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Consequences of a dream: interactivity and agency of the reader/ player in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Undertale

Nicholas Dávila

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Abstract

In this thesis, I analyze Toby Fox's 2015 roleplaying game *Undertale* alongside Lewis Carroll's 1865 children's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. My reason for doing so is to investigate the narrative structures of the two stories, how they use metanarrative, and their use of game as a narrative tool in order to showcase the narrative lineage video games like *Undertale* share with *Wonderland*. Through this investigation I wish to show that the use of games and play as a vessel for or a part of narrative structure do not exclude works like video games from posing interesting questions and challenges for the reader, or in this case, player. Such questions, as posed by *Undertale*, include those of the moral obligation of the player as a protagonist of a story, the relationship between a player and their avatar in-game, and challenging narrative completion by the use of multiple routes and endings. An important way to show both the lineage of video games with novels and a game's ability to pose intellectual and artistic challenges to the player is to discuss how game and play are used in the novel. Carroll's clear use of game elements and symbolism blur the line between game and novel, making this well-studied novel an incipient narrative game. The foothold *Wonderland* creates for the study of video games begs an advancement of scholarship to include them. Carroll's great care in designing *Wonderland* and an implied desire to involve his audience in its making and telling makes him the precursor to modern game directors and designers, and it makes him an optimal starting point for advancing video game analysis in scholarship.

Keywords: game, play, narrative, structure, designer, Undertale, Alice, Wonderland, Carroll, Fox

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Consequences of a Dream: Interactivity and Agency of the Reader/Player in *Alice's Adventures in*

Wonderland and *Undertale*

by

Nicholas Dávila

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IN *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND* AND *UNDERTALE*

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Introduction: Interactivity in Narrative

A child falls below ground to a land of strange creatures, all with some level of ridiculousness or nonsense in their behavior. This land is under the rule of a monarchy unfairly and dangerously pitted against the child and features a mysterious, physics-defying character with a characteristically toothy grin that ends up becoming a well-known feature of the story. These features all appear in the hit, independently developed, 2015 video game *Undertale* by Toby Fox. And of course, they also appear in the popular Victorian children's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The two are remarkably—and by no means accidentally—similar with their stories largely centering on how a child protagonist treats the denizens of the strange new land they've entered while they figure out the most proper ways to navigate it. The key difference is one is a classic nineteenth century novel and the other is a twenty-first century video game.

In this thesis, I argue that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is very much like a game itself, despite its traditional classification as a novel. Carroll's use of play and the clear use of game elements and symbolism blur the line between game and novel. I argue that *Wonderland* is an incipient narrative game that predicts several features of the video game as a medium, specifically those like *Undertale*. The game features *Wonderland* inform can reveal key narrative features in the structure of modern video games like *Undertale*, and a modern video game like *Undertale* may reveal, in hindsight, what it is that Carroll was doing with his *Alice* stories structurally. This framing and comparison provide insight into the essentially interactive relationship between the most important parts of these two mediums: the reader and the player as an audience. In both works, they can be involved in their respective stories through interactivity as a part of the narrative structure. Various interpretations of the book and game exist as separate entities that can be discussed to compare the two works; however, my analysis will lean more heavily on the importance of *Undertale* in comparison to *Wonderland* as a

narrative structured around a game.¹ *Undertale* is a unique video game because of how it challenges the conventions of the turn-based RPG (role-playing game), allowing the player to spare or subdue an enemy rather than slaughtering everything in their path (though that is a—quite brutal—option open to the player).



Fig. 1 Flowey takes over the game

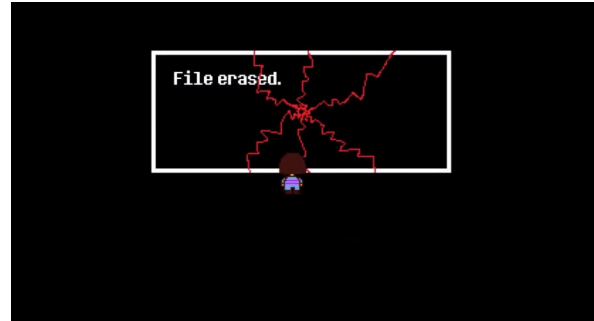


Fig. 2 The GUI is diegetic and can be broken from within

Additionally, it includes a meta-narrative acknowledgment of the game within the video game.

As shown in the screenshot above by the video game’s use of its SAVE and LOAD mechanic, save points and save files are a diegetic, if not commonly seen, part of the world by certain characters. Even the GUI (graphical user interface), something usually treated as just the medium through which the player interacts with the game, can be seen and meddled with by characters within the diegesis: for example, the penultimate challenge put before the player involves the character King Asgore literally shattering one of the player’s core options in combat in order to force the player to FIGHT (note: many

¹ “Video Games & the Novel” by Eric Hayot interprets *Undertale* as revealing the constraints of games as a form of mass murder. “Nihilism, Violence, and Popular Culture: The Postmodern Psychopath in Toby Fox’s *Undertale*” explores the trope of the postmodern psychopath the player can play as in *Undertale*’s “Genocide Route”. “Submission and Agency, or the Role of the Reader in the First Editions of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871)” by Iché Virginie, interprets reader importance to the narrative. “Children, Monsters and Words in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*” by Ben Silverstone, which talks about the “monstering effect of child’s play within language.” “You’re Using *Alice in Wonderland* Wrong” a video essay by Negative Legend on YouTube details the use of the *Alice* stories in popular media and asserts that the point of *Alice* is that it means nothing (literary nonsense); Negative Legend critiques anyone using its iconography without infusing meaning or acknowledging its nonsense, arguing that simply referencing the story through quotes and iconography does not justify its use.

Wonderland’s original title was *Alice’s Adventures Underground*. Coincidence or not, it is an interesting throughline for the two stories that *Undertale*’s world is “The Underground” and that *Wonderland* was once simply called “Underground”

of the important game elements in *Undertale*, such as representations of player choice and typical video game mechanics, are represented as words in all caps). While many, including Eric Hayot in his article, touch on some of these things that make *Undertale* unique as a game and emphasize the way games are capable of playing with narrative and narrative frameworks, I would like to explore more of how *Undertale*'s innovations as a game are part of a legacy descending from Carroll's *Alice* stories, specifically *Wonderland*. Furthermore, I want to study how it stands out as a successor to Lewis Carroll's work in both its base narrative and its meta-narrative as a game which makes its audience aware of it as a video game the same way *Wonderland* is a story which makes its audience aware of it as a story. Through this it is also possible to see where *Undertale* goes with its narrative structure as a video game where *Wonderland* does not or could not as a novel, shown especially by an implication by Carroll that there is a desire to hand his story over to his audience although they have no real control over it in the end.

