now look like the character. If the player decides to leave, the end group picture will feature the character and everyone else's heads crossed out in red. The first scene is accompanied by a terrifying laugh, and both play music from the genocide run and a blood red "the end" script appears. The happy ending of a pacifist play through has been altered.

There is no way within the game to fix this. The effects of the genocide route, or all that senseless, ruthless killing it took to get there are as permanent as games can get. In fact, it is even more permanent, because even deinstalling and reinstalling the

game does not fix it. The only way to escape the consequences of your actions is either to never play a pacifist run again, accept it, or to find a specific file buried in your computer system and delete it. That means that the only way to absolve yourself of your in-game sins is by performing an action outside of it. This is going above and beyond to not only hold the player accountable but also to establish an additional sense of permanence. Furthermore, the person who is being held accountable here is clearly not the player avatar. Frisk is nowhere present on screen or in the dialogue after Flowey dies. The person the character is talking to is the player.

This is not the only instance where *Undertale* messes with the magic circle, the space where the rules of the game apply and we suspend our disbelief to become immersed in it, by expanding it to include not just the computer it is being played on, but the player themselves (Conway, 2010).

If the player restarts the game after completing a perfect pacifist run, instead of the intro or the start menu, Flowey will pop up on the screen. He tells the player that everyone is happy. That Frisk has their happy ending. Then he asks you not to restart the game, which would result in resetting the timeline, and making everyone suffer again. He goes on to say that if you really must reset, then you need to delete his memories, too, because he cannot bear to remember everyone having been this happy. But you have probably heard all of this before, huh?

This is Flowey directly addressing the player and confronting them with the choice they are about to make. Will they reset his memories? Or will they let everyone be happy? In moments like these, Flowey essentially moves the magic circle to include the player. And because this decision does not happen within the game itself, we could even argue that the player has full agency here. They can restart the game. They can uninstall it. They could even take a USB-stick and keep their save file somewhere safe so everyone will forever be happy. Many, many players did the latter (FantasticPancake, 2015).

In terms of game mechanics, *Undertale* portrays realistic emotional and social consequences to each death the player causes and each character they spare. By freely giving them this choice in the first place, *Undertale* gives the player agency over their actions. This agency extends beyond the actual game space into the real world, by

making the player's choice to play at all a meaningful one within the context of the game. Further, the game includes characters and game mechanics that directly hold the player accountable for their actions, even outside of the game space. The resulting consequences as well as the fact that characters remember player decisions further gives these actions a sense of permanence that goes beyond the game itself. These factors combined create a greater sense of agency in the player, who now has the feeling that their actions matter and truly impact the characters and essentially the game itself. In essence, *Undertale* is a game that managed to make player choices so meaningful that they bled over into real-life. Few games can probably say that they made players perform actions outside of the game itself.

Chapter 5.

Discussion and conclusion

Few studies so far have addressed specifically non-violence and pacifism in entertainment games and game spaces. The aim of this close reading was to analyse how *Undertale*, an entertainment game aimed at mainstream gamers, communicates its message of non-violence and killing. The study focused on sound design, graphics and game mechanics to answer that question.

The findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Establishing a personal emotional connection between the player, the game world and its inhabitants.
2. Portraying monstrous enemies as human beings with feelings, social connections and a sense of culture and establishing them as equals to the player.
3. Showing consistent, direct and realistic consequences of violent, i.e. killing, and non-violent conflict resolution.
4. Consequences focused on the emotional and social aspect of the game world and its characters.
5. Holding the player accountable for their actions, particularly killing, by showing them to have a lasting or permanent impact on the game world and outside of it that cannot easily be taken back or erased, creating a sense of personal responsibility.
6. Providing room for personal doubt and self-reflection within the game-space.
7. Fueling player agency by provide room for the them to question or reject the game's message, while never betraying it.

