

Spring 2017

# “Don’t You Have Anything Better to Do?” : A Care-Focused Feminist Analysis of Undertale

Evan Marzahn

*Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wgststudent>

Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

## Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Marzahn, Evan. "“Don’t You Have Anything Better to Do?” : A Care-Focused Feminist Analysis of Undertale" (2017). *Women's and Gender Studies: Student Scholarship & Creative Works*.

<https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wgststudent/1>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Women's and Gender Studies at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's and Gender Studies: Student Scholarship & Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

Evan Marzahn  
 Professor Jane Simonsen  
 WGST 420 Seminar  
 16 May 2017

“Don’t You Have Anything Better to Do?”

A Care-Focused Feminist Analysis of *Undertale*

*Warning: Major spoilers for the video game Undertale ensue immediately.*

Sans the skeleton, my favorite character, told me shortly after the start of my third playthrough of *Undertale* that I was “gonna have a bad time.” I had 147 bad times, actually, tallied on a index card in real life. That is, I attempted the difficult final boss fight of *Undertale*’s “genocide” route 147 times over one week and lost every time, but I improved with each attempt. I was obviously close to winning. But these failures were not what really gave me a bad time. Instead, my drawn-out struggle against Sans gave me time to reflect. I felt sick realizing that, for fun, I betrayed characters I had come to love during my two previous playthroughs. So I aborted my genocide run at the very end without defeating Sans, resolving to play differently and earn my digital friends their happy ending again—but let them keep it this time.

I was inspired to explore the ethics of the 2015 indie role-playing game *Undertale* because I am a different person since playing it; it has affected my subsequent approach to morality and problem-solving in video games as well as real life. Fans often “read” *Undertale* as a feminist game because of its inclusive treatment of gender and sexuality—there are gender-ambiguous characters, gay and lesbian relationships, and strong female characters. I won’t analyze most of that here. Feminism and feminist criticism have long been concerned not just with inclusion of more women in powerful positions in the current system, but with subverting that structure itself. I believe that a care-focused feminist<sup>1</sup> analysis shows *Undertale* to be feminist in the very structure of its “meta” narrative<sup>2</sup> and gameplay, which engage the player with feminist care ethics within the context of her role as a video game player.

To be clear, I am not making any claims about the author’s intention. Though it appears that developer Toby Fox at least somewhat values the ethical message of *Undertale*,<sup>3</sup> I don’t know or

---

<sup>1</sup> In short, care-focused feminism is a feminist theory that highlights the long-forgotten values of care and dependance for ethical action in a system that has privileged impartial justice.

<sup>2</sup> I don’t mean to use the term metanarrative, which means something else, but rather a narrative that is “meta” (in this case, self- and genre-aware).

<sup>3</sup> In a hilariously unhelpful interview with Julian Feeld of Outermode, Fox gave the following non-answer: “Regarding UNDERTALE’s morality, my opinion is kind of irrelevant. I’d be interested in what you think about it, though.” I guess I’m taking him up on that challenge.

care about what exactly that message was supposed to be when he designed the game. The presence of feminist intention (or lack thereof) does not make or break the feminist nature of a work, especially a piece of fiction that fans interpret and engage with beyond merely playing/reading/viewing it, and especially since the story and meaning of an interactive video game at the time of play are created in part by the player. That collaborative dimension of video games further highlights the possibility for a feminism that goes beyond inclusion—such that a game can not only be written with feminist goals in mind, but can also be experienced through feminist play.

And so I write this as a feminist gamer (and *Undertale* fan) who openly loves the medium. Though I will do my best to be academic, I hope most of all that someone will stumble across this and enjoy it the way I enjoy reading wild fan theories on Reddit late at night. As you might expect, major spoilers for *Undertale* abound, as well as for the *Mother* series that inspired it. Beware.

*Undertale* is explicitly billed on the digital distribution platform Steam as an “RPG game where you don’t have to destroy anyone” because every encounter can be won if you “negotiate.” This selling point openly contrasts with the usual combat focus of the RPG genre. As with many other games, your in-game choices affect the trajectory of the plot and the way that scenes are scripted. There are three general categories (“routes”) an *Undertale* playthrough can end up in, with distinct endings. These are the “pacifist” route, where the player chooses to kill no one and to befriend major characters; the “genocide” route, where she actively seeks out and kills everyone until there is no one left; and the “neutral” route, which encompasses any playthrough that didn’t meet the exacting criteria for a pacifist or genocide route. There are also several variants of these routes’ storylines, because the player’s exact choices (including ones that are not about killing) can cause the epilogue (and various scenes along the way) to turn out differently.

The story centers on a child who has scaled Mt. Ebott, from which climbers are said to never return, and fallen down into the Underground, where monsters have been magically sealed since losing a war with humans long ago. The child, Frisk, leaves the Ruins where they<sup>4</sup> landed and crosses the Underground to reach the barrier, which they discover that neither they nor the monsters can cross alone. The barrier is so strong that to breach it requires a monster to absorb seven human souls, which has led the monster king, Asgore Dreemurr, to kill and harvest the souls of the six human children who have fallen into the Underground before Frisk. As the seventh child, Frisk is caught between their desire to leave, the monsters’ collective desire to use Frisk’s soul to

---

<sup>4</sup> Frisk is one of several characters referred to in-game with the gender-neutral pronoun “they.” I will be continuing that usage here.

escape, and (potentially, if the player's choices allow for it) Frisk's affection for various monsters. These characters include, among others, the motherly Toriel; the skeleton brothers Sans and Papyrus; the "fish lady" Undyne who leads the Royal Guard; and the reclusive, anime-obsessed scientist Alphys.

### **"Mixed Realism" and Players' Moral Obligations to Video Game Characters**

After playing *Undertale*, I read voraciously. Many fellow players were commenting online on the game's morality, trying to pinpoint its unique approach and why it felt different from the morality systems of other games, and I wanted to hear their conclusions. One reading that I was pointed to is pop culture writer Kat Smalley's piece on how the game incorporates Kantian ethics. As Smalley summarizes him, Kant believed that people only owe animals moral consideration because treating animals poorly can feed a habit of using other people as means instead of ends; treating animals with kindness thus fulfills ethical obligations toward other people. Smalley suggests that players' actions in *Undertale* are ethically relevant because the characters, being fictional and not truly having any agency or self-awareness, are comparable to Kant's idea of animals. So as Smalley sees it, characters aren't owed any moral consideration in and of themselves, but merely as practice for when we owe someone moral consideration in real life.