Much of where I am coming from with this analysis comes from how *Wonderland* is structured like a game and what *Undertale* takes from that. For example, Alice takes action against herself to force consequences upon herself for "playing" incorrectly and in *Undertale* the player is made to likewise play against themselves. Additionally *Wonderland* uses the building blocks and mechanics of its medium, words, as playthings in its game the same way *Undertale* uses common game conventions as playthings in its game. There is then some necessity in showing why it is worth analyzing *Wonderland* through the lens of *Undertale* and vice versa to find these shared qualities.

Although I believe that narrative-centric video games (typically RPGs) are a step in an interesting direction for artistic game design, not all share this interest in video games as works of artistic and philosophical value. Video games are very popular, but they don't carry the same cultural legitimacy as novels. This is not to say they *shouldn't* have legitimacy; that view is a common attitude held by many who do not involve themselves in the cultural practice of designing or playing games.

The logic of objections to video games' artistic significance is that the primary focus of a game is achieving goals, points and results, and so a game cannot reproduce the emotional connection and narrative complexity of traditional art (Bourgonjon 2). Perhaps this can be proven true of video games (especially early ones) such as *Street Fighter* and *Super Mario Bros.*, where the games are *centered* on fun mechanics and the ability to spend time learning how to do or overcome something challenging, but the operative word is “centered.” These games may not foreground narrative, and are thus intentionally a type of diversion with an emphasis on fun rather than intellectual engagement; however, these objections, even in the case of works like these, ought not prevent games from being properly considered an art.

Play and goals do not exclude a game from being a compelling artistic and intellectual work, and the origins of the video game are enough to establish that potential. Hayot points out that the video game emerged out of a world shaped by the existence of the novel, television, film, and theater. As he puts it, “video games are not novels, but they certainly share with novels a relation to a much longer history of narrative” (179). Although they share a lineage with the previously established modes of narrative, games are often seen as impeding narrative complexity because of their unique focus on achievement; the idea is that all that matters is the tidy conclusion of the game, lacking any intellectually challenging structure which would, in turn, provide a more sophisticated artistic, emotional, or philosophical payoff. The pure pleasure of “winning” is the only payoff that matters in this case. To challenge this notion throughout this analysis, I will use “video game” and “game” to describe two different things: “video game” will be used for the medium itself, ranging from games as simple as *Pong* to complex, branching RPGs like *Stray Gods*; “game” will refer to the Oxford English Dictionary definition of “an activity or diversion of the nature of or having the form of a contest or competition, governed by rules of play, according to which victory or success may be achieved through

skill, strength, or good luck” (“Game, n.”).² The point of this distinction is to recognize the “game” as a part or tool of the narrative while not being its replacement and one that can be present in both video games and novels. An example of the separation of the two terms is Telltale Game’s *The Walking Dead* where while there are moments where skillful input and investigation are required, the true game part of this video game is the choices the player must make to affect outcomes of each “episode.”³ Without these choices and permeable outcomes (though admittedly they are a big part of the video game) the video game would just be an interactive TV series. The writer and developer of both video games and novels are equally capable of manipulating the elements of their works, such as narrative structure and game elements, with their readers or players in mind. Lewis Carroll makes use of this strategy through the phrasing and imagery evoked in his writing of the prefatory poem for *Wonderland* and I will later discuss this in relation to the bridge between game and narrative structure within narrative mediums: interactivity.

The *OED* defines the term “interactive” as being “reciprocally active; acting upon or influencing each other” (“Interactive, adj.”). The essential aspect of this definition is a two-way communication or stream of information between two subjects, or a subject and an object taking the place of a subject through artifice (think of a chat client AI capable of responding to your texts while “considering” what you are saying to it). So in the context of this paper, interactivity is the ability of a player or reader to make a choice in relation to a narrative structure and the narrative’s ability to react to that choice, whether it be by changing narrative structure, meaning, or progression.

For games, a useful and simple example is the original *Super Mario Bros.*, the prototypical

² *Stray Gods* is an RPG that features a branching musical which changes in genre and tone based on decisions made by the player as the protagonist, Grace. Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7u6dnpEIVk>

³ Based on the comic book series of the same name, the game was developed by Telltale Games who specialize in video games released in an episodic format with each episode picking up from where the last episode left off in both its scripted events and the choices players may or may not have made, even carrying between “seasons” of a game e.g. *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *The Walking Dead Season 2*. In their heyday, Telltale created a unique style of game that was being written while it was being played unlike playing a demo or an early access build before a video game’s full release.

linear game where you can only go forward on your quest to save Princess Peach from Bowser. While the ending will not change in your linear progression, the game still has a level of interactivity that accounts for what the player might do to beat the game: do you take out the bridge from under Bowser using the carelessly placed ax as Super Mario, or do you blast him with a fireball as Fire Mario?⁴ The video game allows elements of gameplay to be manipulable through player interaction to the same end in each successful playthrough. A more complicated effort lies in allowing narrative structure to be manipulable through player interaction with gameplay, such as in *Undertale* itself. The game boasts three narrative routes, one of which having different permutations based on who lives and who dies at the player's hands by the end of a playthrough. One route is not even attainable until you finish the game at least once which the video game acknowledges diegetically.⁵ Novels are not excluded from the potential of interactivity that video games have, however, as made clear by this paper's use of *Wonderland* and in more experimental works such as those from the mid-twentieth century and beyond.

Around the time of the video game's emergence, many instances of literature experimenting with reader interactivity emerged. One example of this co-emergence Hayot gives is the video game *Spacewar!*, released the same year (1961) as *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* by Raymond Queneau, a literary work which invites readers to make vast amounts of poems by combining a multitude of lines. Works of literature like Queneau's and others like B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) which features 25 separately bound chapters of a book that which can be read in any order, or more recent examples like Jason Shiga's choose-your-own-adventure graphic novel *Meanwhile* (self-published in 2001 and physically published in 2010) show that literary artists working in the genre of experimental

⁴ Super Mario, funnily enough, uses a mushroom to grow in size, and in later games even to shrink in size.

