



Undertale: Tales of Dystopia

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Kylea Caughman analyzes the indie role-playing game *Undertale* as an example of dystopian narrative, noting the game's innovative construction of time and space and its revision of tropes commonly seen in dystopian fiction and film. This essay was written for a seminar on dystopian fiction and film with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

IN THE SCOPE OF CANONIZED dystopian fiction, *Undertale* does not fit the typical mold. There's no totalitarian world government, unempathetic mechanical overlord, or towering Metropolis powered by the sweat and labor of the poor when the protagonist arrives. However, *Undertale* does bend tropes and build time and space to create a unique dystopian adventure for the player. *Undertale* creates the bad space associated with dystopian fiction, twists the typical tropes, provides commentary on current society using unique gameplay options, and uses the medium of video game to its advantage, creating a never-before-seen dystopia.

Undertale, first released in 2015 by creator Toby Fox, is a role-playing game, set in a world of humans and monsters. After losing a war, the monsters have been sealed underground by the humans. The game begins with the protagonist, a human, falling into the underground. The game features turn based battles, puzzles, and boss

battles. However, unlike most RPGs, *Undertale* permits the player the option not to fight or kill monsters and perform other actions instead. This allows the game to have multiple different endings, the main routes being neutral, pacifist, and genocide.

The starting space of *Undertale* can leave the player feeling conflicted. The layout and design of the Ruins is minimalistic, using very few colors and objects aside from the puzzles used for the player to progress in the game. Upon venturing into the Ruins, the protagonist meets both Flowey and Toriel, who give the player two completely different impressions of how this game and its story could play out. Flowey tells the player that “In this world it’s kill or be killed,” leaving a sense of impending doom in the player’s mind, even after being saved. Contrastingly, Toriel saves the protagonist from Flowey’s wrath, and moves to take the protagonist in as her own child. She is appalled by Flowey’s actions, calling him a “miserable creature,” giving the player the sense that Flowey may not have been right about this world. Depending on who the player believes, the view of the Underground could be distorted either way, especially within the barren Ruins.

The next area in the Underground at face value is quite pleasant, but upon exploring, a darker side can be found. After the Ruins, the protagonist moves on to Snowdin. Both the forest and the town in the Snowdin area are covered in snow and have a joyful atmosphere. This is connoted by the light and bouncy music playing, along with the fun and exciting characters met in the area. However, even in this area with its wacky skeletons and friendly dog monsters, another element to the space can be discovered if the player looks closely enough. Upon searching certain spots within the Snowdin area, the player can find hidden cameras. Along with this, when travelling backward, the player may spot a fleeing Flowey who appears to be following close behind throughout the protagonist’s journey. This creates the feeling of being closely monitored, both by known and unknown means.

As the protagonist continues their journey, the Underground gets darker once again. In the Waterfall area, the sense of dread the player may have felt in the beginning starts becoming stronger. On the surface, the area is quite beautiful, despite the darker atmosphere. The scenery includes fluorescent mushrooms, lantern-lit pathways, and glistening rocks on the ceiling of the cave that resemble stars in the night sky. Once again, when the player investigates further, the area doesn't seem quite as quaint. Like in Snowdin, cameras are still watching, along with Flowey who continues to trail the protagonist. This area also begins to show the player how desperate the monsters residing in the Underground are to escape it. When the player chooses to listen to echo flowers featured in this area, a conversation between two monsters explains how they long to return to the surface, to be free, and to see the true starry night sky. This can distress the player, as it is here that they also learn that if Asgore, the ruler of the Underground, takes the protagonist's soul, all of the monsters in the Underground could be freed.