The idea that *Undertale* promotes this Kantian interpretation is reasonably supported by the text. Sans, when he judges the player and/or character for killing in a "neutral" or "pacifist" run, criticizes the player's immoral actions because they increase the player's "capacity to hurt," not necessarily because of the actual suffering caused for the virtual victims. And this reading certainly offers a reason that the morality of in-game actions might relate to real-life morality. But Smalley's reading doesn't go into much detail about what particular actions are ethical regarding game characters—only that they are indeed indirectly owed moral consideration. And, as I'll discuss later, others' interpretations of what is a good or bad in *Undertale* have fallen short or been inconsistent.

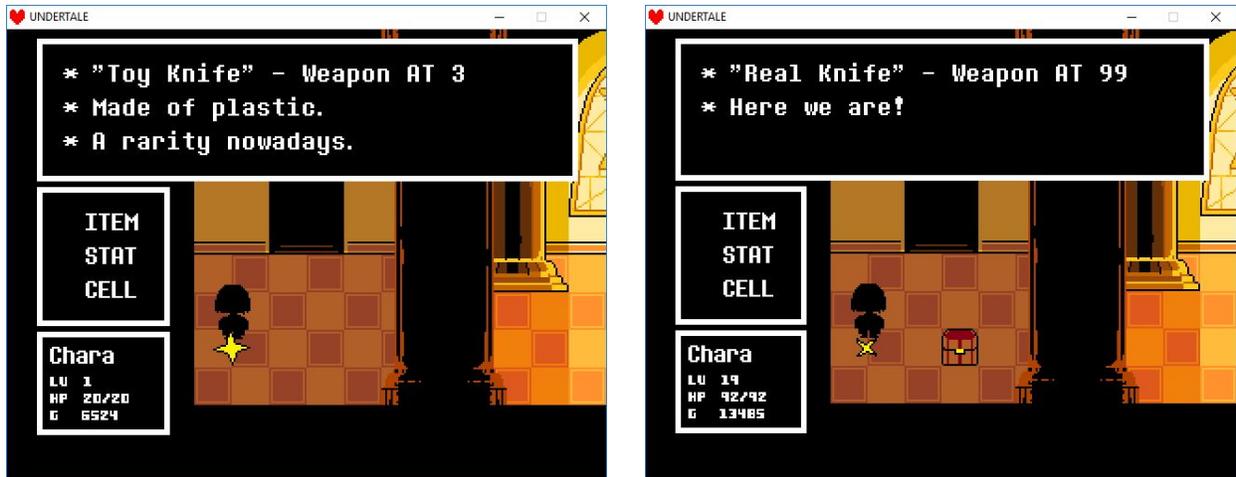
I think approaching the player's relationship with the game as that of a character *within* the game makes the player's role more clear. Timothy Welsh explores this "mixed realism" in the context of both video games and traditional literature. People typically believe that fiction is fiction and real life is real life, with a hard boundary between the two. But, in fact, fiction often blurs the lines between them, especially when the work reflects on or draws attention to the medium—as games must always do, in order for their rules to be comprehensible (54). Games are thus not self-contained, and their stories extend to the real world, bringing the two into "contact" with each other (61). On the other hand, as in the case of the game *Eternal Darkness* or the book *House of*

*Leaves*, the reader or player in their actual role as a media consumer can be written into the story (80). *Undertale* is extensively self-reflexive in this way: typical game mechanics like saving, reloading, and playing multiple times all happen in-universe, and some characters alter the interface or seem to crash the game. One character even calls out people who merely watch the game being played by others on streams or in videos (which is another common way of consuming video games).

With mixed realism, the player *is* a character in the story of their particular playthrough of *Undertale*, giving new meaning to the phrase “player character.” Typically, a player character (PC) is simply the character who is controlled by the player, as opposed to non-playable characters (NPCs) whose behavior is dictated by the game’s code or script. Sometimes, a PC can be named or otherwise customized to help the player identify with them. The fact that the character the player sees moving on-screen during most of *Undertale* is not the character the player names at the beginning is a plot twist revealed at the end of a pacifist playthrough when Frisk tells their name to their new friends. The player-named character is someone else, referred to by fans as Chara.<sup>5</sup> Chara appears to be the usual stand-in for the player, being ascribed a “level” and being encouraged to continue after a game-over. But they are also described in the story as the first “fallen human,” the deceased adopted child of Toriel and Asgore. The identification of the visible player-character with Chara in the genocide route suggests, to me, that only in a pacifist run does the player truly “role-play” Frisk; the character named Flowey seems to reinforce this in his speech to the player at the end of the pacifist run, in which he addresses her by name and requests that she “[l]et Frisk live their life.”

---

<sup>5</sup> Though Chara (possibly short for “character”) is the most common fan name for this character, Fox has stated that the name *should* be the player’s name (@tobyfox), and this is in line with the typical use of player-input names in most video games.



Checking items during the pacifist route (left) and the genocide route (right). In the corner, level, health, and money are ascribed to, the named character, rather than Frisk, in both types of playthrough.

The game situates the player as a character whose actions occur within the fiction. There is thus moral significance in the player's interactions with the fictional characters just as there is moral significance in the interactions between a protagonist and other characters in a novel. The player and character can both change through their choices, rather than just control or be controlled.

### Feminist Conceptions of Care Ethics and Justice Ethics

The concept of care ethics, articulated as a feminist ethics, appeared in the 1980s with Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*. As a psychologist, Gilligan observes that men and women tend to approach moral problems differently, using "different voices." She observes that, while men focus on the concepts of "justice, fairness, and rights," women consider "the wants, needs, and interests of particular people." Gilligan suggests that it is this different orientation that has led women to be viewed as less morally developed than men when measured against the justice-based standards developed by men, such as the psychologist Kohlberg (18), so she "expands our vision of moral maturity" by outlining these "two disparate modes of experience that are in the end connected" (174). Soon, other writers began to address care from different angles: Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* presents the idea that mothers are particularly disposed to caring (even in the political arena; she presents maternal thinking as an approach that inherently provides useful tools for peace politics regardless of the variety of political orientations of individual mothers [220]); meanwhile, Nel Noddings articulates a detailed theory of how to be the active "one-caring" and the receptive "cared-for" by extending the natural caring understood by everyone to be good into

“ethical caring” that arises from a desire to “meet the other morally” (*Caring* 4-5) by remaining in a caring relation even when natural caring is not present.