⁵ I hesitate to use the term "complete" despite its formality because my personal use of the terms "complete" and "finish" differ in regards to video games. To finish a game is simply to go from its start to its end (credits roll the main scenario is resolved), while to complete a game is to scour every aspect of it until all possible parts of it are discovered or resolved (those who play video games to this point are often called "completionists"). Flowey, after defeating him in his Omega Form and sparing him, will tell the player what they should do if they would like a different ending or to prove his philosophy wrong if the player has gained any EXP in their playthrough up to that point ("in this world it's kill or BE killed").

narrative have been utilizing reader interactivity and agency to great success for some time. In *Meanwhile*'s case the narrative drastically changes based on your decisions: whether choosing the vanilla ice cream and going home or choosing chocolate and ending the world, reader interactivity is well accounted for by using game-like choice in a similar vein to the aforementioned *Telltale Games*. Although these examples were experimental in the 1960s, the reader's ability to explore text or narrative in this interactive way carry on today in ways like the choose-your-own-adventure genre of books as with Shiga's graphic novel and the "game-ification" of (graphic) texts like *The Walking Dead* or Telltale's other game adapted from a comic, *The Wolf Among Us*. This type of co-authorship, the work of an author co-written through the post-publication reader interaction with the text, is a feature of works like Queneau's *and* video games, especially more recent ones that often include multiple endings.

These interactive texts have clearly found a level of success in their experiments, so it isn't a stretch to say that depth and complexity in literary works and video games aren't absent just because the author is relinquishing a part of their control over them. In fact, it is possible to have an even richer experience of a narrative by giving a reader/player a direct hand in the shape it takes from one instance to another through interactivity. This richer experience makes it clear why the two media take cues from each other and why their authors, designers, and directors have been doing so for some time now. A key difference is that the novel (often) cannot exist without some form of narration that grants the reader access to its fictive world, while the video game can replace this with various game elements. This difference sets up the ideas that make the narrative structure of a video game so potentially interesting.

Interactivity in Video Games Through Co-authorship

Zlatko Bukač, writing on the book *Narrative Design and Authorship in Bloodborne* (written by Madelon Hoedt), asks the question of who narrates a video game (Bukač 1).⁶ A narrator is “the voice or persona (whether explicitly identified or merely implicit) [that relates] the events in a plot, [especially] that of a novel or narrative poem” (“Narrator, n.”). When a game does objectively have a narrator, such as in *The Stanley Parable* (2013)—where the voice which presumes to dictate the player Stanley’s actions is the narrator of the story but only if the player listens to him—the player usually plays out the path set out by the game director and designers. This leads to an effect similar to the linearity of novels, but because a game does not need a narrator to be linear, there is usually no narration present in a video game. Even in the case of *The Stanley Parable*, the narrator is not conventional as it can be defied, allowing the story to be conveyed by playing through and interacting with it in defiance of that narrator. It is worth noting that the closest relation to this use of the narrator in the novel (or textual media in general) is the unreliable narrator or polyvocal narration; their common uses are to affect the way a reader engages in reading a text by inspiring doubt or alternate considerations, yet the reader cannot deviate from the narrator’s control unless they stop reading. Because the narrator can be defied by the player of a video game, a break away from that tool’s intended purpose is clear. This creates an experience which iterates the role Carroll places his readers into using his prefatory poem that I mentioned previously. Critic Virginie Iché argues that the poem’s purpose is to provide the sense of how the reader is meant to approach the story, as if Carroll is establishing the rules to his game. That sense is the narrative being like the boat which Lewis Carroll, the character (the author’s fictionalized self in the narrative), lets drift away out of his control as he tells the story to the three children: Prima, Secunda, and Tertia. The role the player is placed in is then one that allows for control over the story through co-authorship of it. These three have a type of power they

⁶ *Bloodborne* is a game in the “Soulsborne” family of video games created by From Software and directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki. The game takes place on the night of a town-wide hunt for beasts borne of tainted blood in the Gothic town of Yharnam. Here is trailer to get a feel for the game: <https://youtu.be/G203e1HhixY?si=pYQVIoDvCGHcslqU>

exert over Carroll in his passivity through language, as Iché highlights, while telling them the story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Iché 2). Bukač says the *Bloodborne* player's approach to the narrative matters to how the story unfolds as the game is filled with multiple storylines, item descriptions, and monsters connected to the greater setting and conflict that can be discovered or completely missed by players. These spread out but connected plotlines can be played (or missed) without endangering the fullness of the narrative. As a result, according to Hoedt, the game director and designers' "role as an auteur is drastically diminished [...] and shifted to the players, their choices, and inclusion in the narrative elements presented in the game" (Bukač 3).

While those behind game development do place elements (narrative or otherwise) for the player to play with, they otherwise have no control over how a specific player will find or resolve them through game-player interactivity, thus sacrificing a level of control to the player experience. This is true for *Undertale* as well, with its 3 distinct routes and possible permutations. This makes interactivity between the game and the player making their own path through the video game a part of the narrative structure of a video game rather than something that breaks it down. This freedom to move through the video game's world and narrative progression in different ways gives the player more responsibility for the events which unfold in their version of story.

Video games therefore have great potential for narrative complexity by *using* game elements to contribute to a unique structure. By mixing components of a scavenger hunt with the typical placement of challenges (both in parts sequential and out of any particular order), *Bloodborne* crafts its narrative dependent on player interactivity and controlled by player experience. The novel is equally capable of such game-driven narrative in cases such as *Meanwhile*. This potential is not limited to the choose-your-own-adventure novel, however; novels more in line with typical structure such as *Wonderland* also brush up against this potential.

The Game in *Wonderland*

Lewis Carroll's work shows this willingness to play with narrative structure and invoke interactivity in an early state. While interactivity in a novel usually boils down to whether or not it is read and how the reader analyzes the meaning behind or responds to the structure of the narrative, Carroll shows a desire to give his readers the ability to interact with the narrative in ways that anticipate how a video game uses interactivity. Carroll's writing in his *Alice* stories is characterized by a fascination with game elements like the playing cards in charge of Wonderland, the chess piece monarchy and the prefatory chess problem to *Through the Looking Glass*. Virginie Iché's essay on the *Alice* stories mentions Stuart D. Collingwood, Lewis Carroll's nephew, who documented his uncle's love of games and capacity to invent them. Because of Carroll's "fascination for rules," according to his nephew, which are the building blocks of games, it is appropriate to analyze *Wonderland* in the context of a game or a game-like ability to involve the reader in its story (1). Reader involvement in the *Alice* stories is limited by the medium of the novel as a book to be flipped back and forth, but it offers its readers a distinctive type of interactivity in that page-flipping because of its textual structure and visual aspects. This is in large part due to sudden appearances and disappearances as a common theme in the *Alice* books' visual design (5). Iché emphasizes that the original edition of *Wonderland* playing to the kinesthetic experiences of its readers (much like the "kinesthetic and interactive structures" in games that Hayot cites as a unique element of video games [178]) by using the pictures on the front and reverse of a page which allows the reader to feel they are not just reading, but invoking parts of the story, such as how the Cheshire Cat gradually disappears within the same picture across multiple pages. By flipping the pages, the reader plays an active role in the cat's "metamorphosis," being able to make the cat disappear and reappear (Iché 5).