From here, an undeniably dystopian space can be experienced by the player. The protagonist moves on to Hotland, featuring hot lava and machinery used to power the Underground, as well as the camera feed that has been watching them this whole time. Upon entering the Lab near the entrance to Hotland, the player can see the giant screen that has been playing the camera feed. It is focused on the protagonist's face, insinuating that the cameras have truly been watching them the entire time, following their every move. It has a feeling of panopticism—the threat of being under surveillance at all times—especially after learning that choices in the game can have extreme consequences within the storyline (Foucault 195-228). It is revealed that Alphys, the royal scientist, has been watching the protagonist the whole time, but claims to be on their side. She also helps the protagonist stay alive in the face of Mettaton, the anti-human robot she created and “accidentally” made into an “unstoppable killing machine” before they arrived. The conflict of whether or not to

believe Alphys stays with the player throughout their journey in Hotland.

Both Hotland and the closely related area of the Core have a certain dystopian look to them. Hotland is fiery while the Core is mechanical in nature, and it only adds to the feeling of danger as the protagonist comes closer to the Barrier. During this time, Mettaton continues trying to destroy the protagonist, while Alphys “helps” to keep it from happening. However, it is obvious, as Mettaton later points out, that these “savings” are set up, just a façade to get the protagonist to trust and like Alphys. This serves to create more tension and discord in the player, not understanding whose side to be on, wondering if Alphys has ulterior motives.

One last properly dystopian space found in *Undertale* is the True Lab. This area can only be explored during the true pacifist route of gameplay and shows exactly how far the royal scientists were willing to go in order to escape the Underground. The True Lab looks abandoned, dark, and almost evil in a way. Knowing that determination within souls could help break the Barrier, Alphys set out to extract it and strengthen it by resurrecting fallen monsters, which went horribly wrong. Alphys created amalgamates comprised of multiple different monsters. It is also revealed here that Alphys created Flowey, fusing determination to a golden flower, giving it the power to save and rewrite time. Flowey goes on to use this power to entertain himself, killing monsters and resetting time over and over until he exhausts all of his options. It is in the True Lab that Alphys creates the true monster of *Undertale*.

Aside from creating dystopian space, *Undertale* also uses dystopian tropes within its narrative. The most striking dystopian trope is the post-war society trope. This trope of rebuilding society after a great war can be seen in dystopian texts such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s novel *We*—wherein a totalitarian government took over after the “200 Years War.” The title sequence before the game begins explains the history of this world, showing the war between humans and monsters. The monsters lost the war, and the humans decided to

seal the monsters beneath Mt. Ebbot, enclosed away from human society. As a human, the player's first instinct can be to side with their own species, fearing the fall into the Underground that is shown in the title sequence.

Another dystopian trope *Undertale* employs is experimentation, done by Alphys in order to help the monsters escape the Underground. Both the film *Alien* and Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* are dystopian texts that use this trope, in which they both aim to advance the species at the expense of individuals. However, this trope serves a different purpose in *Undertale*. The experimentation goes horribly wrong in *Undertale*, resulting in monstrous amalgamates instead of Alphas. These monsters show the suffering their whole society has been through trying to get back to the Surface.

Undertale also has the typical capital-M Machine that citizens within dystopian societies so often worship. This trope is seen again in *Alien* as well as E.M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops," along with other dystopian texts, but *Undertale* puts a twist on the trope. The machine that practically owns and runs the Core is Mettaton, is a robot with a soul. Mettaton acts as the sole television star in the Underground, amassing fans and worshippers alike. This fame grants him large amounts of power over the Underground, especially over his employees at MTT Resort. The strict control Mettaton has over his employees can best be seen in the genocide route of the game. During this route, every monster evacuates the area ahead of the protagonist, but Mettaton's employee Burgerpants is the only one to remain. When the protagonist threatens Burgerpants, he simply responds with: "I can't go to hell. I'm all out of vacation days." Even when all other monsters have run away in fear of the protagonist, Burgerpants stays, more afraid of Mettaton and the repercussions of leaving his post.

The commentary on violence in *Undertale* can be observed in every route of the game. Toriel and many of the monsters in the Ruins try to push the player out of the typical video game mode of killing all the monsters in sight, attempting to teach the player how to

act and spare enemies in battle instead. While the stats seem inconspicuous—the typical abbreviations LV and EXP usually mean “level” and “experience points”—the player finds out their more sinister meanings in the genocide route of the game. When facing the character Sans in battle, he tells the player that these stats actually mean “levels of violence” and “execution points.” This distortion of typical game stats could be used as shock value for the player, unknowingly amassing great amounts of violent stats.