Care ethics is broadly associated with women, whether that be because care is the natural approach of women and girls (as with Gilligan), based in feminine values (as with Noddings), or based on maternal experience that has been historically limited to women (as with Ruddick). Justice ethics is thus associated with men in oppositional ways, whether that be because it is the masculine approach, based on masculine values, or simply an expression of patriarchal power since, as Noddings puts it, “ethics has been discussed largely in the language of the father” (1) in contexts like religion and law. Just as there are different articulations of care by different theorists, there are of course different systems of justice ethics (such as deontological or utilitarian ethics). But all involve some universal or absolute principle(s) applied impartially, whether the principles prized by a particular system happen to be virtues, laws, religious commandments, or personal convictions.

Noddings will be the theorist I call on most while analyzing *Undertale*, because hers is a very detailed and influential formulation of care ethics as an approach, and not simply as an observed pattern. I also think it is particularly adaptable and inclusive, because although she frames caring as a “feminine approach,” she locates the basic urge to care not necessarily in feminine or maternal experience but in the “earliest memories of being cared for” as a child, which are generally accessible to every person (*Caring* 5).

In *Caring*, Noddings is concerned not with the right answers to moral problems but with how people “meet the other morally” (4); caring is all about the context of a specific relationship between a particular “one-caring” (caregiver) and a particular “cared-for” (9). Each relation is nuanced, even involving subtleties like the cared-for’s *perception* of whether they are cared for or not (69). Noddings suggests that the desire to remain in caring relationships is the real motivation for being moral, and that this should guide moral behavior instead of “rules and principles” that are considered “universalizable” (5). Though caring is based on the one-caring “feeling with” the cared-for by “receiv[ing] the other” and understanding them intuitively (30), *ethical* caring involves making a concerted effort to care when natural caring is inaccessible:

As I care for others and am cared for by them, I become able to care for myself. The characteristic ‘I must’ arises in connection with this other in me, this ideal self, and I respond to it. It is this caring that sustains me when caring for the other fails, and it is this caring that enables me to surpass my actual uncaring self in the direction of caring. ... [A]s caring for another engrosses me in the other and redirects my

motivational energy, so caring for my ethical self commits me to struggle toward the other through clouds of doubt, aversion, and apathy. (49-50)

Thus, Noddings' idea of care, as expressed in *Caring*, is based on interdependence, attention to particular circumstances, and intentional development of the ethical self.

It is important to note that there has been critique of care-focused feminism from other feminists, especially in response to the idea that morality is gendered. The criticism has ranged from Annette Baier's suggestion that both justice and care are important values and thus women and men must work together to erase the gender divide (58); to Marilyn Friedman's insistence that there is no moral gender difference and that justice and care are closely related approaches (73); to the observation (by people such as Sandra Lee Bartky) that it is irresponsible for a feminist to promote caring given that women have been disproportionately confined to caregiving roles (Tong 174). Regardless, the ethic of care—or some dialogue with it—has been a prominent feminist ethic for decades. Though I believe that justice and care approaches are compatible, justice *alone* has long been the default approach and choosing a care-focused stance can lead to new, feminist insights.

### **Justice Ethics in Role-Playing Games**

The popular role-playing game (RPG) genre is named for its gameplay style, inherited from tabletop RPGs like *Dungeons and Dragons*. RPG is a very broad term, with multiple subgenres and much debate over what qualities define an RPG or whether particular games qualify for the label. It is not carefully-defined, but rather has a general meaning in its usage by gamers. As a gamer, I have a sense of what makes a game an RPG, but in the interest of intellectual honesty, I will crowdsource my definition. I found a lively debate on Reddit's /r/truегaming (a community devoted to casual, but careful, discussion on gaming-related topics) titled "What exactly is an RPG?" and looked at the five most highly-voted responses to get a sense of how this community would characterize the RPG genre. Major themes include:

- Heavy usage of statistics, with character progression marked by "numbers that go up" (as yumcake phrases it) and the accompanying increase in abilities, items, and combat skills. This is mentioned by JeddHampton, yumcake, InquisitorJames, catharsis, and a deleted user. This seems most important, not just because all five mentioned it, but also because JeddHampton notes that they would consider non-RPG games with this quality to have "RPG elements," while InquisitorJames says that this in addition to character customization is all it takes for them to consider a game an RPG.

- Literally “playing the role” of or identifying with a character, with the caveat that this *alone* is not enough because many games involve playing as a specific character. This is mentioned by yumcake, InquisitorJames, and catharsis, but argued against by the deleted user.
- A focus on story or narrative. This is mentioned by JeddHampton, yumcake, catharsis, and the deleted user. yumcake and catharsis emphasize that the player should be able to interact meaningfully with the story. JeddHampton highlights “storytelling” and “free roaming” as the definitive non-statistical part of the Japanese and Western RPG traditions respectively, which the deleted user corroborates.
- Combat. This was not mentioned directly by any commenter except for the deleted user, who wrote that Japanese RPGs emphasize combat more than Western ones. However, statistic-based combat is a part of the tabletop RPG tradition; it was discussed extensively in the responses to these comments; and it was implicit in each definition’s focus on “leveling up” (combat-focused) abilities along with other notes (such as comparisons with explicitly combat-centric genres like first-person shooters). I suspect that, in video games, combat is so common that it went unspoken in the top-level responses (and I can’t personally think of any RPG that *doesn’t* involve the option of combat).

From here on, when I discuss “RPG” story, structure, gameplay, etc., these are the distinctive qualities I am referring to.

In terms of narrative content, RPGs typically follow a particular story structure that it shares with other genres, like adventure games: the quest narrative, adapted from literature, which game design writer Jeff Howard argues is not just a search for a thing, but also a search for meaning (2). He connects this literary heritage with the gameplay concept that is also called a “quest” (which is also common in many non-RPG game genres): “an activity in which players must overcome challenges in order to reach a goal,” which may trigger “events that comprise a narrative” (xii). This may or may not be the entirety of the game or a small piece.

Game stories may then be quite flexible, without a consistent message for all players. The main quest of a game may be one goal, but on the way there can be many sub-goals. Some may be mandatory, dividing up the journey toward the main goal into smaller chapters, and some may be optional activities known as “sidequests.” This system is largely based on gameplay rather than story, and not all players complete all quests, or do them in the same order or in the same way. Thus, the narrative experienced by any given player in a quest-based game is relatively modular and individualized.