Fig. 3 (left) and 4 (right) *The Cheshire Cat appears and disappears*

As shown above in fig. 3 and 4, the Cheshire cat's appearance to Alice and disappearance are drawn in a way by the illustrator, John Tenniel, to look as though it is fading in and out as an overlaid image on a singular background.

On the subject of the *Alice* stories as games, Elizabeth Sewell wrote an analysis of the *Alice* stories called "The Game of Nonsense." Her own definition of what a game is emphasizes its need for at least one mind to play it and at least one object or plaything to play the game with (310). I will return to why an emphasis on needing only a single mind for a game is important later, but Sewell gets at the idea that Carroll's writing is inherently a game with its plaything being words (311). Sewell claims that nonsense as a language game is organized not by prose or poetry, but by play with its own internal rules it must follow and adhere to in order to be played successfully (314). Although it seems to make disorder out of order with its many strange phrases, nonsense language's goal is actually to resist disorder by presenting a new order from the old, and to do this the nonsense must be built from what has existed previously ("ones") and must be able to "fall back into separate ones again" (318).⁷ Carroll catches the reader and forces them to go along with his game for as long as they read his work.

But Carroll giving the reader no choice but to play his game of nonsense shows even further how any amount of agency the *Alice* stories give the reader is illusory, as the story plays out the same

⁷ Strange phrases like, "[y]ou have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair," as Sewell uses as an example of nonsense in *Wonderland*, follow their own internal logic. They are comprehensible even if strange.

in each reading. But the emphasis on the reader's role in the stories' progression brings attention to reader agency even if there is a limited amount. Even in the great amount of control Carroll exerts over his stories, there is a clear intent to make the stories out to be something he *could* surrender to the reader. This is best shown in the prefatory poem. The passive language of Carroll in the poem is clear with how the "cruel three [...] beg a tale of breath too weak [t]o stir the tiniest feather," and how his own voice is characterized as "one poor voice [...] [a]gainst three tongues together" (Carroll 4). The three children who listen to the story of *Wonderland* are representations of the reader, "who is both a passenger of the boat/narrative in which she has no choice but to drift away and a sailor that can potentially take over its helm" (Iché 7). This feeling that the children exert a power over the storyteller mimes preparation for the children to shape the story of *Wonderland* in their own ways, just as Alice tells it to her sister by the time she wakes up from the dream of Wonderland. On the other hand, this feeling that the children and reader *could* have control over the story, even if they really don't, feels like the co-authorship present in interactive texts of modern video games like *Bloodborne*, *The Stanley Parable*, and even *Undertale*. Viewed in this way, it's almost as if Carroll was realizing the strength of the reader's own interpretation and elaboration in shaping a story considering how the story "grows" and is "hammered out" by the "merry crew." Carroll, using this language, sees the story as something that simultaneously came about naturally and out of his control and also as something crafted carefully by the four on the boat, showing what is possibly a level of co-authorship to the tale. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is born from the hands of both author and audience from stanzas five to six and although full control is not surrendered by the real Carroll, it is clear he sees (mock-frightening) potential in his audience, potential best acted on through the use of game in narrative structure.

The Game in *Undertale*

The general shape of *Undertale*'s story, as previously established, is reminiscent of *Wonderland*. A child falls down into a new land beneath the world they know, they have to appease and/or suffer through the eccentricities of its inhabitants, and their final confrontation is with a monarchy that symbolizes the worlds' (*Wonderland* and *The Underground*) confluence with the idea of games. *Wonderland* is ruled by the King and Queen of Hearts, *Undertale* is ruled by Asgore Dreemurr, who is a "Boss Monster." A Boss Monster is characterized in-game as a type of long lived monster with a powerful SOUL that can persist longer (even if mere moments) after death, and a boss in terms of video games is usually a personified, significant obstacle in the way of a player's progression.⁸ Like the King and Queen of Hearts being cards, Asgore Dreemurr is a personification of a game element in this story. He is both a Boss Monster in the context of *Undertale*'s fictional world, but also a boss monster in the context of the game used for *Undertale*'s narrative structure. Like Alice, the player character of *Undertale* faces many different episodes or "chapters" of challenges, but the final challenge has a special place as a core element of the story's identity with or heritage of gaming.

Like *Wonderland*, *Undertale* has a "waking from the dream" type of ending that comes from beating the game because the video game refuses to hide game elements from the player in its presentations of features like SAVE, LOAD, LV, EXP, and all other important game elements and representation of player choices. Where *Wonderland* and the events of the story taking place there are made fictional to the reader by having Alice wake up next to her sister, the *Underground* pushes against the player's immersion in the world in a number of ways: how one of the game's three final bosses uses the SAVE and LOAD feature to trap you in its fight, how another of those bosses acknowledges the amount of attempts made to kill him even though you are loading a previous save file to challenge him again, and how King Asgore himself literally destroys one of your core options for interacting in a fight before his fight starts, the MERCY option, represented below in fig. 5 and 6.

⁸ Gerson, an old turtle monster in the area of Waterfall, goes into detail about how Asgore, the missing queen, and their late son stand out from other monsters being longer lived and having more powerful SOULs.

