

Vassar College

Digital Window @ Vassar

Senior Capstone Projects

2020

"For as long as you remain here": retraumatization, video game trauma theory, and player response in Undertale

Max Dubois
Vassar College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone

Recommended Citation

Dubois, Max, "'For as long as you remain here": retraumatization, video game trauma theory, and player response in Undertale" (2020). *Senior Capstone Projects*. 1009.
https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/1009

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Window @ Vassar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Window @ Vassar. For more information, please contact library_thesis@vassar.edu.

“FOR AS LONG AS YOU REMAIN HERE”: RETRAUMATIZATION, VIDEO GAME
TRAUMA THEORY, AND PLAYER RESPONSE IN *UNDERTALE*

A SENIOR THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
OF VASSAR COLLEGE
UNDER THE ADVISING OF PROFESSOR EVE DUNBAR

MAX DUBOIS

FALL 2019

Abstract

The video game *Undertale*¹ presents a cast of characters whose experiences as individuals and a collective can be used to generate a ‘new’ trauma theory dubbed Retraumatization. Built from the work of previous trauma theorists, especially Caruth, the Retraumatized subject denies the destruction of their lost beloved by entering into an unreality that psychically preserves the lost beloved and the subject’s hopes of rectifying their trauma. However, the Retraumatized subject comes to build their identity around their trauma and perform retraumatizing reenactments of their trauma in vain attempts to rectify it. The symptomology of Retraumatization is also affected onto many players of *Undertale*, whose fan works both demonstrate Retraumatization and explore it. Ultimately, the *Undertale* and its players come to divergent conclusions on how, or if, Retraumatization can ever be cured. As a work of video game trauma theory, this paper explores the unique ability of video games to explore and engage its audience in trauma through increased empathic engagement and nuanced constructions of repetition.

¹Toby Fox, *Undertale*, independently published, 2015.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Dedication

Dramatis Personae

1	Chapter one: Introduction	8
1.1	Project Genesis	8
1.2	Chapters Outline	11
1.3	Guide to Citation and Formatting	14
2	Chapter two: Theoretical Framework and Methods	17
2.1	Locating This Paper in Trauma Theory	18
2.2	Retraumatization and its Forebearers	21
2.3	The Effects of Video Game Theory upon Trauma Theory	26
2.4	Player Response: The Usage of Fan Works	31
3	Chapter three: Retraumatization	35
3.1	The Anatomy of Retraumatization through Toriel	36
3.2	Complicating Retraumatization through Asgore	42
3.3	Collective Retraumatization through Monsterkind	47
4	Chapter four: Player Retraumatization	52
4.1	Anticipation of Retraumatization and the Moralizing of Players	54
4.2	(Re)traumatizing the Player	68
4.3	Retraumatized Player Responses	76
5	Chapter five: The Ends of Retraumatization	83
5.1	Bleak Conclusions	85
5.2	Player Defiance	93
6	Appendix	99
6.1	Further Explanation of Citation	99
6.2	Discussion of Video Game Theory	105
6.3	Video Game Crash Course	109
6.4	Call for Further Study	114
6.5	Bibliography	116

Acknowledgements

This project never would have been possible without Emily Neely, who first introduced me to *Undertale* and has continued to reciprocate my excited theories about the game throughout the past two years. This paper is complete, but I look forward to discussing *Undertale*'s theoretical possibilities with you for many years to come. Your friendship and encouragement have been invaluable throughout this process, thank you.

I'd like to thank my wonderful advisor, Dr. Eve Dunbar, who kept me grounded, focused, and reminded me that my work was important in spite of all the voices that told me that video game analysis was ridiculous. Trauma theory and video game theory both fall outside the purview of Vassar's English department, but you accepted my topic and helped guide me through the darkness of two fields neither of us knew half enough about--thank you for tolerating me.

I'd like to thank my mother, Erin M Finan-DuBois, for proofreading this mammoth paper and providing edits and feedback. It was immensely helpful work which you found the time to do while you were immensely busy, and I am very grateful.

I would like to thank my sister, Bailey Finan Howard-DuBois, for showing me how to create a map and format images into a program that did not make it easy.

Thank you to Toby Fox, not only for creating the source material at the core of my analysis, but for creating a game that taught so many of us about love, kindness, and pain, and showed queer characters so vibrantly alive. For the lion who wanted to wear a dress, and the non-binary hero we *finally* got to play, and the skeleton who broke the trope and turned us down.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to the *Undertale* community, who I could not but grow to love. In the brief year and a half that I've had to explore it, I have seen so many incredible works of art that brought a smile to my face or tears to my eyes, and often both. I wish I could have included all the poems, stories, comics, paintings, testimonials, audioplays, fangames, animations, ask blogs, theories, songs, alternative universes, comic dubs, fan games, and playthroughs I came across. I wish I could wrap all your brilliance into my arms and show it off to the world. There was far too much to honor, far too much to cherish.

Dramatis Personae

For readers who have not played *Undertale*, this list of relevant characters supplies all necessary context to understand the plot of the game this paper analyzes.

The monsters - sealed by a magical barrier into the underground long ago by humans in a genocide; the society they create parallels modern America and although they come in various forms they mostly act like humans; the monsters are excited for their king to free them from the underground and destroy humanity, but don't see the moral implications of this aspiration.

Asgore - king of the monsters; husband to Toriel; father of Asriel; adoptive father of Chara; likes to garden and grow golden flowers; kills and collects the souls of the six human children who fall into the underground; plans to eventually absorb the souls and use the god-like power they'd grant him to free the monsters and destroy humanity.

Toriel - queen of the monsters; renounced Asgore's plan to free the monsters and hid away at the underground's entrance to try to prevent humans from making their way to Asgore.

Asriel - child prince of the monsters; devoted adoptive brother of Chara. Planned with Chara to absorb their soul after they poisoned themselves and leave the Underground to collect human souls from Chara's village, and use those souls to free the monsters. Arrived at the village but showed the humans mercy when they attacked and mortally wounded him, not killing any, returning home empty-handed and dying; reborn as Flowey.

Chara² - the first human to fall into the underground; a non-binary child who fell while trying to commit suicide; adopted sibling of Asriel; invented the plan that gets Asriel and themselves killed; hates humanity for a reason unknown to the player; during genocide routes comes back into the player's mind and occasionally controls their character, influencing them to continue to murder; ultimately destroys the world at the end of the genocide route and demands the player's soul before restoring the world.

Flowey - a living yellow flower that is Asriel reincarnated; purportedly has no feelings/the ability to care about anyone; discovered the ability to reset time back to the moment he awakened by killing himself, which only preserves his memory; used this power to experience everything the underground had to offer, including befriending and killing everyone; believes that the player is the reincarnation of Chara.

Frisk - the character the player controls; a non-binary human child; their name is only revealed if no monsters are killed.

Player - the persons playing the game; plays as Frisk; falls into the Underground; moves through killing and/or sparing the monsters; accidentally steals Flowey's ability to reset time; depending on their decisions they can set the monsters free (the pacifist route), destroy the entire world (the genocide route), or spare some monsters but leave them trapped (the neutral route).

²This character is named by the player at the start of the game, who believes they are naming the character they are going to play. The name "Chara" comes from this character's sprite, labeled within the game's code as "Chara," and is used ubiquitously by the *Undertale* community to refer to this character.

That's the difficult part. Not the bullets. But accepting that it's all over...

--Annoying Dog³

³Ruins46, AR, named fallen human "Frisk." For explanation of this method of citation, see Guide to Citation and Formatting below.

1.0 Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Project Genesis

Half an hour into my first playthrough of the video game *Undertale* I killed an old motherly monster named Toriel. She was literally standing in my way, not fighting back, just trying to keep me from the dangers that lay beyond her. I couldn't figure out how to spare her and still progress, so I killed her. I felt bad. When I moved beyond her death chamber a talking flower named Flowey suggested that I could have saved her if I somehow had the power to go back into the past and try again. Clever gamer that I was, I closed the game without saving my progress and opened it again. I was back at my save point, before the Toriel fight. I went back into the encounter with the assurance that I could resolve matters peacefully, and ultimately figured out how to do just that. With Toriel alive, I moved on and found Flowey, right where I had left him. However, unlike Toriel he seemed to remember what had happened, and mockingly warned me not to get too cocky with this power of mine.

Fast forward a year and six completed playthroughs of *Undertale*, and I'm racked with guilt over and utterly obsessed with *Undertale*. I wake up and listen to fan made songs that retell the suffering of *Undertale*'s characters, I google fan art of the game while I wait for class to begin, and when I get home I listen to more depressing songs. I feel terrible. Like E. Ann Kaplan after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, collecting every scrap of news she could find relating to the

terrible event, I created a document with 28 links to *Undertale* fan works with the plan to eventually peruse all of them.⁴

In the course of my playing I had completed what has been popularly dubbed a “Genocide Route,” wherein you seek out and kill every character you can. The destruction you cause is so profound that even starting a new game does not wipe it clean: the happy ending is made impossible forever, and Flowey’s warning is proven. I could not bear what I had done to the utterly lovable and lifelike cast of *Undertale*, and yet rather than try to forget about it or distract myself I consumed content which forced me to confront it over and over again, for months, and fell into a depression that kept me from classes and friends.

What is incredible about this personal anecdote is not only that I was affected so profoundly by this *video game* as to unwittingly imitate the behavior of a woman who experienced 9/11 from an apartment a few miles away from the towers, but that millions of other players experienced this same obsessive, painful phenomenon. Even more astounding is that the game anticipated this player response, not only in numerous explicit warnings such as Flowey’s, but in characters who parallel these players’ experiences by endlessly repeating and memorializing a traumatic event at the cost of their present lives.

This thesis began in conversations I held with friends about various elements of *Undertale*, in which I began to notice that at the core of so many of the game’s themes and characters was this all-consuming reverence and repetition of trauma. I began to formulate a unifying theory, “Retraumatization,”⁵ based off of my limited knowledge of trauma theory.

⁴ E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture the Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), pp. 16.

⁵The R is capitalized to differentiate this theory from the general term “retraumatization,” which refers to any instance in which a traumatized subject becomes traumatized again, such as by a second similar traumatic event or a traumatic flashback.

When I eventually discovered *Undertale* fan works I found that this same theory could be applied to many of them, and potentially to the fans who created them.

This paper, then, has two main projects: the establishment of Retraumatization as an expansion of trauma theory built out of *Undertale* and the conventions of video games, and the analysis of player response to Retraumatization. To provide a preliminary sketch of Retraumatization: the Retraumatized subject's trauma is the loss of something crucial to them. This I term the 'beloved lost', most easily understood as a loved one, though it can be anything of import, such as freedom and hope. This subject rejects reality, in which they've suffered an incredible loss, and creates an unreality where their beloved lost is in some form preserved. This psychic state is not necessarily delusional, as the subject may recognize that their beloved lost has died but still attempt to preserve them metaphorically, as through substitution. The price of this unreality is a trauma-centric identity, wherein the subject devotes themselves to the trauma or pre-trauma moment. The subject attempts to rectify their trauma in some form or another, but these efforts always fail and inevitably retraumatize them, keeping them in their Retraumatized cycle and causing the subject, and potentially others caught in the rectification attempts, to suffer.