Beginning with genre-defining series like *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*, RPGs have frequently made their main quest the defeat of some evil—a “bad guy” that the protagonist(s), as a “good guy,” will go up against in the final boss fight. In these “fixed justice” scenarios, the player’s only options are to either commit the actions the game demands (and justifies) or to stop playing (Švelch 58-59). Because the RPG genre is built on combat, violence is experienced through the character’s fights with enemies, plants, animals, and even friends, which reward the player with mechanically relevant things like “experience points” toward level increases or in-game money. In-game, individual acts of violence are justified as steps toward defeating the ultimate evil. Moral success is therefore measured by increasing level numbers, which also increases the character’s other statistics (quantified strength, defense, intelligence, etc.). Thus, should the player cause the character to commit some act that is, in the fiction, considered immoral, she can often justify it by noting some reward (better statistics, a rare weapon, etc.) granted by the game design that will make the final goal easier. For example, in the first generation of *Pokémon* games (*Pokémon Red* and *Blue*) the main quest is to become a great battle trainer of the titular Pokémon. Over the course of the journey, developing a rapport with Pokémon is encouraged; the antagonist, Team Rocket, is villainous because they treat Pokémon as expendable tools. Yet, the player is free to strengthen their Pokémon by having it battle wild ones, leaving them fainted in the wilderness with no trainer to take them to a Pokécenter for medical treatment; the player gets away with Rocket-like behavior.

Noddings herself even expresses some concern about “competitive games of all sorts,” suggesting that for men, games (such as sports) become “rule-bound, skillful, and deadly serious” while women will play them in “inventive, capricious, and fanciful” ways (*Caring* 118). In the case of RPGs, the rule-bound, skillful, and deadly serious qualities are built into the statistic-focused, combative structure of the game. But what if an RPG were made to be inventive, capricious, and fanciful?

### **An Analysis of *Undertale***

*Undertale* has callbacks and thematic similarities to the 1989 Nintendo RPG *Mother* and its two sequels,<sup>6</sup> which seem to already hint at a maternal care ethic in their parody of other RPGs. Throughout the *Mother* series there are twists that emphasize the role of maternal care. Homesickness makes it difficult to battle, and the cure is a phone call home. The final boss of *Mother 1*, the alien Giegue/Gyiyg who was raised by humans Maria and George, is defeated by Ninten

---

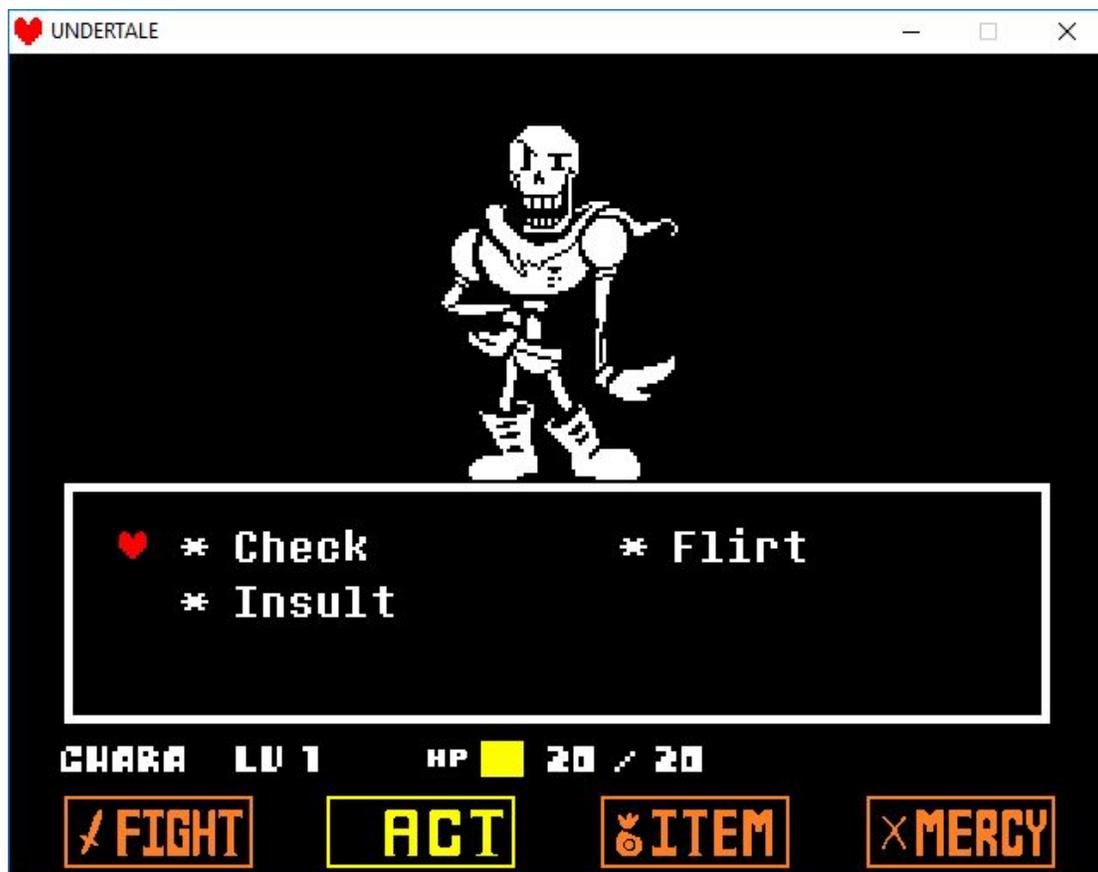
<sup>6</sup> The first two games were localized from Japanese to English as *Earthbound Beginnings* and *Earthbound* while the third only received an unofficial fan translation. In this paper, I’m using the original Japanese titles for simplicity.

playing Maria's lullaby. In *Mother 2*, the same alien, now a formless, omnipotent embodiment of suffering called Giygas, is defeated through the collective, loving prayer of all the characters and the player herself. The Masked Man named Claus, *Mother 3* protagonist Lucas' corrupted twin brother, is subdued through the welcoming call of his dead mother, Hinawa, who has spent the entire game (after her death) guiding Lucas. With its twists on the traditional RPG, the *Mother* series conveys the importance of care and love for moral and social development, and characterizes mothers as the primary purveyors of that care.

In *Undertale*, caring is dematernalized and degendered, as with Friedman's analysis of care and justice ethics, although it begins by playing off the problematic assumptions that *Mother* makes about the role of maternal caring. In *Mother 3*, Hinawa's early death leads her husband, Flint, to be absent from Lucas' life in favor of seeking revenge and finding Claus' body. Flint's absence has few negative effects on Lucas, just as the absences of Ninten's and Ness' fathers in *Mother 1* and *2* are barely felt; it's the loss of the mother that hurts. But Hinawa continues to care even after death by guiding Lucas and by reawakening Claus' consciousness to end their fighting. *Mother 3* tries to make the mother a plot device for a revenge story, while also having the mother be the single most important agent of care. These tropes are both used uncritically in *Mother*, and it creates a paradox: a woman cannot really be simultaneously disposable and indispensable. The extensive self-sacrifice that *Mother* promotes would really be unhealthy for both the mother figure and her charges.