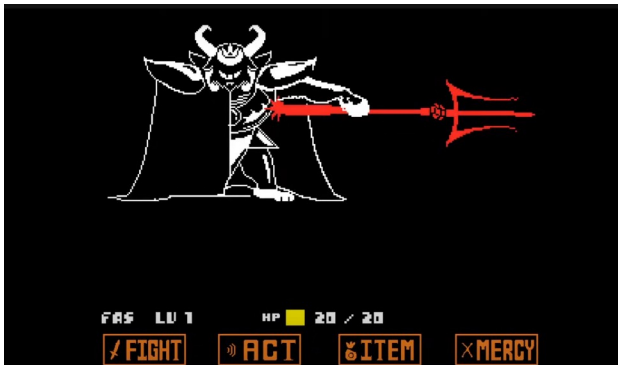


Fig. 5 Asgore prepares to FIGHT

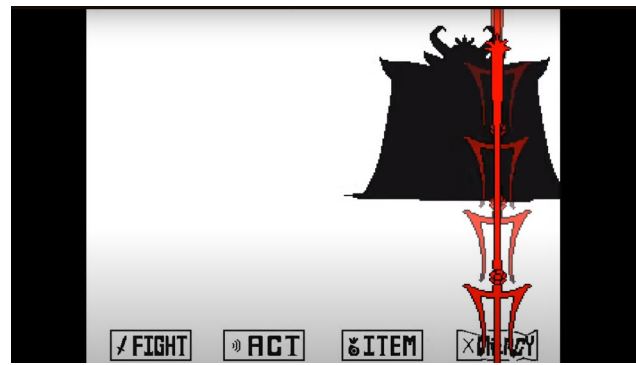


Fig. 6 Asgore rejects MERCY

Rather than being immersed in the fantasy of being the human walking through the Underground, the player is constantly reminded that they are playing a video game. This makes more sense after discovering that no matter what name the player inputs at the start of the game, the character the player plays as, their avatar, does not permanently identify with that name. In the True Pacifist ending of the game, the player learns that their avatar's name is Frisk, not what they input at the start; Frisk is not just the avatar the player thought they were utilizing and the player is further distanced from The Underground, as they are clearly not Frisk. In spite of their intent and/or levels of success in giving the player the sailboat, both Carroll and Fox refuse to let readers and players alike immerse themselves in the fantasy of the story and instead emphasize their existence in the realm of fiction. Where the video game and the novel differ, however, is that *Undertale* is capable of reacting to the player's progress and it uses its capability for meta-narrative to reference the player directly, making them a part of *Undertale's* diegesis. In short, *Undertale* is able to cut away the barriers necessary to *Wonderland's* meta-narrative (funny considering the goal of the player and Frisk is to cross the barrier to leave The Underground), speaking to the player through mechanics with only the occasional directness of the game speaking to the player outright. Their similarities and differences in these regards are hard to ignore, and it is then worth asking what this and the other elements they employ do within their narrative structures. That said, there is the question of what it is players and readers add to the two stories.

Reader and Player Roles in the Medium

The player and reader share a few fundamental qualities: they are both the audiences of their respective mediums, the author/designer must create their work with them in mind, and both must take an active role in enjoying the work (playing and reading as opposed to just watching or listening). Critic Sean Travers describes the idea of the “postmodern psychopath” in relation to *Undertale*’s “metanarrative,” a concept he describes as “overarching grand narratives that purport to explain how the world works.” The archetype of the postmodern psychopath itself is more a trope than any real mental diagnosis, but it describes a character that most people have seen in the media of this postmodern era. They are typically “a type of antagonist that commits heinous acts simply out of the ennui that accompanies the apparent nihilistic postmodern conditions” (Travers 411-412). The point of placing a player in the position of a postmodern psychopath, as Travers does, is to show the narrative effect of *Undertale* as a game with multiple routes and how curiosity is a theme/feature which Fox adds to his story in elaborating on Carroll’s work. The behavior of the postmodern psychopath is something *Undertale* expects of the player who is used to the typical RPG and a behavior that is presented to the new player in the form of Flowey’s signature line, “in this world, it’s kill or BE killed” (Fox). This, interestingly, also seems to draw upon the inherent morbidity present in the casual killings in *Wonderland* such as the Queen of Heart’s orders for execution and how Alice, in a way, turns this killing order against Wonderland by erasing it much like the player erases the Underground in a certain other route of *Undertale*.

The trope of the postmodern psychopath is one that the player ends up being categorized as when pursuing the Genocide Route: a route in *Undertale* named for the tragedy committed against the inhabitants of the Underground in an eventual effort to ERASE them. In this route, the player’s avatar

takes on a character of its own by the end which I will call “Chara” (commonly pronounced “CARE-uh,” due to it being short for “character”) for brevity and for its significance in the *Undertale* community.⁹ Chara is the in-game manifestation of the player’s interactions with the world in all routes/playthroughs of the game up until the final choices of the major routes. By the end of the True Pacifist route, the player must come to terms with the fact that the story is over and that to RESET and play again means to undo that happy ending. It shouldn’t matter if the player plays the True Pacifist route to completion again and again, but what if they get bored? What if the player follows the line of curious thinking, “what if I killed them all?” Rejecting a clear-cut and narratively fulfilling ending transforms a silly and whimsical game into a horror game with the player as its cold and logical killer.

A key point of interactivity in many video games, especially in the case of *Undertale*, is to transmit feelings present in the world of the game to the player and immerse them by implicating their self in these decisions (Travers 417). The separation of “game” and “reality” serves to make it clear that actions in the game are only a simulated immorality and have no bearing on reality, but metafiction, as used by *Undertale*, has the potential to complicate this relationship. As opposed to uses of metafiction for parody or critique, video games use the foregrounding of their artifice to force the player to truly think about how they navigate the medium through their choices (Travers 418).¹⁰ A player of *Undertale* who considers this seriously from the start will have an easier time playing to the completion of the True Pacifist route than one who does not as killing even one enemy before reaching Asgore Dreemurr will result in having to reset the game to achieve the True Pacifist ending. Reloading and replaying the game for the sake of True Pacifism shows a level of care the player has for the world, even as their

⁹ At the end of the True Pacifist route, it becomes clear that the name the player had input was not the name of the avatar, Frisk, but the name of the first human child to fall. “Chara” is the default name of the player character and the name given by the community to that first human child. They were Asriel Dreemurr’s best friend and were the reason Asriel died and subsequently became Flowey.

¹⁰ Immediate examples of metafiction used as parody or critique that come to mind include movies such as *The Dead Don’t Die*, in which a character is capable of reading the movie’s script, and the *Scream* series which actively acknowledges the tropes of slasher fiction.

plaything, and it is a level of theme that *Undertale* can have because it is a video game, not just for its structure, but for its cultural history.