Player Retraumatization occurs when players of *Undertale* become deeply attached to the game, its world, and its characters, and are unable to achieve a sense of completion that would allow them to put the game away, emotionally and literally. They repeat the game over and over in hopes of finding resolution/maintaining the connection that has grown so important to them, but instead their enjoyment of the game fades while their emotional dependence remains. This leads them to more desperate and unenjoyable repetitions of the game in search of new content to

rekindle their connection, until eventually they complete a genocide route, the emotional brutality of which traumatizes them. They obsessively continue to consume the game, both through playing and by viewing/creating fan works.

As a work of video game trauma theory, a field in its infancy pulled from the only slightly more developed field of video game theory, this paper inevitably includes another project not tied to Retraumatization. This third project is the providing of a proof of concept for video game trauma theory (and video game theory generally). The appendix and chapter two, while bolstering the analysis of Retraumatization, develop this third project explicitly: by arguing that video games are a useful medium through which to explore trauma trauma, by analyzing how video game fan works can and should be used to bolster analysis of video games and demonstrate player engagement with trauma, by the creation and explanation of a method of video game citation that can be adapted to other multi-route games besides *Undertale*, and finally by arguing explicitly how video game theory should be standardized and expanded. While chapters three to five grapple with Retraumatization singularly, they also demonstrate how analysis within the burgeoning field of video game trauma theory should be approached.

1.2 Outline of Chapters

Chapter two illustrates the shape of trauma theory as a field and locates this paper within that broad field, deploying Vincenzo Di Nicola's conception of a false dichotomy within trauma theory to challenge the readily accepted view of trauma theory as falling into scientific and cultural camps.⁶ This chapter's second section cites and discusses the specific trauma theories

⁶Vincenzo Di Nicola, "Two Trauma Communities: A Philosophical Archaeology of Cultural and Clinical Trauma Theories," in *Trauma and Transcendence* (New York, New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

Retraumatization is built from, particularly Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Kaplan, and Donna Orange, and notes departures between standard trauma theory and Retraumatization. The third section explores the field of video game trauma theory and how player emotional engagement, variable game experiences, and the centrality of repetition in video games make video games uniquely capable of engaging in trauma. The final section explores this paper's usage of fan works as critical theory, deployed in the same fashion as traditional critical texts are deployed in literary analysis, and as evidence of player Retraumatization, engaging and expanding upon the theoretical framework of Janice Radway.

Chapter three focuses on Retraumatization as it is presented by the cast of *Undertale*. Its first section defines a baseline anatomy of Retraumatization through Toriel. The second section complicates this framework by performing a Retraumatization reading of Asgore, and introduces the possibility for a socially constructed trauma-centric identity and an aesthetic of Retraumatization. The third section examines the collective Retraumatization displayed by the monsters' society, and ponders the question of whether their centering of trauma through cultural norms can provide a means of healing even as it prevents them from moving past their trauma.

Chapter four investigates player Retraumatization through analysis of the game as well as through fan works. Its first section highlights the ways in which *Undertale* anticipates player Retraumatization through warnings and commentary, while also presenting *Undertale*'s moralizing critique of video game conventions. Its second section illustrates how the game actually affect Retraumatization onto its players through numbing repetition, emotional brutality, and the severing of relational understandings. The final section examines fan works that both

demonstrate that player Retraumatization does occur and provide insight into (player) Retraumatization.

Chapter five considers how, or whether, Retraumatization can come to be resolved. The first section presents three possible resolutions to Retraumatization which can be pulled from *Undertale*: that no active measure can resolve Retraumatization, that an active solution exists but remains undiscovered by this paper's analysis, and that the Retraumatized subject can find equilibrium without the need for resolution. The second section highlights possibilities that fan works present which fall outside of or actively defy the game's logic. Chapter five concludes this paper's analysis of Retraumatization and player Retraumatization.

Chapter six is the appendix, but due to the nontraditional topic of this thesis the appendix needs to be mapped as well. The first section of the appendix contains a more detailed explanation of the method of citation which this paper utilizes to cite video games, dubbed the DuBois Citation Method (DCM), including discussion of both the development process and the potential application of the DCM to other games besides *Undertale*. This section and the next bear reading for scholars interested in pursuing video game theory, as it highlights some of the roadblocks in creating useful citation methods. The following section explores my personal insights into how the field of video games theory must develop. Summarized, I find that fan works and fan resources must be utilized, the field must be standardized, and citations must be useful. The next section provides a crash course in relevant video game conventions which *Undertale* toys with and subverts. The fourth section is a call for further study, particularly on collective Retraumatization, the theoretical potential of *Undertale* as an analogy for healing,

Retraumatized equilibrium, and fan works which grapple with the ends of Retraumatization. The final section of the appendix is the bibliography.

1.3 Citation Explanation and Formatting

The shape of a video game, especially one with multiple routes and various optional dialogue⁷ and content, such as *Undertale*, is sharply distinct from the shape of a traditional novel. There are no page numbers; there are no timestamps. Although the difficulty and process of writing video game theory will be further explored within the appendix, a few notes here will aid in the reader's comprehension of citational methods. I have determined to favor readability over realism, discarding the odd font usage or colored text as they appear in the game. For example, the quote "if you have some kind of special power... isn't it your responsibility to do the right thing?" would be more accurately depicted as "if you have some kind of **special power...** isn't it your responsibility to do the right thing?"⁸ which employs both the comic sans font and a yellow coloring but is less readable, especially to readers using black and white printed versions of this paper. However, in a few regards, such as the use of ellipses, still images from fan works and the game, and most notably citation, this essay contains necessary idiosyncrasies, explained here.

Undertale makes frequent usage of ellipses, and to differentiate the game's from my own, I diverge from the Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition by using the older form of ellipses in which [...] is used to indicate omitted material. I do this because Chicago 16th edition lacks standard citational guidelines for the dialogue conventions of *Undertale*. For example, the

⁷ "Dialogue" refers to all types of textual information given to the player, including narration, character speech, and item description.

⁸ NewHome17, N, Papyrus dead.

unaltered quote of “Down here, LOVE is shared through... Little white... ‘friendliness pellets.’ Are you ready? Move around! Get as many as you can!”⁹ is altered to “Down here, LOVE is shared through... Little white... ‘friendliness pellets.’ [...] Get as many as you can!” Note that this usage of ellipses is consistent throughout the paper, and is *not* used exclusively when quoting the game.

Corresponding to the usage of fan works in this essay, as explored in the next chapter, and in order to capture certain visual elements of *Undertale*, this paper is frequently embedded with still images. These images are intended to be read after the sentence they follow, and will not interrupt sentences or require a reader to refer forward or back to an image. In this way these stills usually function as a block quote within a traditional work of literary analysis.

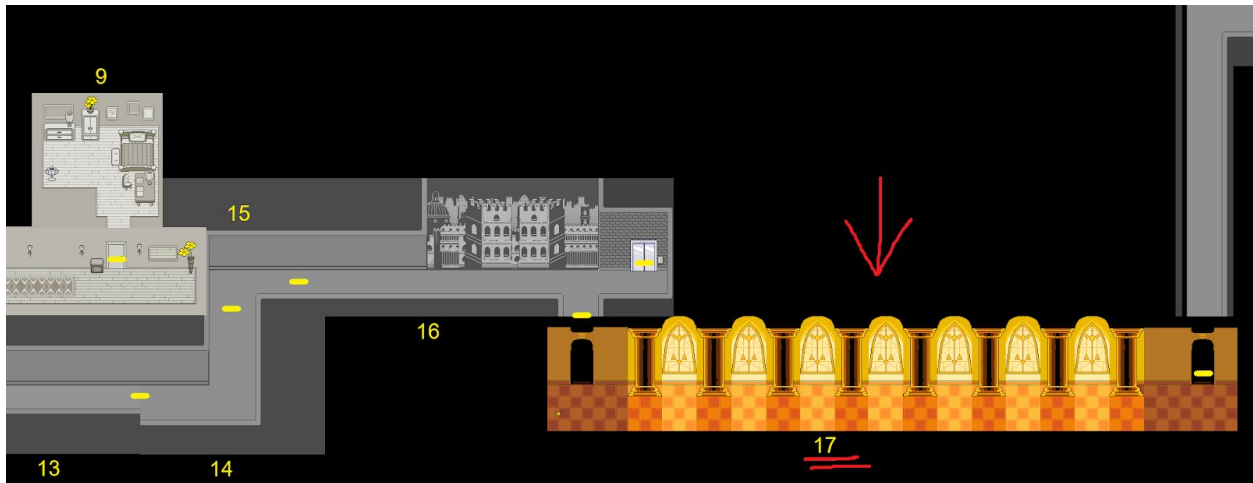
The method of citation deployed in this paper, DCM, was developed for the purpose of creating citations within *Undertale* which readers could use to locate quotes directly within the game. However, I developed this method so that it might be alterable to fit other multi-route video games. It was created out of necessity: there is no standardized method of citation within video games. Further discussion on the process of development of this method, including proof of concepts and suggested usage of this method on other games, can be found in the appendix. The purpose of this section then will be to explain how to read citations.

“NewHome17, N, Papyrus dead”

‘NewHome17’ refers to the room in which the quote was made. A map of *Undertale* was created that labels all of the game’s rooms. This map can be found at this URL:

⁹ Ruins2, AR, Flowey fight.

<https://www.deviantart.com/maxduboisthesis/gallery/all>.¹⁰ The map is broken into seven sections, and ‘NewHome’ refers to the New Home section, while ‘17’ refers to the labeled room within that section.



For example, the citation above corresponds to the highlighted room in this image.

‘N’ refers to the route in which this quote takes place. *Undertale* contains three major routes: Pacifist (P), Neutral (N), and Genocide (G). Some quotes take place in multiple routes, which are referred to as, for example “NewHome17, N/P.” Some quotes take place in All Routes (AR), such as “Ruins2, AR, Flowey fight”. When dialogue or content may occur at multiple points throughout the game, the citation refers to the first available instance of occurrence.

Finally, the last notation refers to secondary details necessary for the quote’s existence, and to certain special situations. *Undertale* reacts to the player’s actions, and as such, certain dialogue does not occur without specific actions taking place. In the example ‘Papyrus dead’ signifies that the dialogue in that quote does not occur, even on the correct neutral route, unless the player has killed Papyrus. If the quote is taken from a fight scene or a cut scene, that detail is included in this last notation. Paired with the map created for this purpose, this method of

¹⁰Max DuBois, “Gallery of MaxDuBoisThesis,” DeviantArt, January 8, 2020.
<https://www.deviantart.com/maxduboisthesis/gallery/all>.

citation provides a means for readers to recreate and confirm the existence and accuracy of quotes within the game, as well as find the context surrounding quotes.