When *Undertale*'s Frisk first falls into the Underground, they are adopted by a doting goat monster named Toriel (whose name echoes "tutorial," one of the gameplay function she serves). Toriel guides Frisk through puzzles, bakes them pie, and gives them a room filled with other children's different-sized shoes. She is the ideal loving mother, but her story is complicated as the player learns that Toriel was once the wife of the monster king, Asgore, with a biological child (Asriel) and an adopted human child who died in one night—one of them at the hands of other humans. She left Asgore after he resolved to kill any children who came into the Underground from then on, in order to use their souls to break the barrier, freeing the kingdom once and for all. She has been living in the ruins of the old capital ever since, trying (unsuccessfully) to adopt and protect the six other children who fell down before Frisk. Toriel's caring is strongly informed by her maternal feelings for her biological and adopted children; she is revolted by her husband's reluctant choice to harvest the souls of children out of duty to his kingdom just as Gilligan and Noddings are revolted by the biblical decision of Abraham to sacrifice his visible, vulnerable son out of duty to an unseen, powerful God (Gilligan 104, Noddings 43).

After Frisk convinces Toriel to let them leave the Ruins during a pacifist run, they are cut off from her caring influence (unlike *Mother 3*), yet caring and being cared for continue. Immediately after leaving the Ruins, Frisk meets Sans the skeleton, who has promised Toriel that if he saw a human child leave the Ruins he would protect them rather than kill them. He does so throughout the game, exchanging favors (like giving Frisk free food and distracting Frisk's pursuers) for Frisk humoring the little brother Sans cares for, Papyrus, who wants to find a human and really needs a friend. Frisk is hunted by the royal guard captain Undyne, but may peacefully end their confrontation by offering her a drink of water and later befriend her by cooking spaghetti together. Similar dynamics exist with most of the major characters, such that during a pacifist run, Frisk must act as both the one-caring and the cared-for at different times and with different people in order to achieve their goal and grow as a person. (That Frisk experiences both caring *and* being cared for is key for their moral development, in line with Noddings' claim that both are important in the development of the ethical self [49].)



*Undertale's* distinctive "act" menu as it appears during the encounter with Papyrus.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> All screenshots are from the exhaustive Undertale Text Project, which could formerly be found at [crashergale.tumblr.com/post/156682884561/view-text-project-here-download-text-project](http://crashergale.tumblr.com/post/156682884561/view-text-project-here-download-text-project).

And the player, as the one guiding Frisk in this endeavor, is directly engaged with some of the ethical decision-making skills called for by Noddings' ethic of care. Though combat is always available to the player, she is asked to help Frisk evaluate the needs of each individual "enemy" by talking with them and trying different actions through the "act" menu until the monster is placated, at which point they can be spared through the "mercy" button. This calls back to other RPGs that have special character skills, such as a magic system, that complement the simple "attack" option. For example, fire-based spells do more damage to ice-affiliated opponents in the *Final Fantasy* series. These skills add variety to the games they appear in, but encounters are still just violent math at their core. *Undertale's* special options are instead puzzles unique to every encounter, and solving one leads to unquantifiable happiness or friendship instead of the quantified strength of experience points. *Undertale's* most unique gameplay thus requires a total re-envisioning of battle scenarios—usually called "enemy encounters"—as *encounters with people* just as one might have at the grocery store or at school. Sometimes those people are hostile, and sometimes they are not, but they must always be received as *people*.

But sometimes the people we encounter, in *Undertale* or otherwise, seem just too evil. Noddings has been criticized for not establishing limits to care, points at which we might no longer care for an individual because they have done something too evil (Tong 181). Some have criticized *Undertale* similarly, as Nick Dinicola does when he suggests that the character of Alphys problematizes *Undertale's* pacifism. Alphys is the royal scientist and a reclusive anime nerd, who with Frisk's help enters into a relationship with her crush, Undyne, as part of the pacifist run. Alphys at first seems like a quirky, self-deprecating character, but it becomes clear that she is deeply depressed, insecure, and self-hating. While she initially claims to help protect Frisk from the killer robot/popular entertainer Mettaton with a sequence of improbably timely technological interventions, Mettaton ultimately reveals that Alphys asked him to play this role just so that she could impress Frisk and feel useful. Dinicola points out that defeating Mettaton once he begins to fight seriously is the closest thing there is to killing in a pacifist run; Mettaton merely runs out of batteries, so he doesn't *technically* die. Dinicola criticizes Alphys for getting the player into that situation in the first place.

The pacifist run presents two more wrenches through Alphys. One is simply that Alphys is the only character whose happy ending is achieved not through friendship with the player directly, but rather with another character (Undyne) who the player helps Alphys make a connection with. Dinicola believes that this underlines *Undertale's* simplistic kill/don't kill morality: "Undyne can

offer explicit criticism and support, whereas all we can do is not cut someone's head off." The other problem is that Alphys, as the royal scientist, turns out to have experimented on a human soul, extracting the essence called "determination" that allows human souls to persist after death (which is the in-game justification for allowing Frisk/the player to reload their game). She also experimented on dying monsters' bodies, injecting them with determination to allow their souls to live on, which only succeeds in melting their bodies together. Dinicola suggests that the encounters with these Amalgamates show them to be so miserable that euthanasia might be a better option than sparing them, but believes that *Undertale's* morality unfortunately insists that all killing is absolutely wrong.

Setting aside for now the question of whether *Undertale* is focused specifically on the player choosing to kill or not, Alphys is certainly a character that I have to grapple with when thinking about the ethics of the game because her circumstances are so extreme. I agree with Dinicola that the game doesn't confront her behavior satisfactorily—as he points out, it "literally runs away" from addressing Alphys' dangerous insecurity and makes a joke out of her relationship with the Amalgamates by likening them to dogs who get grumpy when they're not fed. From a care-focused perspective, I don't even see Alphys as properly reformed when she describes the Amalgamates impersonally as "failures," the knowledge of which has kept her from doing more "work." At the same time, though she may not have undergone proper ethical development, she is clearly crying out for *relatedness* (not even necessarily forgiveness) despite her awful crimes. In this way, she is similar to the Nazi in Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* as analyzed by Noddings in *Women and Evil*, who asks for Wiesenthal's forgiveness as a Jew but, Noddings suspects, really just wants his humanity reaffirmed (213). The person's actions may truly be unforgivable, but there remains an opportunity to relate that the one-caring may respond to.