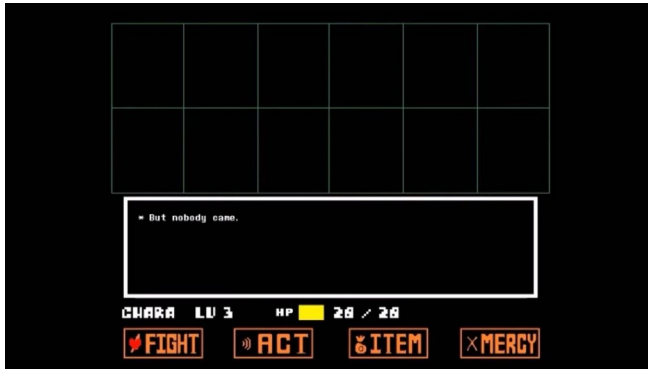


Fig. 7 Monsters are missing from combat



Fig. 8 Countdown

The Genocide route is nigh impossible to stumble into, for good reason. The reason for this is the “grinding” aspect of it, which requires the player to kill enemies for EXP in order to raise your LV to the point where monsters begin to disappear and avoid the player entirely (shown above in fig. 7).¹¹ As the player navigates a Genocide run, they are urged forward by the SAVE points, now serving as a count for how many monsters remain in an area (shown in fig. 8). There will always be intention behind a Genocide run player because of this. Those who are spurred on by their curiosity will stop playing *Undertale* only after playing their part in killing the world, as the game will have been played to completion. Even further, although the world can be restored after Chara and the player destroy it, that restoration only comes after sitting in a dark screen, with the wind howling in the background, and having a conversation (presumably with Chara) to restore it. The game is never the same, though, as by finishing a True Pacifist run after this, results in a new final scene where Frisk’s eyes glow red with Chara’s presence (shown below in fig. 9 and 10). The player is now haunted by what they’ve done (at

¹¹ Grinding is a term used in the RPG community to describe the process of killing enemies or completing challenges for the purpose of collecting experience points to increase the player’s level, making them stronger. While EXP and LV are common abbreviations for “experience points” and “level” respectively, sans (sic), the character who judges your actions toward the end of each playthrough, reveals them to stand for “Execution Points” and “Level of Violence” in *Undertale*’s context.

least until *Undertale* is completely wiped from their system). This is an advantage *Undertale* as a video game has over *Wonderland* as a novel, although the two utilize game and play. A novel cannot actively change to reflect how a reader is reading it, but a game can change based on the style of play on the part of the player. Fox's narrative structure forces the player to confront the fact that how they "read" the narrative will never be the same.



Fig. 9 (left) and 10 (right) Chara's mark Post-Genocide

The unique metanarrative structure of *Undertale* is what allows the complex ideas of exploring the curiosity of the player and the ramifications of involving an audience in a narrative. The closest *Wonderland* gets to this is best examined in how Alice herself is recognized as a construct of the story. I return to the Prefatory Poem and the cruel three (Prima, Secunda, and Tertia) because it is interesting to note that they are a representation of *Wonderland's* audience, and Lewis Carroll in the poem, in this case, is the medium through which the story is told. The Prefatory Poem's implication that the story of Alice and Wonderland are being "hammered out" as the three and Carroll float down a river creates an implication that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is being read and enjoyed as a type emergent storytelling, much in the same vein as video games with procedural generation or sandbox elements such as *Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor* or *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall*.¹² Additionally, the show

¹² *Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor* is a game set in the world of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien that utilized a unique system called the "Nemesis System" which allowed enemies that killed the player to rise up in rank and power, effectively creating emergent rivalries between the player and enemies. *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall* is a case of character

of how the three children exert power over Carroll's telling of the story solidifies this point even further:

Imperious Prima flashes forth

her edict 'to begin it':

In gentler tones Secunda hopes

'There will be nonsense in it!'

While Tertia interrupts the tale

Not *more* than once a minute. (Carroll 4)

Presuming the reader should read the cruel three as in the position of the audience of *Wonderland*, they can be considered the players of the game of nonsense which is experienced through Alice as an avatar. Though, the trail goes cold for the cruel three as there is no direct reference to their involvement in the rest of *Wonderland*. Although, there is still evidence here of a vision Carroll has for the game he plays and has the reader follow. What proof of a game being played does lie in the story serves as a template for the task *Undertale* eventually takes on itself.

Recalling that Sewell's definition of a game only requires at least one mind to play, the idea of "two-ness" of the self springs up in the matter of Alice's identity. Consider the first chapter, "Down the Rabbit-Hole," when Alice argues with herself about the use of crying. "'Come, there's no use in crying like that! [...] I advise you to leave off this minute!' She generally gave herself good advice (though she very seldom followed it)." Immediately, it does not come across as too odd or nonsensical for someone to scold herself for crying or to give herself good advice that she doesn't follow. What makes it come across is a detail in the same paragraph: "this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people" (Carroll 15). Alice is playing against herself when she does this.

creation working to help a player craft a personal narrative in their game as players can impose limits on themselves in order to add bonuses to their character in the early game, effectively making each playthrough of the game different based on who the player and their character are.

Reading Alice's behavior this way makes the subsequent chapter feel as though she is punishing herself for crying. Alice, despite telling herself to "stop this moment," continues to cry. Through this continuation of an act non-conducive to narrative/game advancement, a punishment or negative reinforcement is put in place. The hall she finds herself in is flooded, and when she unconsciously shrinks herself down with the white rabbit's fan, she is suddenly "up to her chin in salt water" (Carroll 20). Although "The Pool of Tears," both the chapter and the literal pool of tears, comes as a natural consequence of shrinking to the point that her tears become an obstacle of oceanic magnitude, she is still, in a sense, enacting a punishment for herself for playing incorrectly. In the same way, the player must play against themselves: Alice vs. Alice and Player vs. Chara.

Undertale's utilization of this type of narrative structure is clear in what the game encourages and discourages. Meeting Flowey for the first time in the ruins makes *Undertale* out to be a typical RPG, as Hayot would describe it, where you kill all enemies in your way; in this way, Flowey encourages the typical murderous behavior of an RPG protagonist (Hayot 184). However, meeting Toriel and properly playing through the game's tutorial (notice the punning Fox uses, haha!), subverts the previous encouragement into discouragement by teaching the player they may ACT and practice MERCY rather than FIGHT their enemies and kill them. Fox uses the established pattern of RPGs to keep Flowey's assertion—"In this world, it's kill or BE killed!"—in a state of limbo between encouragement and discouragement. I'd dare to call this a state of curiosity, the very same that pits the player against themselves, against the tendency toward Genocide. Giving in to said curiosity results in turning the violence present in the fictional world (shown through Flowey and the Queen of Hearts) back against said world and increasing it eightfold through erasure rather than growing beyond it.

This is the game being played: to complete *Undertale* to narrative satisfaction, its structure requires the player to interact with the video game in the way its *Toriel* teaches; it requires the player to play against their avatar of destruction, Chara. In the same way the game of nonsense is constantly

being played against the idea of disorder and meaninglessness by walking along its line (Sewell 319), *Undertale* is being played against a reduction of its world to meaninglessness to the point of effective erasure.

