

Undertale: a Masterpiece with Boring Gameplay

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Undertale is an Independent Role Playing Game (RPG) made by Toby Fox and released in late 2015. The game has been praised for its unique way of dealing with enemy encounters. Unlike a traditional combat system, where the player must attack the enemy until their live bar depletes, Undertale adds the ability to befriend enemies by talking them out of fighting. This single design decision gives agency to the player, where they choose how they go through the world. Do they kill every single enemy, spare them all, or choose to remove only the most troublesome? Nonetheless, the manner in which the game challenges the player is extremely boring and moreover demonstrates that a great game does not need entertaining gameplay to be a masterpiece.

In Undertale, the player, a human, falls down a hole into a world full of monsters, our character must adventure through this mysterious world, befriending or killing lovable personalities to find a way back home. The gameplay revolves around turn-based combat. When the player is on the offensive, they must stop a red bar that moves across the screen and must stop it when it is in the middle of the screen. Otherwise, they can “act”, and perform certain actions to befriend the enemy. While on the defense, the player, represented by a red heart on the screen, must evade projectiles and a barrage of attacks, similar to a bullet-hell. Knowing this, why do I say that the gameplay is boring?

This gameplay makes for an easy game to get a grip off, but it demands a surface-level challenge to the player. Looking at the combat at face value it can be seen that it doesn't really engage the player

Undertale at its core is a game which is not challenging in terms of gameplay, the game asks the player to do basic tasks to succeed, it has shallow gameplay and asks for surface level complexity and challenge. For example, any player can practice a quick time event where they stop a bar from moving towards the center screen, there is no real challenge in waiting and pressing a button at the right time, and hence why QTE's have been shunned upon by the gaming community at large. More importantly, the challenge emerges from timing attacks, which is not inherently hard, but is something that is easy to mess up, it is more tedious than it is challenging. Nonetheless, Undertale still has this system as the primary way to damage enemies. If a game like Call of Duty would implement this system to damage enemies there would be outrage, but somehow inside Undertale, such a thing is acceptable. Then when looking at the way the player must evade bullets it strips what makes one of the core aspects which make a bullet hell so entertaining, the exhilaration of weaving in and around bullets to finally find an opening to attack the enemy. It seems like no one would ever buy a game that revolves around evading enemies instead of attacking them, but that is exactly what the game does. So how does Undertale run away with this?

Toby Fox understands that gameplay is the catalyst that pushes the story forward. A game must provide some kind of resistance to progress, if not games would become movies where nothing

is asked from the player, and hence games must demand some kind of barriers to overcome through the use of skill to advance to the next story beat and hurdle. Keeping this knowledge in mind, it can be seen that Undertale is not a game that centers on masterful and challenging gameplay, it is not attempting to be like Dark Souls, Spelunky, Celeste. Rather it is a game that centers on its story first, providing challenge as a means to push the player to fail, so they can overcome adversity and feel a rush after beating a hard enemy, which is one of the themes of the game. The game doesn't need a cerebral combat system, so it settles for a simple one that gets the point across and challenges the player, even if it is in a cheap manner. Hence, why the rudimentary gameplay is perfect for Undertale as the game at large revolves around its story, the characters, and the interaction between human and monster; therefore Toby Fox couldn't care less about a complex battle system, rather he provides a game which harmoniously brings story and gameplay together.

But still, there is more to it, because to make a video game is not only about gameplay and story, but also music and visual art, and how all these components intertwine with each other to create the game. Because, the gameplay would still be boring if it were just pixels on the screen, with no music and only blurbs of text to tell a story. One of Undertale's greatest accomplishments is how every component builds onto each other to make a great game. Firstly, the game combines the combat next to an incredible soundtrack that fits the mood of the battle. Secondly, the attacks by the enemies are not simple pixels but rather they have a connection to the enemy itself. If it is a skeleton which you are fighting, there will be bones, if it is a muscular seahorse, it will be their arms, and so forth. Hence, the battle exudes personality, making so these are not enemies but people. Thirdly, the game's decisions to make defense a dance of dodging the enemy is deliberate, as the game holds the theme of being a pacifist, hence why being offensive when dodging similar to a bullet hell would defeat the purpose of the game. Additionally, the dullness of offense also reinforces such themes, as being offensive and killing enemies is seen as incorrect inside the game world, hence why it makes sense to make it dull to make it an unrewarding strategy. Lastly, the game's difficulty, even if it may be cheap, builds upon the game's themes of determination. Henceforth, Toby Fox is able to build a whole game which builds around its combat system which, shallow on its own, becomes the perfect metaphor for becoming a toolbox to push the story forward, even if it is a rather simple one, creating a game greater than the sum of its parts.

In the end, Undertale is a game that breaks down normal game design philosophy. The rule of thumb when it comes to game design, that great gameplay is more important than a story in a game. However, Toby Fox shows that it is about having every component working in tandem to make a masterpiece. Because a game without a remarkable story can be fun but it will be somewhat forgettable, it becomes an interesting experience but it will not transcend into art. Art conveys a message, and any artistic medium, poetry, music, movies, books, and videogames, does so by telling a story. The only reason why games like The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, Final Fantasy VII, and Chrono Trigger, it is not because of their gameplay they timeless classics, but rather because of their touching stories, incredible music, and a game which balances out every component of its design to tell a story. And Toby demonstrates once again that which truly matters to make a masterpiece.

As a closing note, due to the more in-depth manner of this essay, I believe that exploring how other games tell stories through gameplay, music, and visuals would give a broader sample size to demonstrate Undertales design philosophy, games like: Celeste, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, and Subnautica would be great games to study.