A faster, but less reliable, means of confirming quotes within the game is to use one of several fanmade online resources which include the entirety of the *Undertale* script, including all dialogue. These resources can be explored via the ‘ctrl f’ search function, but fail to help readers uncover where/under what circumstances these dialogues are available. *Undertale - Text Dump*¹¹ provides a raw (and a few slightly better formatted) version of *Undertale*’s code, which contains the game’s full dialogue. *Undertale dialogue dump*¹² provides all dialogue, as well as noting which characters said it. I have discovered a few inaccuracies in the second resource, but these are rare. The final note on online resources is that, significantly faster than playing through the game yourself while still able to provide context, YouTube playthroughs provide the ability to zoom to different parts of the game if the sought after quote can be located geographically and by route (as through my method). Searching “Undertale new home playthrough neutral route” will yield a few playthroughs that contain the example citation.

2.0 Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Methods

To call trauma theory a field unto itself does not quite capture its shape. Many fields have analyzed trauma through their own lenses and methodologies, leading the term trauma to become overdetermined, its theoretical implications so vast and disparate depending on the scholarly field of context that the term “pure trauma theory” would be an oxymoron. In researching for this

¹¹*Undertale - Text Dump*, GameFAQs, Sans, updated 10/22/15, <https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/pc/180989-undertale/faqs/72468>.

¹² *Undertale text dump*, github, Hushbugger, accessed 12/31/19, <https://hushbugger.github.io/dialogue/>.

paper alone, I read trauma theory by historians, theologians (continental, womanist, feminist, mujerist), art historians, psychologists, psychiatrists, philosophers, psychoanalysts, teachers, film critics, cultural critics, neurologists, artists, authors, video game theorists, mathematicians, literary theorists, and others. In turn, these trauma theorists pulled from each other, their own fields, as well as others fields unlisted here. Given the expansiveness of trauma theory it is especially important to annotate which theories this paper grows out of. As such, this chapter's first section is focused on locating Retraumatization as a theory within the broad 'field,' and the next section examines the relationship between Retraumatization and the specific theories it is built from. The third section, "The Effects of Video Game Theory upon Trauma Theory" highlights the unique offerings video game theory can provide to the already-vast field of trauma theory, paying special attention to the usage of repetition and the unique empathic engagement provided by video games. The final section, "Player Response: The Usage of Fan Works as Critical Theory," builds off the canonical work of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* to examine *Undertale* fan works, such as fan songs, comics, and testimonials as both secondary sources on *Undertale* and primary sources on player response to *Undertale*.

2.1 Locating This Paper in Trauma Theory

As a piece of trauma theory generated through the analysis of a video game, this paper can be seen as fitting into the burgeoning field of video game trauma theory, a field currently led by Tobi Smethurst and Stef Craps, whose scholarship will be discussed in this chapter's third section. To zoom out a little, Retraumatization can also be considered kin to other trauma theory pulled from media, such as that done by Shoshana Felman and Kaplan. In her seminal work

Testimony: Cries of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, Felman examines texts, fiction and nonfiction, by which to produce her theory of testimony. She writes that “Testimony [...] is a discursive *practice*, as opposed to pure *theory*”¹³ which this paper expands upon in its dual view of fan works as analysis (theory) *and* enunciation/communication of the personal experience (discursive practice) of trauma, thereby valuing both aspects of testimony. Kaplan’s *Trauma Culture* similarly produces trauma theory from texts, and analyzes the effects upon individuals and collectives of media which engage with trauma. Kaplan argues that audience engagement with trauma can be productive, even if it means some level of traumatization for the audience, when that trauma instills a “wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind, is common.”¹⁴ It would be impossible to disentangle this paper from the audience-centric, nuanced trauma-positive lens Kaplan trailblazed.

To zoom even further out, this paper may be considered as part of humanities, or cultural, trauma theory--as opposed to medical, or scientific, trauma theory. The belief that trauma theory can be divided into halves, into scientific and cultural approaches, is widespread among scholars of trauma. The scientific fields which engage in trauma theory are assumed to dictate the diagnosis and treatment of trauma through psychiatry and therapy, whereas the cultural fields are assumed to contain all theoretical implications relating to trauma outside of treatment options.

Di Nicola, however, criticizes this dichotomy. Building off the analysis of Ruth Leys, who saw trauma theory as divided into memetic and antimemetic theories which could never resolve despite borrowing heavily from one another,¹⁵ Di Nicola argues that “The dichotomy in

¹³ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013, pp. 5.

¹⁴ E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, pp. 122.

¹⁵ Di Nicola, “Two Trauma Communities,” in *Trauma and Transcendence*, pp. 23.

trauma theories will be intractable insofar as we unwittingly repeat it.”¹⁶ In order to avoid the dichotomy pitfall, this paper makes use of theories from both sides of the dichotomy. This was not difficult, for my research confirmed Leys’ critique that theorists pull from across the ‘memetic’ and ‘antimemetic’. Most of the ‘scientific’ texts I read contained cultural theory, and conversely ‘humanities’ texts contained scientific evidence to substantiate their claims. Throughout the writing of this paper I was frequently asked what implications my theory had for therapy, and although an answer would fall outside my personal expertise, it is not inconceivable that Retraumatization bears therapeutic consideration by a researcher better versed than I, especially considering the concern within therapy with retraumatization, which Retraumatization investigates.

Before moving beyond discussion of Retraumatization’s place within the field of trauma theory, the role of texts in addressing trauma bears brief consideration. Although Retraumatization is my own theory, it was developed from engaging with the creative text *Undertale* and the fan works *Undertale* inspired. In this way, my analysis, as well as that of Kaplan and Felman, seems to stand in direct opposition to Di Nicola’s argument that art “will not protect us” from trauma since it has “become entertainment,” and only “philosophical archeology” can save us.¹⁷ Just as the dividing of trauma theory into arbitrary halves is not productive towards addressing instances of trauma, dividing between which types of texts stand to help brace us against trauma seems additionally fruitless: this paper as a work of media analysis, *Undertale* as a piece of entertainment which engages its audience with trauma, Di

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 24.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 42.

Nicola's philosophical archeology, and the disparate strands of trauma theory which borrow from one another all stand to potentially help "protect us" from trauma.

2.2 Retraumatization and its Forebearers

Now to examine the specific trauma theories this paper can be seen as continuing. The trauma of Retraumatization is always the loss of a 'lost beloved,' most easily understood as a beloved other, such as a deceased child, but potentially more complex as chapter three shows. A crucial element of Retraumatization is the preservation of the lost beloved by the deployment of an unreality, and this concept of unreality is built from the theory of Caruth, which in turn is built from Freud. Freud argued that in mourning, the unwillingness to let go of the "lost object" "can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis,"¹⁸ however, "the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged"¹⁹ only until the painful process of mourning is completed. Freud was puzzled why the process should be so slow and painful, but was certain that "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again."²⁰ Caruth, in her analysis of *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), finds the film's female protagonist's "forced entrance into the cellar [...] a representation of her own attempt, in her entrance into madness, to maintain the event of [her German lover's] death"²¹ and thereby delay his erasure. Caruth clarifies how the lover's existence is prolonged via the symptoms of trauma: "the woman's seeing is not the

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), pp. 244.

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 245.

²⁰ Ibid. pp. 245.

²¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), pp. 30.

erasure of a death that was once known, but the continual reappearance of a death she has not quite grasped, the reemergence, in sight, of her not knowing the difference between life and death.”²² Nevertheless, just as Freud determined, this unreality too must pass:

Just as the entrance into the cellar represents the faithfulness of madness, the story of her exit from the cellar [...] comes to mean the emergence into a full, truer knowledge that forgetting is indeed a necessary part of understanding.²³

Caruth’s theory creates a clear linear progression from the moment of trauma, through a moment of unreality, and finally into a forgetting that signifies understanding and healing: an exit from traumatization. Retraumatization finds subjects sacrificing their own reality to destroy the reality of their beloved lost’s destruction in a manner very similar to Caruth’s process. The major departure between the theories of Caruth and Freud and Retraumatization is that the last does not predict an inevitable exit to the unreality moment, let alone to traumatization.

Undertale, from which Retraumatization is theorized, seems to suggest that the cycle is usually not, and perhaps cannot be, broken by the Retraumatized individual without immense psychic damage. It may not be broken healthily at all. The Retraumatized subject’s unwillingness to abandon the unreality which preserves their beloved lost does not fade painfully but assuredly, as Freud suggested, but remains so powerful that death is readily embraced as an alternative to escaping unreality. As a major departure from its precursors, the lack of a solution to Retraumatization becomes the conclusion of this paper’s primary focus.

Contributing Retraumatization’s conception of unreality to Caruth appears fraught, however, due to her assertion that “The story of trauma [...] far from telling of an escape from reality--the escape from a death, or from its referential force--rather attests to its endless impact

²² Ibid. pp 37.

²³ Ibid. pp. 32.

on a life,”²⁴ but while unreality for the Retraumatized subject *is* an escape from a traumatic loss, it is an escape contingent upon the total devotion of the subject’s life to that very loss. It does not represent a clean escape, especially not from the referential force of trauma. Retraumatization can be read as the application onto Caruth’s theory of newer trauma theories and trauma-engaging texts, such as *Undertale* and fan works, although as shown above this conglomeration does not mesh perfectly with the original.

Nevertheless, Retraumatization is an answer to the “urgent and unsettling question” Caruth finds “At the heart of Freud’s rethinking of history in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,” that is, “*What does it mean to survive?*”²⁵ Retraumatization proposes an embodied rejection of life after a loss so central to one’s identity that unreality or even death makes more sense than moving on. However, this rejection does *not* take the form of suicide, but purposeful unreality. At the core of *Undertale*’s Retraumatized characters’ decisions not to kill themselves--a decision made with so much determination that some even defy their own physical deaths to continue their existence--is the pursuit of rectification. In some form or another, the Retraumatized subject persists in both life and in their Retraumatization cycle because they are determined to stay off the reality of their loss and rectify their trauma, a goal which always and can only lead to retraumatization and never rectification.

Caruth finds that trauma is the work, potentially impossible, of a wound to make itself known to the wounded, who cannot comprehend it.²⁶ The traumatized have nightmares and flashbacks to try better to know their trauma. This is another major departure between Retraumatization and Caruth: Caruth’s *unknowability* which nevertheless demands witnessing is

²⁴ Ibid. pp. 7.

²⁵ Ibid. pp. 60.