Undertale also echoes *Wonderland's* question of identity for the main character of the story. *Undertale's* player is not made aware of their avatar's true name until the ending of the True Pacifist Route, after confronting the true final boss of the game, Asriel Dreemurr, the God of Hyperdeath. Until then, Frisk finds themselves acting as someone who is not Frisk, as someone who is instead "Chara" (or whatever name the player chooses). Alice, likewise, finds herself transformed into someone who is not Alice in the early chapters of *Wonderland* until she is able to wake from her dream. This thread is first seen in Alice's own questioning of her identity due to her rapid transformations. "The Pool of Tears" is where this problem presents itself as Alice muses to herself, "I wonder if I've been changed in the night [...] if I'm not the same, the next question is 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, *that's* the great puzzle!" (Carroll 18). Alice then continues to cycle through who she might be if not "Alice," changing names to Ada and then, to her dismay, settling on Mabel. When she believes she might be Mabel, she makes an assertion:

[I]f I'm Mabel, I'll stay down here! It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying 'Come up again, dear!' I shall only look up and say 'Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else' (Carroll 19)

The question of identity for Alice is not left just to the beginning of *Wonderland*, however, as she says to the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle "I could tell you my adventures—beginning from this morning [...] but it's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then" (Carroll 92)

Undertale can be seen as echoing the scene of Alice refusing to resurface if she is not Alice and working it into Frisk and the player's roles in the story. The idea that Alice would stay in *Wonderland* if

she could not be Alice (or rather someone she likes being, at least) is then represented by the fact that the True Pacifist ending is both the only ending that allows Frisk speak their name and the only ending that the player and Frisk truly reach the surface as all other endings figuratively and/or literally fade to black after Asgore.¹³ On the level of content, this is a neat comparison. On the level of structure, it is clear that both protagonists' development trend toward a self-realization assisted by the forces that move them through their stories and participate in their games. The style in which Alice is able to resurface also reflects *Undertale*, in both its True Pacifist and Genocide routes.

With the Mock Turtle and Gryphon episode serving to remind the reader of the questions of Alice's identity, the next two chapters during the trial serve as a resolution to these questions. The trial is the point where the cruel three are able to unite in "Alice's Evidence." By calling out the flaws of the King's logic, toppling the jurors, and outgrowing the court, Alice is capable of resurfacing from Wonderland and dispelling the nonsense by acknowledging the game of Wonderland and finishing it. "Who cares for *you*? [...] You're nothing but a pack of cards!" (Carroll 109). Both *Undertale* and *Wonderland* end in leaving the subterranean realms behind and calling attention to the nature of the games and dispelling them. The player of *Undertale* loses control of their avatar, Frisk, who becomes their own character. Alice seemingly shakes off the awareness she acquires in Wonderland and relegates her experience to the realm of dream (Gilead 283). Both characters, in their separate circumstances, are able to reclaim their names/identities. In Alice's case, however, there is a question of whether or not it is a cop out to relegate Wonderland to a dream because it "undercut[s] the effect of the [narrative]" (Carroll 273). To this point I find myself agreeing in part with Sarah Gilead in her article "Magic Abjured: Closure in Children's Fantasy Fiction," but I also find myself thinking that there must

¹³ The player cannot literally see the surface until after the confrontation with Asriel Dreemurr. In the Neutral ending, the player gets a phone call from one of the denizen of the Underground who tells them how things are faring now that they've left; this ending has many permutations, but the furthest the player can go is talking to Flowey if he was spared after the Omega Flowey fight. In the Genocide ending, the player is left with the (near) complete erasure of the Underground, leaving them with no game to return to, much less a surface.

be more to such an abjorative ending that *Undertale* can show us in the advantage it has as a video game.

“Magic Abjured”

At the end of both games, there is a resolving of the fantasy elements, both diegetic and metatextual. To borrow Sarah Gilead’s term to describe what happens, the magic of the Underground and Wonderland is abjured (or, to quote *Harry Potter*, “mischief managed!”). As Gilead notes, a common view of the ending of *Wonderland* is that it is indicative of “a lapse of Carroll’s creative courage” (Gilead 282). According to Gilead, Carroll’s closure is disavowing Wonderland as a type of reality, denying its symbolic representation of illogical adult reality. While speaking primarily of *Through the Looking-Glass*, Gilead makes the point that in both instances of Alice waking from her dream (in both stories) she becomes unconscious of her maturation and insights into the nonsensical and potentially frightening adult world that Alice’s dreams represent (Gilead 283). The issue becomes a clear romanticization and differentiation of adulthood and childhood that creates an “uneasy equilibrium” between fantasy and reality (Gilead 285).

In this reading of *Wonderland*, the story does seem to undercut any meaningful growth for the character Alice. It is in this sense that *Undertale*, as a video game, has an advantage over *Wonderland* by roping the player into its narrative structure. While the prefatory poem’s construction of Alice and her adventures in Wonderland and *Wonderland* written as a game toy with the idea of it being an emergent narrative with readers having a significant role in its execution, *Undertale*’s structure is centered around the player’s role in Frisk’s adventures in the Underground as they are one and the same until the journey is truly over. In both cases, however, when the game ends, the player and reader are who are left with the journey while Frisk and Alice “wake up” and are left to be themselves again,

likely ignorant of the psychic journeys they had gone through, but for *Undertale* these additional layers of game and play give it an advantage over *Wonderland*. But of course it is thanks to *Wonderland* that Fox is able to take off where Carroll landed, and I do not believe *Undertale* renounces *Wonderland*'s “cop out” of an ending, but rather embracing and remixing it to take advantage of its medium.

Undertale has its three unique endings thanks to its capacities as a medium, and the two core endings take pieces from *Wonderland*'s ending. The True Pacifist ending plays with the idea of Alice becoming Alice once again with Frisk speaking their name to Asriel who then echoes it back to the player as Frisk is incapable of speaking directly to the player on their own. As Frisk is able to live a life with the now freed monsters on the surface, they have become a part of the world above and relegated the Underground into the realm of video game. The player is then left with the process and results of the journey, unsure what Frisk may have learned for themselves but ideally not left dissatisfied as it is clear that *Undertale* is a story more about the player's actions than that of their stand-in. Despite being made aware of the video game's artifice as it was being played, this serves only to solidify the player as part of its structure.