The work of ethical caring, as Noddings envisions it, involves a commitment to care even when the one-caring feels revulsion instead of a natural desire to care, at the very least as a form of caring for the ethical self (*Caring* 18). This commitment applies to the player's relationship with characters like Alphys and Asgore, but it is also modeled in every character's relationship with the player. In the genocide run, when Papyrus is killed, his final words promise the player that she "CAN DO A LITTLE BETTER! EVEN IF YOU DON'T THINK SO!" If it's troubling that the player and/or Frisk is expected to accept the humanity of Alphys or Asgore despite their moral failings, then it should be even more disconcerting that many of the characters put up with the player and attempt to relate with her despite her being in the process of *committing genocide*. The circumstances parallel Noddings' discussion of *The Sunflower* when she writes that if the two men were in a

“human-to-human relation,” even one loaded with negative feelings, they could recognize that they both have the capacity for evil which is amplified in human separation and thus they both also have the “responsibility to resist” (*Women and Evil* 213). A player could easily read Undyne as evil because, as a boss character, she actively hunts down Frisk who is only an innocent child in the pacifist run. But the same player in the same game can commit genocide, in which case Undyne is a hero standing up against *the player* who is the real evil. The fights with Undyne and Sans in the genocide route are not boss fights in the traditional sense, but rather ones in which the player acts as a villain for the heroic characters.<sup>8</sup> This flip of the usual RPG format highlights this potential for good and bad in the same person.

Noddings suggests that seeing ourselves and others as symbols, rather than as human individuals, is a critical error. When discussing *The Sunflower*, she suggests that the two men view each other as symbols of the Nazis or Jews in general and that such symbolic thinking “sustains our capacity to inflict suffering” and leads to Wiesenthal’s decision not to forgive (*Women and Evil* 211). In *Caring*, she cautions against such abstract thinking, instead offering as a model: “Here is this person with this perceived need to which is attached this importance. I must put justification aside temporarily. Shall I respond?” (84).

Unfortunately, symbolic thinking is an expected part of video game play. Jesper Juul, in *Half Real*, describes games as being half fictional world and half real rules: the fictional characters, environment, etc. are overlaid on the rules and objects, and players eventually reach a point where they focus on the rules over their fictional representations (139). This has been my experience as a player of RPGs. Often the final boss fight does not feel like the culmination of my character’s journey, but instead an arduous exercise in balancing the numeric cost of my attacks, the damage done, and how much I can heal. The play becomes so abstracted that not only am I ignoring my relationships with the characters, but probably also any conscious thought of ethics entirely.

*Undertale* plays with this experience of seeing through the fiction. Before meeting Asgore at the end of a neutral or pacifist run, Frisk (or the player) meets up with Sans the skeleton for a judgement. Sans evaluates the player’s amount of EXP (a common RPG statistic, representing battle “experience”) and LV or LOVE (another RPG statistic, representing the character’s “level” and thus relative development in strength).<sup>9</sup> He reveals, in his serious, non-Comic Sans “voice”:

---

<sup>8</sup> This is underscored in the gameplay. It would only take one hit to kill Sans, but he casually dodges attacks (while monologuing) like only the player character has been shown to do thus far.

<sup>9</sup> In a bit of genre-aware wordplay, *Undertale* uses the common RPG abbreviation for “level,” LV, to refer to the player’s level, but it’s treated as an abbreviation of something else, “LOVE.” This seems like a quirky reframing of the level system, at first.

What's EXP? It's an acronym. It stands for "execution points." A way of quantifying the pain you have inflicted on others. When you kill someone, your EXP increases. When you have enough EXP, your LOVE increases. LOVE, too, is an acronym. It stands for "Level of Violence." A way of measuring someone's capacity to hurt. The more you kill, the easier it becomes to distance yourself. The more you distance yourself, the less you will hurt. The more easily you can bring yourself to hurt others.

Sans criticizes the player's participation in the traditional RPG gameplay of combat and leveling up as a desensitizing behavior, echoing Noddings' idea that seeing persons as symbols "sustains our capacity to inflict suffering" (*Women and Evil* 211). Should the player actually commit genocide, Sans condemns the player for her actions' immorality directly: "birds are singing, flowers are blooming... on days like these, kids like you... Should be burning in hell." But if the player completed a pacifist run, Sans instead congratulates the player with "you never gained LOVE, but you gained love," directly suggesting love (caring) is a viable alternative to the typical numerically-defined success (LV or LOVE) of RPGs. Caring is thus an alternative form of moral success that is conspicuously immeasurable in this game whereas pain is quantifiable and absolute. Noddings points out that, in real life, care often goes unrecognized as a developed ethical approach, with care-oriented women often considered to be stuck at stage three in Kohlberg's six-stage model of moral development (*Caring* 42), but at Sans' judgement, the development of the player (and Frisk) as a one-caring is praised.

The character Asriel (and his alter ego, Flowey, once he has been reborn as a flower) also explicitly links violence with the symbolic nature of gameplay. The player learns that after waking up as a flower with the same powers of "determination" (saving, reloading, resetting, etc.) as the player, he tried to do the right thing and make the people of the Underground happy, but as he did this over and over he found the people boring and predictable. He no longer saw the people, but instead the rules: when Flowey does X, the person does Y. He says that once you understand someone's predictable reactions, "that's it. That's all they are." And so he turns to destruction out of boredom.

This is potentially the same process that a player goes through as they move into a genocide run after a neutral or pacifist one. When I played for the first time, it was a "blind" playthrough—I began the game without any knowledge beyond the fact that there is a character who is a flower and that you don't have to kill anyone. I accidentally killed Toriel by attacking her, assuming that she would simply stop me once I had sufficiently proven my strength. I then attempted an old trick that I would use in any other RPG when I want a redo: turning off the game and reloading from the

last place I saved. But after I completed the encounter nonviolently, Flowey confronted me, saying, “I know what you did. You murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it.” Because Flowey also has “determination” and is aware of the player’s ability to save and reload, the game can track and critique this type of player choice from within the fiction.

*Undertale* remembers many such details between different playthroughs and instances of reloading. Though these echoes of my mistakes do not prevent me from going on to achieve a pacifist ending if I wish (with one exception), they’re not just meaningless, either. The game’s constant reminders of my flaws as I struggle to do good remind me of Noddings’ conception of the ethical ideal. She argues that one’s ethical ideal self must be attainable. “It is constrained by what I have been and done and not fully described by what I am striving to be and do” such that a woman who has been jealous once must set a goal to remain only *once* jealous instead of someone who is *never* jealous (*Caring* 50). With *Undertale*, I am always a player who once killed Toriel, and whose future decisions are influenced by that knowledge.