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 4.

substituted in Retraumatization as *unbearability* which nevertheless must be tolerated. Just as dreams return the traumatized subject to an event which went unwitnessed and remains so in the nightmare according to Caruth's theory,²⁷ the Retraumatized subject's retraumatizing events are as *unbearable* as the first, and each new reenactment of the original trauma returns the Retraumatized subject back into their cycle with no progress. As Caruth finds, "the shape of individual lives, the history of the traumatized individual, is nothing other than the determined repetition of the event of destruction"²⁸ which themselves retraumatize the individual. These repetitions are not coincidental, but are the backfiring of attempts to return to the pre-trauma moment, according to Caruth's reading of Freud.²⁹ My own theory separates the attempted return to the pre-trauma moment, affected via unreality, from the attempts at rectifying the trauma, which I argue lead to the retraumatization.

Breaking from Caruth's centering of aporia also represents a significant idiosyncrasy between Retraumatization and most trauma theory. Aporia is an important element within many analyses of trauma, since "The seminal contributions of Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub have foregrounded the sense that trauma ought to be distinguished by its non-assailable character"³⁰ but later trauma theorists caution against the necessity or overuse of aporia within trauma theory, contesting the "position wherein trauma can only be theorized as an aporetic phenomenon to which one is drawn yet of which no one can speak."³¹ Aporia is not centered

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 93.

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 63.

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 69.

³⁰ Eric Boynton, Peter Capretto, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, eds., *Trauma and Transcendence: Suffering and the Limits of Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), pp. 2.

³¹ Ibid. pp. 3.

within the Retraumatization process, but as noted before, the unbearability of trauma replaces the unknowability of trauma within the theory.

Despite this substitution, Retraumatization evokes similar symptoms of trauma theorized by Caruth and other aporia-focused scholars. For instance, Caruth leans into Paul de Man's notion of referentiality and applies it to trauma, noting that trauma inescapably demands referenced.³² The inescapability of referencing trauma, often tied into repetition (which is even more ubiquitous than aporia within trauma theory), features in the Retraumatized subject's trauma-centric identity.

Finally, this paper borrows from the theory of traumatism, particularly as it is expressed by Donna Orange, in explaining how player Retraumatization sparks player reflection. Orange argues that "The other's suffering, absurd and evil ['useless suffering'], must become intolerable to me, pre-primordially responsible for the other"³³ so that she will be motivated to combat the suffering of the other. This theory resonates with Kaplan's justification for traumatizing media, but the framework Orange supplies can be applied to *Undertale* with greater specificity. On a meta-game level, the player, as a player of other games where the slaughter of monsters is normalized, is complicit in the attitude that allowed the original genocide of monsters within *Undertale*. Within the game, the player plays as a human, the species which caused all the suffering of monsters. The trauma that *Undertale* affects via player Retraumatization is built from guilt for their responsibility for the useless suffering of the game's characters, which in turn causes useful suffering within the players. Many fan works demonstrate this phenomenon through guilt-driven reflection, and Toby Fox himself reported that players sometimes told him

³² Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, pp. 7.

³³ Donna Orange, "Traumatized by Transcendence" in *Trauma and Transcendence: Suffering and the Limits of Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), pp. 77.

after playing the game “I want to be kinder.”³⁴ Traumatism’s differentiation between useful and useless suffering can be used to understand the project of player Retraumatization as ethically positive.

2.3 The Effects of Video Game Theory upon Trauma Theory

There are a few characteristics of video games which allow them to engage with trauma in unique and compelling ways. First, video games almost always place the player in control of the game’s protagonist, which triggers an emotional engagement with that character and the events that unfurl around them that is entirely unique to the medium. The difference between this kind of engagement with a story and a first person narrative in another medium is that the game’s events can depend on the player, rather than the character. The most ubiquitous form of this control is over whether the character succeeds or fails a challenge, whether they jump over the pit of spikes or fall into it and must try again. The *raison d’être* of video game trauma theory appears when players are given control over the game’s story: “By experimenting with player agency and interactivity, videogames have the potential to work with psychological trauma in ways that more traditional media such as books or films cannot, especially with regard to guilt, anxiety, and perpetuation”³⁵ since players themselves “feel as though they are complicit in the perpetration of traumatic events.”³⁶ This feeling of guilt may be limited when players are forced or tricked into actions that they disagree with,³⁷ but many games, including *Undertale*, offer their

³⁴ Toby Fox, “Retrospective on UNDERTALE’s Popularity,” Tumblr, September 14, 2016, <https://undertale.tumblr.com/post/150397346860/retrospective-on-undertaes-popularity>)

³⁵ Tobi Smethurst, “Playing Dead in Videogames: Trauma In Limbo,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 5 (October 19, 2015): pp. 817-835, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12330>) pp. 817.

³⁶ Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps, “Playing with Trauma,” *Games and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2015): pp. 269-290, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014559306>), pp. 277.

³⁷ Smethurst, Craps, “Playing with Trauma,” pp. 278.

players fully-informed and meaningful choices so that players cannot excuse their own actions or ignore their consequences.

Meaningful choices are critical to the player Retraumatization process of *Undertale*, but not necessarily to all video games that engage with trauma. Meaningful choices mean player decisions which affect elements of the game and its story; for instance, the decision to spare or kill a character in *Undertale* alters how other characters will treat the player, and how the game's story will play out. Even without meaningful decisions, the playing of a video games increases one's emotional engagement with the story, as compared to passively watching the game,³⁸ so games like *Spec Ops: The Line*³⁹ can still cause effective emotional engagement with trauma even if the player is forced or tricked into the committing of a traumatic act, if to a lesser extent.

⁴⁰ But when players are given meaningful choices, the medium of video games allows the stimulation of audience consideration of trauma heretofore unprecedented. This engagement matters, for as Sicart argues in *The Ethics of Computer Games*, the player "is morally aware and capable of reflecting upon the nature of her acts within the game world"⁴¹ and "the influence of games, and their ethics, [extends] beyond the act of playing and into the realm of cultural behavior."⁴² Through the lens of traumatism, feelings of guilt and perpetuation are transformed into ethical reflection and altered behavior outside the game world.

But there is another benefit to meaningful choices, powerfully employed by *Undertale*, and that is the creation of an experience tailored to the individual player. A movie or a novel can

³⁸ Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us Emotion by Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 3.

³⁹ Yager Development, *Spec Ops: The Line*, 2K Games, 2012.

⁴⁰ For discussion of how engagement with trauma is impacted by a lack of control, see Samuel Roberts, "Now Playing: Spec Ops' Most Troubling Scene," *pcgamer* (PC Gamer, December 3, 2014), <https://www.pcgamer.com/now-playing-spec-ops-most-troubling-scene/>.

⁴¹ Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 62.

⁴² Ibid. pp. 73.

only tell one story: the outset and outcome are always the same, no matter how many times they are consumed. Their audience is capable of interpreting the work in multiple ways, but regardless of any action by an audience member, the work remains unaltered. Games, however, are capable of radically altering their own experience in response to the actions of their players, and this is used by *Undertale* almost as a method of diagnostics. A player who is not on the path to player Retraumatization will not be told that their “LIFE IS GOING DOWN A DANGEROUS PATH,”⁴³ and they will not be given the numerous other warnings discussed in chapter four. Video games are capable of selectively moralizing only players who seem to need it, which is an important capability for a game like *Undertale*, where the moralizing process is traumatic.

The second area in which trauma theory stands to benefit from video games is repetition. Repetition is central to both video games and trauma theory. In most games, players are expected to fail tasks and repeat them until they succeed. Given the limiting nature of coding, the tasks set before players are often repetitive as well, since to use a particular code only once would make game development astronomically more expensive. Within trauma theory repetition is often the inescapable symptom of trauma: traumatic flashbacks, traumatic retellings, traumatic reenactments (as in Retraumatization). But it is possible that repetition--and trauma ‘symptoms’ more generally--have been exclusively examined under a pathological lens within trauma theory, as “there has been little systematic investigation of the positive effects of trauma - as if there were perhaps something indecent in pursuing this line of inquiry,”⁴⁴ and the available studies which have found positive effects have done little to disrupt the “near-universal belief that the

⁴³ Snowdin37, G.

⁴⁴ Cecile Rousseau and Toby Measham, “Posttraumatic Suffering as a Source of Transformation,” in *Understanding Trauma* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 278.

effects of trauma on individuals and groups are always pathological.”⁴⁵ Repetition, along with other responses to trauma “are objectified and usually assigned a positive or negative valence” without the necessary research to confirm those claims.⁴⁶ Instances of repetition as response to trauma that are *not* seen as negative (such as the annual visiting of a child’s grave) are separated by the deployment of a different language than trauma, such as mourning or honoring, so that repetition is either pathological, or unrelated to trauma.

Video games offer a complication of repetition-as-symptom. In games, repetition is considered with greater nuance, for as Jesper Juul writes: “players like to fail [and repeat], but not too much,”⁴⁷ which points to an understanding of good repetition, and bad repetition. Although this consideration of repetition is usually in regards to a game’s difficulty or variety of activities, it can also be deployed in ways useful to trauma, as it is by *Undertale*. This will be discussed in greater depth in chapter four, but *Undertale* differentiates starkly between repetition it regards as harmless and reacts to playfully, such as when Sans begins placing hotdogs on the player’s head if they continue to ask for free food after their bag is full,⁴⁸ and repetition it regards as ‘DANGEROUS’ which it reacts to with warnings, and scoldings, as when the player kills only a single monster in their entire playthrough and Sans remarks “did you go through and kill someone... just to see what i’d say about it? wow. you’re a pretty gross person, huh?”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid. pp. 279.

⁴⁶ Ibid. pp. 280.

⁴⁷ Jesper Juul, *Art of Failure - an Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Mit Press Ltd, 2016), pp. 5.

⁴⁸ Hotlands25, N/P, Papyrus alive.

⁴⁹ NewHome17, N.



50

Undertale deploys its ability to mold its players' experiences based on their individual actions to create a subtle critique of repetition that cautions players against repetition that is unenjoyable, unethical, or indicative of neurosis while avoiding unequivocally condemning repetition outside of these contexts. Although not every video game presents such nuanced representations as *Undertale*'s, it is indisputable that no other medium engages as thoroughly with the concept of repetition in terms of creating mechanics and gameplay as well as stories and characters.⁵¹ This bears noting because "In spite of the discernable trauma trend in video games,

⁵⁰ Hotlands25, N/P, Papyrus spared.

⁵¹ See Appendix 6.3 for discuss of completionism and replayability in video games. For an example of another video game that engages thoroughly with repetition as potentially pathological, see Irrational Games' *Bioshock: Infinite*, produced by 2K Games, released March 26 2013.

however, and the potential they exhibit for representing trauma in new and interesting ways, they have as yet received very little critical notice from trauma theorists.”⁵²

2.4 Player Response: The Usage of Fan Works

As a work of video game trauma theory, this paper is as much a proof of concept in how scholars can and should engage with video games as it is the elaboration of a ‘new’ trauma theory. Part of that work is the usage of fan works as critical theory. My background is in literary analysis, where it is assumed that theory, even when written by a single author, is a collaborative process, pulling together the theories of other scholars. Literary analysis is a conversation, so that every new theory builds off of others to create a web of greater comprehension and theoretical potential within works of literature. Video games, as a new medium, and scholarly video game theory, as an even newer field, lack a well-developed analytical foundation consisting of peer-reviewed scholarly journals and articles.