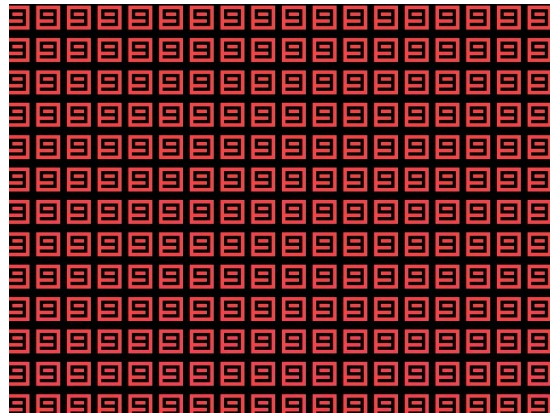
The dissatisfaction left by *Wonderland*'s abjuration of its magic is not lost by *Undertale*, however. What's left, as discussed above, is the Genocide Route, a route that mirrors the destruction of *Wonderland* on the part of Alice and the lack of resolution that follows. The Genocide route is impossible to be carried out unintentionally as discussed prior; it requires a level of intent or curiosity on the part of the player. So it answers a question: what if the player *is* dissatisfied by the True Pacifist ending? With curiosity being the motivation behind Alice's entire adventure, the connection is clear although appearing superficial. The connection is solidified when considering that where the True Pacifist and Neutral endings result in leaving the Underground behind (with the True Pacifist route being the only case of truly resurfacing), the Genocide ending results in the player's murderous intent manifesting as Chara. And with or without the player's permission, Chara will dismantle and

“kill”/erase the underground because it is just a game after all (see fig. 11 and 12 below).

Fig. 11 The Choice



Fig. 12 Chara “kills” Undertale



If any, like Gilead, claim that the dream undercuts the end of a story and/or we should care differently about a dream over a literal journey, we might ask, who cares for a world that only exists in the game? The player has proven that they don't by following their curiosity along. Even if the world is restored, there is a mark forever scarring any attempt at obtaining the real True Pacifist ending in the form of Chara's unsettling smile and big, red eyes being placed over Frisk's. This can be circumvented by wiping *Undertale* clean off of the system it is housed in, but Fox's message is clear. The Underground is just a game the same way Wonderland is just a dream if the reader/player choose to read into them like that, and pursuing that level of completion nigh forever marks the game with the player's knowledge of its artifice and the fact that the happiness of the monsters helped by Frisk and the player is meaningless. The interaction is settled, and the player loses the game of nonsense, falling into disorder and meaninglessness.

Conclusion: Undertale as a Modern Wonderland

Wonderland has a weakness in this ending, but it is a weakness determined both by the constraint of this work's medium and temporality. Carroll updating and controlling the publication of

the *Alice* books directly, from how it was printed and how the pictures were laid out, makes him come across as an incipient game developer in the modern/video game sense. His notes on changes he made even come across as patch notes for a video game.¹⁴ In his “Preface to the Eighty-Sixth Thousand” he even comes up with an answer to the Hatter’s Riddle that he had designed at first without an answer, but it is clear he deemed it important enough to tell his readers what he believes the answer would be even though he remains honest in saying there is no answer (Carroll 6). Carroll would have made a for a great video game designer in the present day, if not at least following the footsteps of the choose-your-own-adventure writers like Shiga or venturing in the realm of TTRPGs (tabletop role playing games) which are a vast space for emergent storytelling.

Fox and Carroll are also similar in their use of parallel stories. Lewis Carroll wrote both *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, with the latter appearing to have a heavier insistence on the game taking place within the story (thinking of the prefatory chess problem). Toby Fox, likewise, is in the process of writing *Undertale*’s parallel story, *Deltarune* which further explores the player-avatar relationship with the avatar having a seemingly antagonistic relationship (or at least one riddled with contradicting motivations and goals) with the player which has been shown throughout and especially at the end of each of its released chapters. While the video game is incomplete as of writing this (2 out of 7 chapters have been released), *Deltarune* was conceived as a story by Toby Fox at least three years before *Undertale*.¹⁵ The two are also anagrams of each other, and *Deltarune*’s first chapter takes place on a chess board like *Through the Looking Glass*.

There remains further elements to be explored in this analysis between the works of Toby Fox and Lewis Carroll. Seeing that Fox is not yet finished with the whole of his *Undertale/Deltarune* narrative, a full analytic comparison between the pair of video games and the pair of stories

¹⁴ Notes made to discuss changes made to the game for the betterment of the experience of play.

¹⁵ My source is Wikipedia. While I am unable to figure out where the original source of this assertion is located, it is generally accepted as true by the community, and the fact is most likely buried with Toby Fox’s social media account.

(*Wonderland/Looking-Glass*) cannot yet exist, and *Deltarune* immediately pulls the critical player in by foregrounding the question of identity and the player's role by presenting and immediately ripping away the player's ability to decide who they are with the claim "No one can choose who they are in this world." This claim which presents itself as applying to the world echoes Flowey's philosophy, "In this world, it's kill or BE killed," which when considered in light of the True Pacifist and Genocide routes, is the difference between losing and winning the game respectively. There is also the matter of the other human SOULs present in the game that represent different virtues, including your own, implied to be the reason the player and Frisk are able to SAVE and LOAD the game and keep playing even after dying.¹⁶ There is also the idea that the player is actually assuming the role of the human that fell before the existing story as the name created by the player and Chara's are one and the same and what that means metanarratively. Just as the game can be left in an incomplete state as a feature of its narrative—thanks to the mechanics of the choice to SAVE, LOAD, or RESET the game—the analysis by this very nature is incomplete.

As the field expands to include video games as topics of and lenses for discussions, it is important for scholars to play these games, think about the strategies they employ, and consider the narrative lineages they draw upon. An increase in video game scholarship can allow for challenging and playful fiction to see critical consideration such as this thesis and further propel the medium intellectually and artistically. *Undertale* isn't even the only obvious video game to put against *Wonderland* or *Looking-Glass*. *American McGee's Alice* and its sequel *Alice: Madness Returns* put a twisted and gore-y spin on the classic stories for example. Looking beyond representations of Carroll's work, *The Stanley Parable*, as mentioned above, explores the potential of a player as a protagonist

¹⁶ There are seven virtues represented by the human SOULs in *Undertale*: Patience, Integrity, Bravery, Kindness, Perseverance, Justice, and Determination. Determination is the virtue that allows the player/Frisk to SAVE and LOAD, a power the Flowey is revealed to once have before Frisk fell into the Underground and usurped Flowey by having more. Determination is also revealed to be the power that bound Asriel Dreemurr to the single golden flower that became Flowey.

actively defying the supposed structure of his narrative, and stories crafted by From Software like *Bloodborne*, *Dark Souls*, and *Elden Ring* are not even explicit, requiring the player to piece the story together and (provided the player doesn't use a guide) requires careful consideration and literacy on the part of the player to get a "good" ending. The structure of narrative can achieve new depths when gaming is a narrative tool. In the case of *Undertale* and how it builds upon *Wonderland*, the player can make or break that structure.

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