The findings show great similarities with technics found in peace studies, particularly points one, two, three and four which relate to teaching about the effects of violent conflict, humanizing the other and building empathy. Further, point five ensures that the player cannot just distance themselves from their in-game actions which might

somewhat negate the fact that the conflict discussed in *Undertale* is entirely fictional. The world might not be real, but the consequences are. Finally, points six and seven are important because they allow players not only to make mistakes – a player who plays only the pacifist run will miss out on a lot of the analysed game elements, but also allows them to discover their own, more personal meaning of the game and keeps the player from feeling forced into a certain direction which could increase resistance to changing their attitude. Further, only the ability to reject the message gives the choice to accept it any actual meaning.

Within the context of the game, *Undertale* consistently portrays senseless murder as horrible not just for the individual but on a societal level and the perpetrator even as monstrous. Considering that *Undertale* is an RPG, a genre that is still fairly saturated with violent content, I argue that *Undertale* is not just a game about non-violence, but also maybe an object of non-violent resistance in itself: A means of persuasion towards a little less violence and a little more peace in RPGs. However, in spite of its message, it can also be a heavily violent RPG, depending on the player, making it a non-violent and violent game at the same time.

Considering this, it might be a point of future research to take a closer look at exactly how violence is contextualized in violent entertainment games and how the players interpret it. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that we cannot teach non-violence and non-violent conflict resolution without violence at all: To perform non-violence as a politically meaningful action against violence, violence must exist as a point of resistance. I therefore encourage the expansion of research into pacifism and non-violent themes and contextualization's in digital entertainment games. In addition, I would like to recommend, at the very least, a stronger collaboration between the academic field of serious and entertainment game research. As the findings, particularly points one to four, demonstrate, *Undertale* is a commercially successful digital game that effectively managed to blend together elements of entertainment game design with techniques borrowed from peace education that actually resonated with a mainstream entertainment game audience on both a serious and game level. *Undertale* has shown to have substantial elements of both and it is important to not erase or devalue any of its elements. The fact that it was targeted at experienced RPG players, i.e. the traditional gamer demographic does not negate its impact as a tool of education.

I also strongly suspect that we will be seeing more of games like *Undertale*, games that take a more serious approach to things, in the future. Academia will have to find a way to talk about them that does not leave them in a silo that they do not quite fit. For the on-going culture war in entertainment game spaces in particular, we can draw some conclusions from this study. First, *Undertale*'s success is at least to some extent a sign that while the traditional male gamer has not died out yet, they are to some degree being drowned out by the voices of the marginalized in digital games. *Undertale*'s serious message and themes could have been enough to let it drown, but instead people rallied around it.

Moreover, *Undertale* is maybe the living embodiment of 'know your audience': The way it uses players expectations of certain design elements, such as the victory jingle, to convey its message, indicates that it was specifically designed to appeal to and address long-time RPG players, the market that as an indie game it would have some of the greatest access to. Both in entertainment and in seriousness, it managed to aim for the same audience, and that might have made all the difference. What other indie games struggle with might be that their games are not quite reaching the right audience via their distribution and advertisement channels. Many of them are not quite made with or for the traditional male gamer in mind, but are perceived to intrude on their domain. Different marketing strategies might help to at least alleviate some of that problem.

5.1. Further research and limitation

This study was affected by the limited extend of existing research on pacifism in mainstream entertainment games and related game spaces. Further, there are other aspects of *Undertale* that are worth a closer look, but went beyond the scope of this paper. It's fan community and overall reception could reveal insights into the importance of the "fun"-factor in convey a message, and how to market serious games at a mainstream game audience. Further, while this study cites a few examples of player responses, it does not provide reliable data for how deep or shallow *Undertale*'s message was actually perceived to be, and whether or not it actually affected players outside of the game. A next step would be to find out how exactly players were impacted by the game and how long this effect actually lasts. In terms of serious games, I especially encourage further research into whether the division of entertainment games and serious games both in terms of target audiences, and academia is productive or not

and what could be done in the future to prevent the strict separation of these two academic fields.

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