I stuck to my ethical ideal and earned a very peaceful neutral ending before going back to reluctantly befriend Alphys for the pacifist ending, but somehow it wasn’t enough for me. At the end of my pacifist run, Flowey, uncharacteristically serious, asked me to let everyone be. But my curiosity got the better of me. Knowing that the game was incredibly responsive, with detailed lore, and that I had left a range of potential actions unexplored, I did some exploring on the Internet and realized there was an entire “genocide” route to perform. I chose to do so for the sake of seeing the rest of the story.

I gained some insight on this regrettable decision from the blogger Michael Lutz, who wrote a short critique of *Undertale* that problematized my original conception of the significance of the genocide run—namely, that it was simply the darkness that made the light seem brighter. Playing a pacifist run would be less meaningful if it were the only option, despite that fact that the game makes it abundantly clear that you are not *supposed* to go through with a genocide run. Lutz agrees with me on this part. But he believes that this means the ideal player is unfairly intended to reach the pacifist ending and then leave the game in that state forever, with *questions unanswered*. It occurred to me that satisfying one’s curiosity can be just as much of an incentive to play in an “immoral” way as experience or loot. Lutz believes that *Undertale*’s design thus contradicts its message that you are to be pacifist, because it ultimately lures you into genocide (as it did with me) and “unintentionally muddles your ethical relationship” with the game world.

But Lutz’s critique (like Dinicola’s) relies on a justice-based understanding of *Undertale*’s morality. The encouraged route in *Undertale* is not, in fact, a “pacifist run” where you avoid violence

and death.<sup>10</sup> The idea that all one should strive for is “don’t kill, and don’t be killed,” is only expressed by the game’s misguided, accidental villain, Asriel; it’s the negation of the motto of his alter-ego, Flowey: “kill or be killed.” Asriel’s absolute commitment didn’t serve him well when he was killed and his re-embodied spirit corrupted, making that commitment impossible to fulfill. As Noddings says, an unrealistic ethical ideal “cannot be diminished but only discarded and replaced” (50). In Asriel/Flowey’s case, it’s as though he took Noddings’ other observation that “[w]hen we establish a principle forbidding killing, we also establish principles describing the exceptions to the first principle” (2) to the extreme.

The issue is not really whether the player is killing or letting monsters live. It’s whether the player chooses to honor their connection with the monsters—the people—around them. The so-called “pacifist” run requires more than avoiding combat. It requires befriending people. And an even better “ending” requires negotiating and compromising with the needs and wants of even those people you do not befriend, rather than simply running away from battle. The player must be prepared to connect with those monsters as people. This is why, though it is true that the player who reaches the “pacifist” ending does not purposefully kill, the watcher of a “let’s play” is also criticized despite not engaging in murder. Both of these things indicate a sense of entitlement (to entertainment, to knowledge) and a lack of real relation with the characters. The mistake isn’t murder at all; it’s failing to recognize and honor your connection with others. The error is the attitude that nurtures the “capacity to inflict suffering,” that would allow murder to be an option in the first place. In this framework, it is irrelevant how curious the player is about characters’ backstories or other lore—of course the temptation is there, but the decision to act on it as though the player’s desires take precedence over others’ needs is *the* moral transgression, long before the player begins to systematically kill.

The genocide run and Flowey’s destructive behavior are the only things that absolutely cannot be undone. In a neutral playthrough and up until the very end of a genocide run, the characters give the player many chances to redeem herself, so that even when she is reminded of particular mistakes (such as killing Toriel), she still has the opportunity to embrace her relationship with the characters and even go back to achieve the pacifist ending. But should the player complete a genocide run, any further pacifist playthroughs are marred by Chara possessing Frisk in the epilogue, indicating that the happy ending is in danger. The player cannot undo this. If the player is

---

<sup>10</sup> “Pacifist run” is just a popular phrase used any time a player of any game avoids combat for challenge or other purposes, as seen on the TV Tropes page for the phrase. However, it is also *the* fan name for this route in *Undertale*, with that option being called the “true pacifist route” in the fan wiki, which is why I have used it throughout this paper.

using the Steam release of the game, even deleting her files and reinstalling the game or playing on a different computer won't help her because a completed genocide run triggers a sync with the Steam Cloud service. This seems very extreme for a game with characters who otherwise give the player many chances for redemption—as good one-carings should do, according to Noddings (115), until there is truly no other alternative but to violently confront the player. But in completing the genocide run despite many opportunities to stop, the player “intentionally rejects the impulse to care and deliberately turns her back on the ethical,” meaning that “she is evil, and this evil cannot be redeemed” (Noddings 115).

But even evil is, in some ways, relational. In *Women and Evil*, Noddings classifies causing pain, causing separation or dehumanization, and causing or maintaining helplessness as “great moral evils” (221-222). This selection makes sense in light of her discussion in *Caring* about how even one's personal ethical development relies on others: “You can push me to betray my principles, deny my loves, sacrifice my ethical self,” which means that “I might do far better if you reach out to help me and far, far worse if you abuse, taunt, or ignore me” (*Caring* 48-49). In *Undertale*, there is one character who experiences these evils and who is thus corrupted such that he commits them himself: Asriel/Flowey, who cannot receive care and love in his flower body, and he is ultimately corrupted. Like the player who commits genocide and cannot take it back, Asriel faces permanent consequences for his destructive actions, even once Frisk saves him, because he will eventually turn back into the corrupt Flowey—his evil cannot be redeemed. This is all in spite of the fact that Asriel, unlike his alter ego, seems to be kind, with good intentions. Relatedness is so key to moral development that the inclinations of his personality could not save him when being reborn as a flower distanced him from his family and other monsters.

One of the most damning reflections on interdependence and moral development in *Undertale* is in the library in Snowdin (or rather the “librarby,” according to its misspelled sign). One book reads: “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.” This could just be a reflection of how the monsters feel toward the people that imprisoned them, but it's telling that *human* souls are the ones with determination—the ability to live on without a body situated among other bodies—while monster souls are the ones that need that relatedness, that will shatter easily not with physical strength but with hatred from the attacker. In the world of *Undertale*, though the player and Frisk are human and most certainly able to be loving and compassionate, it is monsters who most successfully embody these qualities. But because the “real world” only has humans and not monsters made of magic, this serves as a

reminder that in real life we *all* carry the potential to inflict suffering alongside the opportunity for redemption, relatedness, and caring that *Undertale* emphasizes throughout.