However, video game theory outside of PhD-populated formal peer-review journals has exploded with the internet into a booming industry. In specific regard to *Undertale*, an entire YouTube channel with over 200,000 subscribers, “Underlab”⁵³ exists dedicated solely to fan theories about the game, and its multi million-view videos do not exhaust fan efforts to interpret the game on YouTube alone. Throughout my research I discovered many blogs, such as on Tumblr and Amino, where fans from diverse educational backgrounds and age ranges argued compellingly to highlight some aspect of *Undertale*. Outside of these dedicated theory spaces, it

⁵² Smethurst, Craps, “Playing with Trauma,” pp. 270-271.

⁵³ “Underlab,” YouTube (Google, March 29, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXEiQSP33MnlR67JzaR8eNw/videos>

is impossible to peruse fan art (by which I define a broad spectrum of media) without discovering rich discussions of the game taking place in the margins via reposts, comments, and captions. Although *Undertale*'s fandom is unusually large⁵⁴ and the game's depth perhaps prompts greater fan interpretative work than other video games, it is very common that games (and other newer media forms such as podcasts and webcomics) inspire fans to engage theoretically with the source material in circles outside of academia. The sophistication of these fan theories bears mentioning, not only in the interpretive work they conducted, but also in the innovative uses of technology to format their analysis, some of which inspired this paper's formatting.

This paper makes use of a variety of fan 'works,' which include traditional arts such as poetry or drawings, and less traditional pieces such as YouTube playthroughs or hacks developed by players. Fan works of *Undertale* provide insight into the game just as a critical theory might provide insight into a novel, and I lean into these works, to help shape and extend my own analysis, reinforce the logic of an argument, and cite certain ideas I deploy, just as I would make use of critical literary theory in a more traditional paper. A Japanese vocaloid song, *Close to you*,⁵⁵ adapted into English by another artist,⁵⁶ was heard by a fan of *Undertale* who felt that the lyrics resonated strongly with the character of Sans. He was "really REALLY obsessed with Undertale" and so he performed a cover of the song, sung in the voice of Sans.⁵⁷ Another *Undertale* fan heard this version and decided to *learn to animate* in order to create an animation

⁵⁴ See the beginning of chapter four.

⁵⁵ Niki, *Close to you / lily*, YouTube (Google, February 17, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcQxAqtNeKA>).

⁵⁶ KEH, *[KL] Close to You | Eng Cover [TY 6K SUBS]*, YouTube (Google, July 14 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oMvPaoAxw>).

⁵⁷ Kumalegs, *[Undertale] Close to you - Sans (voice)*, YouTube (Google, December 1 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UeW_oWNs0wo).

for this song because “I was inspired by other animations and interpretations of this character [Sans], so I was excited to show him from my point of view.”⁵⁸ I discovered this animation in the depths of my own obsession with *Undertale*, and my consideration of the game was influenced by its intentional constant usage of swaying--visual repetition--as an animation style that spoke to something deep within *Undertale*. Although only my iteration of this distant collaboration takes an academic form, the process by which each work in succession came into being parallels academic writing, wherein new ideas are built from older ones.

Critical to the establishment of player Retraumatization as a real phenomenon, the usage of fan works within this paper allows analysis of how players of *Undertale* reacted and engaged with the game’s traumatic themes. The proof that player Retraumatization exists comes entirely from fan works which serve as testimonials of fan experiences. It would have been impossible, in fact, to demonstrate anything beyond the game’s anticipation of player Retraumatization without leaning into fan works. By considering fan testimony rather than speculating on the game’s effects upon its audience, this paper follows Janice Radway’s “decision to move beyond the various concepts of the inscribed, ideal, or model reader and to work with actual subjects in history”⁵⁹ in her seminal work, *Reading the Romance*. The term that titles this paper, “player response,” is in reference to reader-response criticism, in particular homage to Radway, who investigated the “low art” of romance novels by going to its avid readers just as this paper investigates the “low art” of one particular video game by going to its avid players. The usage of fan works as a way of measuring engagement with trauma is especially compelling since

⁵⁸ Starimation, *CLOSE TO YOU Undertale Animation*, YouTube (Google, January 13 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qXFHtHR_Fs).

⁵⁹ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature ; with a New Introduction by the Author* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1991) pp. 5.

“Constantly rehearsing the details of somebody’s life and death shows that people are trying to continue the story. We always try to do that when the story ends before we’re prepared for the ending”⁶⁰ and fan works can be seen as that exact process extended onto the entire world of *Undertale*, rather than just one character.

Finally, *Undertale* presents a grim conclusion on the ability to grow, heal, or escape from Retraumatization, and a significant part of the work of this paper has been to consider how one can move on from a Retraumatized state. This paper turns to fan works to present possibilities of active defiance against *Undertale*’s presentation of Retraumatization as undefeatable. The last question this paper raises is how to consider these fan solutions to Retraumatization, when *Undertale* provides a framework by which such attempts to overcome Retraumatization are assimilated as nothing more than further evidence of Retraumatization. As part of the legacy of *Reading the Romance*, this paper seeks to complicate the theoretical position of Dorothy Hobson, deployed by Radway, that “there is no overall intrinsic message or meaning in the work”⁶¹ by which Hobson meant TV shows particularly. Radway interprets and broadens this theory to argue that any work of art “comes alive and communicates when the viewers add their own interpretation and understanding to the programme.”⁶² What this paper offers, then, is the possibility that the text can preemptively critique and interpret its viewers’ interpretations upon it, as *Undertale* seems to do with fan works engaging with Retraumatization, so that the meaning of a text can be produced through a discursive, rather than interpretative, process.

⁶⁰ Neil Postman in *Christian Science Monitor*, July 23 1999, quoted in Sheenagh Pugh, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a literary context*, (Bridgend: Seren, 2015), pp. 3.

⁶¹ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, pp. 8.

⁶² Ibid. pp. 8.

3.0 Chapter 3: Retraumatization

Every time *Undertale* is opened, the player is retold the first half of the monsters' traumatic history--the genocide that sealed them underground and the attempted suicide that brought Chara among them. Every time the player nears the game's completion, they are retold another traumatic history, either the second half of the monsters' version--Chara's suicide, Asriel's death, and the declaration of war against humanity--or Asriel's rebirth and descent into Retraumatized depravity. No matter their actions, players are confronted by a world molded by trauma and traumatizing repetition, and the theory of Retraumatization is an attempt at defining and unifying the experiences of the monsters who inhabit that world.

Although only a few are analyzed here, most of *Undertale*'s main characters exhibit the type of traumatization I classify as Retraumatization, as does the society in which *Undertale* takes place; and it is often even affected by the game's players. This chapter's first section, *Anatomy of Retraumatization through Toriel*, fully defines Retraumatization in its simplest form to establish a baseline which the rest of this chapter's examples complicate. The second section, *Complicating Retraumatization through Asgore*, provides a second example of Retraumatization that is similar to Toriel but represents the broader possibilities of the theory, especially regarding the deployment of metaphors and socially constructed Retraumatization. The final section, *Collective Retraumatization through Monsterkind*, examines how Retraumatization can be applied to collectives in a process parallel to that of individuals, as well as investigating how resilient communities can be built around trauma that curb but do not escape traumatization. Ultimately, the work of this chapter is the definition of Retraumatization as a succinct theory

applicable to individuals and to collectives, and the demonstration of the theory's complexity and versatility so that it can be applied in the next chapter to the players of *Undertale*.

3.1 An Anatomy of Retraumatization through Toriel

The trauma that incites Retraumatization is the loss of something I term the 'lost beloved,' which does not have to be a person but can be anything that is critical to the life of the subject. For Toriel, this trauma is the death of her two children over the course of one day and the destruction of her family, and the effects of this trauma upon her conception of the world can be understood using a "constructivist theory of bereavement" which:

posits that grieving entails an active effort to reaffirm or reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss. In this perspective, people are viewed as meaning-makers, drawing on personal, social, and cultural resources to construct a system of beliefs that permit them to anticipate and respond to the essential themes and events of their lives. Across time, this 'effort after meaning' confers a sense of identity and intelligibility, giving rise to a *self-narrative* that integrates the 'micro-narratives' of daily life into a 'macro-narrative' regarding life's purpose and direction. The death of a loved one, however, can challenge this framework, sometimes calling into question the most basic premises that anchor one's 'assumptive world,' necessitating efforts to integrate the discrepant experience of loss into one's autobiographical memory.⁶³

Chara and Asriel's deaths shatter Toriel's world of meaning, and the "anguishing invalidation of [her] central assumptions"⁶⁴ about this world causes an inability to craft meaning from an invalidated reality. *Undertale* literalizes this inability through age: as a 'boss monster' Toriel only ages when her children do,⁶⁵ so that she becomes frozen in the moment of her trauma, unable to grow, in a constructivist and physical sense, after the loss of Chara and Asriel. Finding

⁶³ Sands, Diana, John Jordan, and Robert Neimeyer. "The Meanings of Suicide: A Narrative Approach to Healing." In *Grief After Suicide*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2011, pp. 250.

⁶⁴ Ibid. pp. 250.

⁶⁵ Waterfall38, P, Gerson shop after fighting Asriel.

reality untenable, the Retraumatized subject turns to the creation of an unreality wherein meaning *can* be generated. The new generated meaning is twofold: first is the preservation of the beloved lost, second is the pursuit of rectification of the trauma.

Toriel's flight from society signals the entering into an unreality where she can return to the pre-trauma moment where her beloved lost can continue existence. After the tragedy, Toriel took Chara's corpse and disappeared, making a home in the secluded Ruins, where monsters used to live, and sealing the door behind her. Toriel literally lifts her trauma and carries it away from the present space and her present identity as queen--her reality--to inhabit a past space and create a new identity devoted entirely to the past, calling herself "TORIEL, caretaker of the RUINS"⁶⁶--her unreality. She refers to the player as "My child"⁶⁷ and creates herself as a mother to the player, not minding if the player calls her "Mom"⁶⁸ because she is denying the loss of her own children through substitution. Although she is not delusional, the numerous signifiers of her old life prove that she is attempting to remake her old life rather than face her loss and create a new existence with new meaning. She used to make butterscotch pies for her family, which she then makes for the player;⁶⁹ the player is given the same room her children once lived in with the old toys and drawings untouched;⁷⁰ the refrigerator is full of name brand chocolate bars⁷¹ which Chara loved; and she keeps two adult chairs at her table,⁷² as if she still lived with her husband, Asgore. Finally, she keeps a calendar from the day Chara arrived⁷³ because she is attempting,

⁶⁶ Ruins2, AR, Flowey fight.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ruins8, AR, cell phone dialogue.