The criticism of violence in video games can best be seen in the genocide route of *Undertale*. When the player kills every monster in the Ruins, it triggers the genocide route. This route is noticeably different from the other two main routes: it elicits evacuated non-playable characters (NPCs), a kill counter, and threats from Sans upon meeting him. Once all the monsters in an area are killed, the protagonist is met with many calls to fight and is told: “But nobody came.” The monsters are afraid of the human in this route of the game. Even Flowey, who admits to having destroyed and restored the Underground countless times just to entertain himself, begs for his life when the protagonist encounters him at the end of the game. These acts of violence do not go unnoticed in subsequent runs of the game either. Flowey remembers everything the player chooses to do and taunts them about it in later playthroughs. The game does not allow the player to kill without consequences, even if the game is reset.

Undertale holds a special place among dystopian texts. Its medium allows the player a deeper experience of the world. In *Undertale*, the use of Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotope—the connectedness of time and space within a text—differs from most dystopian texts (Vice 200-28). The chronotopic structure of the story gives a quick review of the world’s history, before thrusting the player into the story. The medium of video game lets time draw out as long as the player lets it. The fleshing out of time is purposeful as well, as the player finds out while exploring. The protagonist is the seventh human to fall down, and is the last soul needed for the monsters to be able to escape through the Barrier. There is also a prophecy: “The

Angel ... The one who has seen the surface ... They will return. And the underground will go empty.” This story is spent in real time by the player, waiting to see if and how the prophecy will be fulfilled.

This story is also distinct from other dystopian texts in that it features two ambassadors—characters that bridge our world with the text’s world—making it more complicated for the player to understand the world. Flowey and Toriel are the exact opposite of one another, Flowey being a homicidal flower and Toriel being a loving goat mom. The player must choose who to believe about the world that they have entered. Either it is truly “kill or be killed” or there are loving, gentle monsters who only want what’s best for you. This choice between ambassadors allows the player to develop two drastically different views of the Underground at the beginning the game, which can even affect the players gameplay choices.

Another unique quality about *Undertale*, which happens through its medium as a video game, is that the story is only what the player makes of it. Without exploring and taking time to evaluate the environment in every single area, the player can miss key elements to the story of the game. The storyline, excluding the beginning scene and what is told to the player by main characters, is almost completely optional. The player must be willing to check things out, read tablets, and talk to NPCs to get a fuller story. In fact, without playing each main route, the story will remain incomplete. The player learns more about the storyline with each playthrough, which takes time and effort on their part, especially when trying to piece stories from different playthroughs together. It is a much bigger commitment than reading a book or watching a movie, taking up countless hours.

Having so many choices and options for both gameplay and story building, players of *Undertale* can have varying views of the story and the characters within the game. Depending on who the player sympathizes with, certain decisions and actions of characters can be construed differently. If the player takes the side of Toriel in the beginning, the action of Asgore killing and taking six human

souls seems worse than if the player takes Flowey's side before learning this. As the player learns more about the history of the monsters, the king's actions may seem justified. Learning about the True Lab in the pacifist route can also change the player's mind, finding out that the king and royal scientist were messing with the lives of their own subjects. It can all depend on whether the player cares to hear out motives for the actions of others or not. The story-line can develop split beliefs between players, depending on what they learn and do not learn.

Undertale could hold a standout spot in the dystopian canon. The game's interpretation can be very subjective, depending on the feelings and opinions of the player. The medium of video game makes the player work harder to get the full story, and even then, it can leave the player feeling conflicted about the story. These game-play options allow the story to have commentary on the violence in the world, while promoting pacifism. The dystopian tropes presented in the story play off the typical ones but have their own novel *Undertale* slant to them. Even the bad space in the game can bring forth different feelings within the player. Some are more subtly dystopian, while others are quite blatantly dystopian. *Undertale* has the potential to complicate the dystopian canon, adding subjectivity to the mix. ►►

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