### **“Don’t you have anything better to do?”**

I’m used to hearing this phrase (or something like it) from friends and family members who don’t quite understand my love of video games—who encourage me to read books instead, or think games are just a violent distraction. I understand both of these opinions—I sometimes think of particular games as trivial or unnecessarily violent, and I value books about as much as I do games. But I think that these ideas, applied absolutely, are misguided.

My care-focused feminism guides me to evaluate the particularities of any situation, including my responsibilities. In my case, it often upholds gaming as a valuable activity. Play is, at the very least, a way of caring for myself and recharging for the demands of caring for others, but at its best, playing games gives me the opportunity to reflect and grow. As I wrote at the beginning of this paper, I am a different person—a *better*, more caring person—since playing *Undertale*, and I’ve had a similar experience with many other games. Gaming for me is not a waste of time that arrests the process of learning and growing and relating to others, but a unique expression of that process that produces results in myself and in my relationships with others all the time.

So it is really exciting that *Undertale* has provoked a very vocal response from fans who have been just as ethically and emotionally touched by the game as I have. Fox has described on the *Undertale* blog that fans have told him that *Undertale* “helped them through a difficult part of their life” or “made them laugh, or cry, or say ‘I want to be kinder,’” and that that response has been *so* strong and vocal that “‘not liking the game’ felt like a cardinal sin to many fans online,” leading others to reactively “hate the game, creating an endless whirlwind of discourse.” I believe this response is possible with almost any game, but *Undertale*’s success is a testament to the power of the medium.

And it’s equally as exciting to me that *Undertale* can undermine the unspoken assumptions of the RPG genre with consequences for how we view games and their moral significance. In doing so, *Undertale* demonstrates new applications for this feminism that sustains me and pushes the boundaries of this art form that I love.

At the end of my first pacifist playthrough, I had Frisk retrace their steps all the way back to the bed of flowers where they first landed in the Underground, only to find Asriel waiting for me there. I spoke to him again and again, hearing everything he has to say—a favor no one could grant him when he was trapped in the body of a flower. And since he knew he would turn back into a

flower, he asked me not to tell his parents that he was alive and to leave him there. Eventually, he thanked me for listening, and then simply asked, “don’t you have anything better to do?”

After my aborted genocide run, I have a long journey ahead of me to put things right by restarting the game and completing a pacifist run as my final playthrough. It will be painful, as I will be reminded of my violent choices just like I was of my accidental killing of Toriel the first time around. But I really want to earn these characters their happy ending and, this time, to let them keep it. At the end, I will walk all the way back to the bed of yellow flowers and patiently listen to Asriel, even though I already know what he will say. And when he asks me that question, I know my answer.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?”

No. There is nothing better in all the world for me to do than to listen to you, right now.

## Works Cited

- Baier, Annette. "The Need for More Than Justice." Held, 47-58.
- Dinicola, Nick. "The Dark Side of Pacifism in 'Undertale.'" *PopMatters*, 15 Mar. 2016.  
[www.popmatters.com/column/the-dark-side-of-pacifism-in-undertale/](http://www.popmatters.com/column/the-dark-side-of-pacifism-in-undertale/). Accessed 20 Apr. 2017.
- Feeld, Julian. "Interview: Toby Fox of Undertale." *Outermode*, 10 September 2015.  
 outermode.com/interview-toby-fox-undertale. Accessed 14 May 2017.
- Fox, Toby. "Retrospective on Undertale's Popularity." *Official Undertale Blog*, 14 Sept. 2016,  
 undertale.tumblr.com/post/150397346860/retrospective-on-undertales-popularity.  
 Accessed 7 May 2017.
- Friedman, Marilyn. "Beyond Caring: The De-Moralization of Gender." Held, pp. 61-77.
- Gilligan, Carol. "Moral Orientation and Moral Development." Held, pp. 31-46.
- Held, Virginia, editor. *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*. Westview, 1995.
- Lutz, Michael. "20 Paragraphs on Undertale: A Critique." *Correlated Contents*, 7 Nov. 2015.  
[www.correlatedcontents.com/?p=1974](http://www.correlatedcontents.com/?p=1974). Accessed 20 Apr. 2017.
- Noddings, Nel. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. University of California P, 2003.
- . *Women and Evil*. U of California P, 1989.
- "Pacifist Run." *TV Tropes*, tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PacifistRun. Accessed 15 May 2017.
- Smalley, Kat. "'Undertale' and Immanuel Kant: Ethics in Video Games." *PopMatters*, 2 June 2017.  
[www.popmatters.com/feature/undertale-and-immanuel-kant-ethics-in-video-games/](http://www.popmatters.com/feature/undertale-and-immanuel-kant-ethics-in-video-games/).  
 Accessed 20 Apr. 2017.
- Švelch, Jaroslav. "The Good, the Bad, and the Player: The Challenges to Moral Engagement in Single-Player Avatar-Based Video Games." *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play*, edited by Karen Schrier and David Gibson, Information Science Reference, 2010, pp. 52-68.
- @tobyfox. "Some people say 'What am I supposed to name the fallen child?' Your own name."  
*Twitter*, 15 Sep. 2015, 5:32 p.m.,  
 web.archive.org/web/20160320005308/https://twitter.com/tobyfox/status/643945593308618752. Accessed 6 May 2017.
- Tong, Rosemarie. "Chapter 5: Care-Focused Feminism." *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 3rd ed. Westview, 2009.

“True Pacifist Route.” *Undertale Wiki*, Wikia, undertale.wikia.com/wiki/True\_Pacifist\_Route.

Accessed 15 May 2017.

Tyson, Lois. “Feminist Criticism.” *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2006.

“Undertale.” *Steam*, 2017, Valve, store.steampowered.com/app/391540/Undertale/. Accessed 30 Apr. 2017.

*Undertale*. Developed and published by Toby Fox. 2015.

Welsh, Timothy. *Mixed Realism: Videogames and the Violence of Fiction*. U of Minnesota P, 2016.

“What Exactly is an RPG?” Original post by lsord. truegaming, *Reddit*, 7 Dec. 2017,

[www.reddit.com/r/truegaming/comments/3vsnwb/what\\_exactly\\_is\\_an\\_rpg/](http://www.reddit.com/r/truegaming/comments/3vsnwb/what_exactly_is_an_rpg/). Accessed 15 May 2017.