⁶⁹ Ruins37, AR.

⁷⁰ Ruins39, AR.

⁷¹ Ruins42, AR.

⁷² Ruins41, AR.

⁷³ Ruins37, AR.

more than just inhabiting a past space, to live in the past, in an unreality where every day is the pre-trauma moment.

The ability of an unreality to enact this preservation can be understood through the theory of Caruth. Caruth writes that the traumatized protagonist of *Hiroshima mon amour* enters “into madness, to maintain the event of [her lover’s] death against the understanding of liberation [which represents that death]”⁷⁴ and that “Her bodily life, that is, has become the endless attempt to witness her lover’s death.”⁷⁵ What occurs in Retraumatization is not life entering into an unreality to *witness* an *unwitnessable* loss, but to *deny* an *unbearable* loss. Just as the French woman fails to recognize the moment of her lover’s death because “I couldn’t feel the slightest difference between this dead body and mine. All I could find between this body and mine were obvious similarities,”⁷⁶ Retraumatized cycles defeat the loss of the beloved at the cost of the life of the subject. Although it is impossible for Toriel to grow, and she must live in a state of hermitage, the unreality she inhabits prolongs the existence of her children against a reality in which they are gone. *Undertale* makes this effect explicit since both Chara and Asriel *do* persist after their deaths, as a ghost and as Flowey, respectively.

Often closely tied to this unreality is another aspect of Retraumatization: the adoption of a trauma-centric identity. For Toriel, the unreality and the trauma-centric identity are nearly one in the same: her isolation, her motherly affectation, her role as self-appointed caretaker of the ruins, all represent the dedication of her identity to her trauma. Retraumatization is an all-consuming state, so that the subject’s existence outside of their traumatization is extremely limited. The subject’s meaning making is especially restricted: as alluded to above, the

⁷⁴ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, pp. 30.

⁷⁵ Ibid. pp. 42.

⁷⁶ Ibid. pp. 38, Caruth’s translation.

Retraumatized subject is dominated by two principal concerns: the preservation of the lost beloved, and the pursuit of rectification of the inciting trauma.

The most distinctive element of Retraumatization is the traumatic reenactment, which is made as attempts to rectify the original trauma in some shape or form, but inevitably fails and retraumatizes the subject. Toriel's traumatic reenactments are extremely clear: by adopting the player she is reenacting the adoption of Chara, which eventually led to the death of both children. Asriel died because he left the safety of her home and was killed by what lay beyond, so her attempt to prevent the player from leaving the ruins to keep them safe from Asgore represents the finale in her substitution of the player for her own children. She is reenacting her very trauma itself, and attempting to create the outcome she wishes there had been. Unfortunately, the player has no real option to remain with Toriel, and must either kill her or spare her to move on. The process by which Toriel can be spared and seemingly freed from her Retraumatization will be addressed in chapter five, but it must be made clear that the player's encounter with Toriel's traumatic reenactment that ends the cycle, one way or another, is the exception.

The term "Retraumatized cycle" speaks to the way that traumatic reenactments often occurs multiple times without providing any release from Retraumatization. Before Toriel attempts to recreate the pre-trauma and trauma moment with the player, she has already attempted this with the six fallen humans who fell before the player. We can only assume that she tried to mother them as well, but she did try to prevent their leaving, as she notes that, when the player refuses to stay, "You are just like the others"⁷⁷ and later, when she fails to prevent their leaving, "Pathetic, is it not? I cannot save even a single child."⁷⁸ In trying to adopt and then

⁷⁷ Ruins46, AR.

⁷⁸ Ruins46, P/N, Toriel spared repeatedly during fight.

save the fallen children, Toriel is simultaneously attempting to live out a fantasy in which she saves Asriel, and prevent her trauma, the death of a child under her care, from reoccurring, signifying a doubly meaningful attempt at rectification.



79

Unlike her encounter with the player, and more typical of Retraumatization's traumatic reenactments, these attempts to resolve her trauma have no effect other than to harm her and the children she's trying to help. Every attempt fails and she has to bear each old new trauma upon herself, symbolized by the "box of kids shoes in a disparity of sizes"⁸⁰ which is a collective made from each fallen human who proceeded the player. Her increasing traumatization culminates in an empty, dusty photo frame⁸¹ she keeps in the child's bedroom. The unoccupied frame may have once held a picture of her first family, then perhaps she replaced it with a picture of the first fallen child after Chara, then the second, then the third, but at some point she stopped replacing

⁷⁹ Ruins44, AR.

⁸⁰ Ruins39, AR.

⁸¹ Ruins39, AR.

the picture and the frame became a monument to all of their loss, and the children and their traumas meld together into one combined trauma, one empty frame. Her Retraumatization ‘progresses’ in severity only through the repetition of traumatic reenactments, inflicting ever deeper misery upon Toriel. She could remain within the cycle indefinitely without learning how better to cope with her situation. Retraumatization contains no active means of escape for its subject, and the condition does not fade over time, as melancholia and traumatization do for Freud and Caruth,⁸² respectively, but only worsens through traumatic reenactments.

In fact, the Retraumatized subject is actively resistant to efforts to break their unreality and end their Retraumatized state. Toriel lies when asked about herself, stating, “Well, I am afraid there is not much to say. I am just a silly little lady who worries too much!”⁸³ To acknowledge her identity as queen and mother of two dead children--to acknowledge reality--would destroy the unreality in which she is able to recreate and inhabit a past that preserves her beloved lost and maintains hope of rectifying her trauma, *the* two goals from which she has built her new world of meaning. To exit her Retraumatized state then would require an abandonment of her newly constructed world of meaning, a loss akin to the traumatic loss of her children. Greater than just requiring a radical change, to escape her Retraumatization and accept reality again is to let her children die so that she can live. In other words, to escape Retraumatization would be to accept the trauma she entered into Retraumatization to deny in the first place. The motivation to preserve Retraumatization is so great that death is accepted before Retraumatization is surrendered. During her fight Toriel shouts at the player to “attack or run

⁸² See chapter two, section two.

⁸³ Ruins7, AR, cell phone dialogue.

away!” and “Fight me or leave!”⁸⁴ if they refuse to fight back, indicating that she would rather die than face the new possibilities their mercy implicates.

To summarize the anatomy of Retraumatization: the trauma is always the loss of something crucial to the world of meaning of the Retraumatized subject, which the subject evades by creating an unreality that preserves both the beloved lost and the hope that the trauma can be rectified, the two goals upon which the subject builds their new world of meaning. The preservation of the beloved lost is achieved through the self-sacrifice of the subject, who denies reality, adopts a trauma-centric identity, and begins to live a sort of half-life. The subject attempts, sometimes repeatedly, to rectify their trauma but succeeds only in retraumatizing themselves through a reenactment of the original trauma. Retraumatization has no natural end and the subject is highly resistant to any attack on their unreality or Retraumatized state generally.

3.2 Complicating Retraumatization through Asgore

Asgore parallels Toriel in many ways, so analysis of his Retraumatization provides a good jumping off point to begin considering the versatility and complexity of Retraumatization. His Retraumatization is still clear, but is frequently reliant on metaphor and is thus less direct than Toriel’s. This section will examine the anatomy of his Retraumatization to highlight how multiple traumas can be synthesized within Retraumatization; how efforts to rectify trauma are not always as direct as Toriel’s; how individual Retraumatization can be affected by collective responses to trauma; how the preservation of the beloved lost trumps the effort to rectify trauma

⁸⁴ Ruins46, AR, Toriel fight.

so that progress within Retraumatization is impossible; and finally how the trauma-centric identity can be affected as an aesthetic which allows its subject to exist outside of social isolation.

Unlike Toriel, Asgore psychically combines the first great trauma the monsters suffered--the genocide that trapped them in the underground--with the second great trauma, the death of his two children. Prior to their deaths, Asgore created his children as the embodiments of the monsters' hopes of escaping the underground, both publicly and privately. When Chara is dying Asgore encourages them to survive by pleading "stay determined! [...] You are the future of humans and monsters"⁸⁵ and when discussing Asriel's death he says "The entire underground was devoid of hope. *The future* had once again been taken away from us by humans."⁸⁶ Asgore's rhetoric connects the death of the siblings to the original genocide. His attempts to rectify the second trauma follow this connection by also serving as rectification for the first one: he declares war on humanity and decides to kill any human that falls into the underground as both a means of revenge for the death of his children and a means of freeing monsterkind from the underground.⁸⁷ Toriel's rectification is straightforward but sets a false precedent for Retraumatization: she was attempting to prevent her trauma's recurrence while simultaneously reenacting her original trauma and replacing its true ending with a happy ending. Asgore's goal of avenging the princes demonstrates that rectification can be less directly tied to solving the trauma or preventing future instances.

⁸⁵ TrueLab17, P, Tape 5.

⁸⁶My emphasis. NewHome22, N, Asgore fight.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Asgore's unreality is also built from his conflation of hope with his children, as well as his relationally built traumatization. After his declaration of war "the people's hopes returned"⁸⁸ and Asgore himself became the new symbol of hope:



For Asgore himself, the creation of hope for his people is the recreation of his children's lives. His unreality is positioned within a social framework, unlike Toriel's, but the effect is still the same--through the dedication of the self to trauma, the siblings' death is thwarted. His home is identical to Toriel's, as is his effort to maintain the pre-trauma moment despite the post-trauma reality. His affectation of Retraumatization *appears* to be geared towards progression, rather than regression; but because the siblings' prolonged existence is tied very specifically to the *hope* of escaping the underground and trauma, to actually escape would destroy them.

The resolution of Retraumatization, even through the successful rectification of trauma, amounts to the dissolution of the unreality and therefore of the lost beloved. Asgore demonstrates that the continued preservation of the lost beloved trumps the desire to rectify trauma. When the player defeats him and spares his life he leaps at the opportunity to continue

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ NewHome16, N/P.

his familial unreality and immediately abandons his plan of rectification: “For as long as you remain here... My wife and I will take care of you as best we can. We can sit in the living room, telling stories... Eating butterscotch pie... We could be like... Like a family...”⁹⁰ which he offers whether or not Toriel was spared, signifying just how fantastical this plan to recreate the pre-trauma family he had is. It becomes clear that he has been holding out hope for any opportunity like this when one considers that he could have used the soul of the first human to cross the barrier and leave the underground to collect six more souls, rather than waiting for seven total humans to fall down. “But instead,” Toriel scolds, “you would rather wait here, meekly hoping another human never comes.”⁹¹ Asgore’s decision to prioritize the equilibrium of his unreality is so intense that even as five human *children* arrive after the first, he continues to decide that killing them is worth the prolonging of his unreality. The implications of this decision for Retraumatization are both grim and fortuitous. Even under perfect circumstances Retraumatization is never resolved by its subject, whose efforts to rectify their trauma are limited by their unwillingness to leave their unreality. However, *if* the effort to rectify the trauma is pointless then the prevention that effort, possible perhaps through therapy or some other means outside the scope of this paper, would not be inherently harmful to the subject. Since the Retraumatized subject’s traumatic reenactments are made as attempts to rectify the trauma, the elimination of those attempts would nullify the most negative aspect of Retraumatization, making existence within Retraumatization far more livable.

The last insight to Retraumatization which Asgore provides is an aesthetic of Retraumatization. Asgore bears his trauma-centric identity as an aesthetic that allows him to

⁹⁰ NewHome22, N.

⁹¹ NewHome22, P, Asgore fight.

move and operate in social spaces while maintaining his devotion to his trauma. Asgore dedicates himself to gardening, particularly to growing yellow flowers, which are an overdetermined symbol of his trauma: Asriel is reincarnated as Flowey, a yellow flower; Chara poisons themselves with buttercups,⁹² a yellow flower; Chara's last wish was to see the yellow flowers of their village;⁹³ Asriel's taking of their body to those flowers causes his own death;⁹⁴ and when he returns home, mortally wounded, the seeds of the flowers stick to the siblings' bodies,⁹⁵ creating the garden which Asgore tends where they fell. When the player encounters him, he is always gardening,⁹⁶ and the monsters share stories of him teaching kids in school how to grow and care for a flower.⁹⁷ What the aesthetic of yellow flowers allows Asgore to do is exist within society while maintaining the separation between their reality and his unreality. Whereas the other Retraumatized subjects within *Undertale* all exist entirely or nearly entirely within the realm of the private, Asgore's offloading of his trauma-centric identity into a metaphor allows him to continue to exist socially. Like Toriel's, his house serves as a mausoleum, and also includes a calendar with the date of Chara's arrival circled.⁹⁸ He preserves his children's rooms just as they were, and it is evident from the discarded butterscotch pie recipes in his trash can that he is also trying to recreate his family. Unlike Toriel, the trauma aesthetic allows Asgore to exit this space without escaping its unreality. If *Hiroshima mon amour*'s protagonist was allowed

⁹² TrueLab17, P, Tape 4.

⁹³ NewHome12, N/P.

⁹⁴ NewHome15, N/P.

⁹⁵ TrueLab11, P.

⁹⁶ NewHome, AR, 21.

⁹⁷ Waterfall28, AR.

⁹⁸ NewHome6, AR.

to exist in the cellar and only emerge as a social figure once her “madness” had diminished,⁹⁹ Asgore’s aesthetic of Retraumatization allows him to carry the cellar with him.

3.3 Collective Retraumatization through Monsterkind

The monster society of the underground demonstrates that Retraumatization can be applied to collectives as well as to individuals. This section shows how the anatomy of Retraumatization can be applied to collectives, how cultural practices substitute for personal affectations of traumatization, and how collective traumas substitute for private ones. While this section cannot speak to the vast literature available on collective trauma, it does path the way for other scholars to more thoroughly combine the theories of collective trauma and Retraumatization.

The monsters’ anatomy of Retraumatization begins, like Asgore, with the connection of the trauma of genocide and the death of the princes. Fan author Boogiepop’s fanfiction enunciates how the monsters transformed the personal tragedy of the royal family into a collective, almost impersonal trauma: “The two [princes] were much more than simply the children of the King and Queen for the monsters of the Underground -- they were symbols, beacons of hope.”¹⁰⁰ The monsters’ beloved lost is not the children themselves but their freedom and their hope of freedom. Their hopes are preserved by their unreality, which is their lack of comprehension of the ethical implications of Asgore’s plan. Two monsters epitomize this lack of ethical recognition: “We’re like, totally hyped for the destruction of humanity”¹⁰¹ which, in the

⁹⁹Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative*, pp. 32. See also chapter two for further discussion of *Hiroshima mon amour*.

¹⁰⁰ Boogiepop, *The Lonely Monsters Are Getting Lonelier* (Independently Published, 2015), <https://archiveofourown.org/works/5582554/chapters/12866515>)

¹⁰¹ Hotlands49, N/P, Bratty & Catty Shop.

context of monsters as extremely kind creatures literally built out of compassion,¹⁰² does not represent ethical comprehension. The world of meaning they have built out of preserving hope does not include ethics. This unreality is contextualized by Kaplan's point that prior trauma affects one's (and, I argue, a collective's) reaction to new traumatic events as "memories inevitably mi[x] with fantasies of prior catastrophes"¹⁰³ which speaks to the monsters' reaction to the death of Chara and Asriel, "Humans had once again taken everything from us."¹⁰⁴ Their retraumatizing reenactment is Asgore's plan: the killing of children (which harkens to their second trauma) in order to commit genocide against humanity (which harkens to their first), with the ultimate goal of rectifying their trauma by achieving freedom. Their trauma-centric identity bears more focused analysis, as it presents interesting insights into collective Retraumatization.

Alian Badiou's theory of Event can be applied to monsterkind to examine the collective trauma-centric identity within the underground. The genocide that placed the monsters into the underground, the death of Chara and Asriel, and the arrival of the player can all be seen as Events. Each event caused a radical, potentially traumatic break from normalcy for the monsters. Di Nicola highlights the connection between Event and the types of events trauma psychiatrist Robert Lifton theorized on--particularly genocides and disasters. Lifton held that, as survivors, "we may open out, porous and permeable to *novation*, or close down, empty and evacuated, in a traumatized state."¹⁰⁵

There are various cultural signifiers within monster society that indicate that their response to the first and second Event was to enter into such a (Re)traumatized state. At monster

¹⁰² Snowdin32, AR.

¹⁰³ Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, pp. 1.

¹⁰⁴ NewHome16, N/P.

¹⁰⁵Original emphasis, Di Nicola, "Two Trauma Communities," in *Trauma and Transcendence*, pp. 18-19.

funerals, the monsters take the deceased's "dust and spread it on that person's favorite thing. Then their essence will live on in that thing"¹⁰⁶ which points to a deeply culturally ingrained inability to accept loss and move on from the past. Similarly, the Waterfall area is filled with echo flowers which endlessly repeat the last thing they heard. The proximity of the echo flowers to the plaques detailing the genocide¹⁰⁷ and the monsters "Wishing Room"¹⁰⁸ is significant. One passing conversation the player encounters through the echo flowers features two unknown monsters speaking about their wish to see the surface and escape their trapped state. This anonymous conversation serves to represent all the monsters, as this comic¹⁰⁹ by artist Niutellat illustrates by imagining that conversation as taking place many times by many different monsters:

¹⁰⁶ Snowdin32, AR.

¹⁰⁷ Waterfall11, AR.

¹⁰⁸ Waterfall10, AR.

¹⁰⁹ Niutellat, "DeviantArt," *DeviantArt*, February 22, 2016, <https://www.deviantart.com/niutellat/art/Undertale-Comic-Echo-Flowers-Story-592417170>). The last character says "That's my wish too" in the wing dings font.



The echo flowers represent a collective aspiration that endlessly centers trauma within monster society. Combined, the echo flowers and the funerals demonstrate that monster society culturally parallels its literal entrapment in the underground, and exists within a (Re)traumatized state such as Lifton theorized.

However, although the monsters are in a traumatized state, their integration of trauma into their culture also signifies the creation of a community around their Retraumatization, the benefits of which should not be understated. Hilary Scarsella draws from womanist, *mujerista*, and feminist theological thought and defines humans not as relational beings, but as “relation organized in particular ways” so that “When trauma undoes one’s ability to sustain particular relations, it does not *lead* to the disintegration of the person; it quite literally *is* the disintegration of actual parts of the person.”¹¹⁰ The very same practices that embed trauma into monster society turn it into a social affair, representing resilience to the kind of damage Scarsella conceptualizes. Under the theory of Rousseau and Measham, the centering of trauma within Waterfall turns the location into a “transitional space”:

Individuals and communities are not passively transformed by a traumatic experience. To varying degrees, they actively engage and take part in their own transformation. In the process of adjusting internal reality to external reality, transitional spaces are key. Through creative expression they provide a transformative power that can channel overwhelming emotions; facilitate the interplay of multiple, contradictory meanings; and, through the transmission of fragments of the experience, *reforge social bonds*.¹¹¹

Even if the cultural practices represented by Waterfall do not allow the monsters to move beyond their trauma, they do allow the monsters to generate a more tolerable state of Retraumatization.

The collective does not progress towards escaping that state, but is adaptive and resistant to the

¹¹⁰ Scarsella, “Trauma and Theology in Light of the Cross,” in *Trauma and Transcendence*, pp. 256-282. Quote from pp. 271.

¹¹¹ My emphasis. Rousseau, Measham, “Posttraumatic Suffering” in *Understanding Trauma*, pp. 289-290.

emotionally and socially destructive effects of trauma. As a final note, the transitional space of Waterfall nevertheless fails to nullify the most destructive element of Retraumatization--the traumatic reenactment--the violence of which the monsters are blind to precisely because of their societal aspirations (“We’re like, totally hyped for the destruction of humanity”).

4.0 Chapter four: Player Retraumatization

“IT FEELS... LIKE YOUR LIFE IS GOING DOWN A DANGEROUS PATH.”¹¹²

The characters of *Undertale* represent an interesting possibility in Retraumatization, but the reason *Undertale* demands scholarly attention more than other fictional works that offer intriguing visions of trauma is *Undertale*’s generation of Retraumatization in its community of players. As discussed in chapter two, video games present a truly novel means of engaging an audience in traumatic themes, relying especially on the level of empathic engagement afforded by the medium and the ability to affect guilt in players, but games have as yet received little attention from trauma theorists. This paper, in its efforts to begin rectifying that deficit and open up video games to trauma theory, focuses particularly on *Undertale* over other trauma-related games such as *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number*¹¹³ or *Max Payne 3*¹¹⁴ because of a few exceptional aspects of *Undertale*’s treatment of trauma, which this chapter will highlight.

¹¹² Snowdin37, G.

¹¹³ Dennaton Games & Abstraction Games, *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number*, Devolver Digital, March 25 2015.

¹¹⁴ Rockstar Studios, *Max Payne 3*, Rockstar Games, May 15 2012.

The game allows players to enact Retraumatization themselves if they fall into certain unhealthy video game conventions.¹¹⁵ As previously noted the creation of a traumatic experience (that is, an experience that is itself traumatic to the players *and* allows players to witness/participate in an experience of trauma) is not limited to *Undertale*. However, *Undertale* provides for especially rich analysis of traumatic themes because it anticipates its players' fall into Retraumatization and warns them, explicitly and implicitly, to avoid succumbing. When players are caught in Retraumatization it actively comments on their state and punishes them for becoming affected. *Undertale*'s final advantage in providing rich material for trauma analysis is its immense popularity.¹¹⁶ The enormity of its fandom allows the effects of the game upon its players to be tracked and analyzed. Because there are so many testimonials of fan experience, represented in this paper through fan works, the Retraumatization of the player, anticipated by the game, can actually be proved.

The goal of this chapter is to examine how *Undertale* both anticipates and effects player Retraumatization, examine what insights that commentary adds to the theory of Retraumatization, and to examine player responses that both explore and demonstrate player Retraumatization. The first section, Anticipation of Retraumatization and the Moralizing of

¹¹⁵ This chapter leans heavily into the video game conventions which *Undertale* plays with. For readers unfamiliar with video game conventions, specifically RPG conventions, it may be necessary to read Appendix 6.3, Video Game Crash Course.

¹¹⁶ On the social media app Amino, which provides communities built around particular fandoms and interests, the *Undertale* Amino is the site's third largest, beaten only by the BTS Amino and the Anime Amino. Bonnie Ruberg writes "By some measures, *Undertale* could be called one of the most beloved video games of all time. In the months following its release, the game proved immensely popular with players, reviewers, and games industry professionals alike. It was voted 'Best Game Ever' on the popular website GameFAQs, beating out classics from canonical game series like *Zelda* and *Mario*. It was, for a period, the highest rated PC game of all time on the review aggregate site Metacritic.com, and it was nominated for Best Debut, Best Narrative, and the Innovation Award at the 2016 Game Developers Choice Awards. As of December 2017, *Undertale* had sold more than two and a half million copies on the online distribution platform Steam. In response to the game's popularity, Kotaku reporter Patricia Hernandez wrote, 'I've never seen a game this young command so many dedicated fans'" in "Straight-Washing *Undertale*: Video Games and the Limits of LGBTQ Representation," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 28 (September 15, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1516>, 1.1.

Players, explores how *Undertale* warns players of Retraumatization and comments upon it, focusing particularly on Flowey as an analogy for players, determination as a cautionary metaphor, pathological language to diagnose problematic player behavior, and the rhetoric of consequences as a meta-critique of both trauma and video games, with the ultimate goal of elaborating the moralizing project of *Undertale*. The second section, (Re)traumatizing the Player, illustrates how the game leads some players to Retraumatization through numbing repetition, the severing of relational comprehension, and emotional brutality, primarily through the genocide route. The final section, Retraumatized Player Responses, examines a number of fan works that demonstrate both that players *are* becoming Retraumatized in the ways the game anticipates, and that they are insightfully engaging with their condition. While chapter three can stand alone as the enunciation of a trauma theory, this chapter is reliant on both chapter three, which it builds from, and chapter five, which finishes its project of considering player Retraumatization.

4.1 Anticipation of Retraumatization and the Moralizing of Players

Undertale anticipates player Retraumatization in two ways: through warnings--which fall into two categories: embodied examples by characters, especially Flowey, and explicit warnings--and commentary provided when players have fallen into Retraumatization. The game aims through warnings to ward players away from entering into the unhealthy, unethical obsessive state I call player Retraumatization, and through commentary to make fallen players recognize their condition and the habits that led to it. This anticipation is tied to a moralizing project: the warnings and commentary only activate when players begin to stray from the linear

and progressively moral path *Undertale* initially sets players on, allowing the game to highlight and critique with nuance unethical and unenjoyable play as unhealthy.

Undertale presents its players with a linear narrative that moves them from immoral to increasingly moral play. The average player's¹¹⁷ first playthrough of *Undertale* will follow a neutral route, due in part to not knowing their other options. They kill some monsters and spare others according to their whims. However, the game pushes them steadily towards the more ethical pacifist route in two ways: first by promising players a “so-called ‘happy ending,’” if they play without killing anyone.¹¹⁸ There are over twenty possible variations on the neutral ending, all of which leave the monsters trapped below the surface in some state of despair; so as a player replays *Undertale*, this prompting that promises something starkly new becomes increasingly seductive. The other way that *Undertale* pushes new players towards pacifism is through demonstrating the immorality of killing. One player, Sev, reflected online about the scene in the judgement hall, where Sans verbally confronts the player to ask if they think they've done the right thing:

My first run was blind, I truly didn't know anything about undertale. I had killed Papyrus and most of the monsters along the way. I didn't know a pacifist route existed, i just played the game as I would any other.

When sans told me to reflect , I suddenly felt very bad. Without thinking , I had behaved like a 'monster'. When he alluded to a special power and with which the responsibility to do good, I started to cry. He was right, and i felt so terrible about it. And finally when he finished with 'so why did you kill my brother [Papyrus]?' Then left; I sat in the room for five minutes just sobbing.

¹¹⁷ *Undertale* anticipates a particular player journey towards Retraumatization, which this paper outlines and follows out of the necessity of creating a concise argument. All works of art are experienced by their audience in different ways, so to imagine one ‘ideal’ audience response is problematic (see Radway’s theory as presented in chapter two). This is especially true of multi-route video games like *Undertale*, where players’ experience of the game can differ dramatically. It is worth noting that my own journey into Retraumatization did not follow the route outlined in this paper. However, from my own research it seems that the majority of Retraumatized fans *did* follow this route, as many fan works presented in this chapter’s third section will show.

¹¹⁸ Flowey makes this promise if he is spared after a neutral route.

My mind was blown. I think referring to it as 'the game breaking the fourth wall' really doesn't do it justice. To me, it did not break the fourth wall. Almost the opposite in fact, it went deeper than any other game I had played. It organically included the ability to reload saves in a thought provoking way. Breaking the fourth wall makes a story seem less real, but this made it feel more real.¹¹⁹

It isn't supposed to be wrong to kill monsters in a game, so Sev's mass murder was just playing "the game as I would any other." The special power referred to is the ability to save, load, and reset the game, which allows players to undo any action they regret. Whether Sev used that power to reset the game immediately and right their wrongs, or continued until the end of the game and then resumed as a changed player, one may assume that after that experience, their next playthrough was as a pacifist. However many playthroughs it takes, it is likely that players will start on neutral routes and eventually move, whether pushed by guilt or lust for something new, into the more ethical pacifist route.

This route from neutral to pacifist provides players with a proper, linear narrative with a clear beginning and ending to *Undertale*. The pacifist ending is the only one that gives players the game's full credits, and the only one that boldly states "THE END." Naming is also used to signify a proper ending to the game, as well as a proper beginning to the player's engagement in the world. The very first action players are tasked with when they open *Undertale* is to "Name the fallen human" (Chara). This leads them to believe that they are naming themselves and they will play Chara. Instead, they are actually setting in motion the monster's second traumatic Event:¹²⁰ Chara's fall leads to their suicide, Asriel's death, the monsters' heartbreak, the royal family's sundering, and the declaration of the war against humans, which only claims the lives of

¹¹⁹ Grammatical errors reproduced from the original. Sev, 2017, comment on "Undertale - All Sans Judgements (SPOILERS)" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhAm81VYLN4&lc=UggoDeteAqLtKHgCoAEC>.

¹²⁰ See 3.3 for discussion of Event theory.

more human children. It is significant that all three Events that affect monster society are caused by humans, as humans come to represent trauma itself. It can be further argued that the player themselves come to represent trauma for the world of *Undertale*, as they are responsible for all the trauma the monsters face. The player's naming of Chara starts the second Event, but even the first Event can be placed on the shoulders of players. As Sev implied, they had played many other games where they killed monsters, and it is this common player mentality, that monsters are *for* killing, that can be seen as responsible for *Undertale*'s first Event.¹²¹

In the pacifist ending Asriel¹²² finally recognizes that the player is not Chara and asks "What IS your name? ... 'Frisk?' That's... A nice name."¹²³ Mirroring the naming of Chara, the naming of Frisk can be seen as the removal of the trauma, and the player, from the world of *Undertale*. The naming of Frisk reveals that the character players have been identifying with is not truly their own, and just as Chara is admitted by Asriel to be gone, Frisk signals that it is the player's time to go as well. Unfortunately, not all players are content with this succinct beginning and end.

The breaking of this linear narrative signals the beginning of player Retraumatization. Unlike after or during neutral routes, when the player resets after the pacifist ending, they are asked again to name the fallen human. Since naming was used to outline a path that leads from immorality to morality, by re-naming Chara players enter into a downward moral spiral which

¹²¹ As examined in chapter two,. Donna Orange argues that "The other's suffering, absurd and evil [...] must become intolerable to me, pre-primordially responsible for the other." This theory could be examined within *Undertale*, as Sev's experience of guilt and empathy leading to action, experienced by millions of other players as well, seems akin to Orange's framework. The monsters are by definition embodiments of otherness, and as shown above, players are pre-primordially response for their suffering.

¹²² Recall that Asriel and Flowey are two forms of the same character.

¹²³ NewHome22, P, dialogue occurs after Asriel fight.

lacks any ending. It is in this moment that the game begins to sound its warnings. When the player boots up *Undertale* after completing the pacifist ending, Flowey greets the player:

Hi. Seems as if everyone is perfectly happy. Monsters have returned to the surface. Peace and prosperity will rule across the land. Take a deep breath. There's nothing left to worry about. ... Well. There is one thing. One last threat. One being with the power to erase EVERYTHING... That's right. I'm talking about YOU. YOU still have the power to reset everything... Nobody will remember anything. You'll be able to do whatever you want. That power. I know that power. ... So, please. Just let them go. Let Frisk be happy. Let Frisk live their life.

The name Frisk is invoked again as Flowey tries to ward the player away, to make them realize that they are the trauma in this world. Another crucial line of the warning is “I know that power.” Asriel in the fansong “Serial Dreamer” sings, “I know what’s in your future/ And you can’t escape the past”¹²⁴ because Asriel had the same power to save, load, and reset and he knows how that power leads to an obsession with the past.

While all of *Undertale*’s Retraumatized characters provide an implicit warning to the player regarding the danger of Retraumatization, Asriel/Flowey’s experience provides a direct parallel to the player’s and is invoked repeatedly as a warning to them. Therefore to examine the ways *Undertale* anticipates player Retraumatization his Retraumatization bears limited analysis. His first trauma was his own death and the death of his sibling, caused by his refusal to kill any humans. After his revival as Flowey, “I realized I didn’t feel ANYTHING about ANYONE. My compassion had disappeared! [...] I become despondent. I just wanted to love someone. I just wanted to care about someone.”¹²⁵ After committing suicide, he realizes he can save, load, and reset, that “I could go back. Amazing, isn’t it, Chara? I was amazed, too.”¹²⁶ Flowey makes the

¹²⁴ Silva Hound, *Serial Dreamer*, released March 5 2016, vocals by MandoPony, <https://silvahound.bandcamp.com/album/serial-dreamer-ft-mandopony>.

¹²⁵ NewHome12, G.

¹²⁶ NewHome13, G.

parallel between his experience and the player's explicit, and in his path we can see player possibilities which the game anticipates: "At first, I used my powers for good. I became 'friends' with everyone. I solved all their problems flawlessly. Their companionship was amusing... For a while. As time repeated, people proved themselves predictable. What would this person say if I gave them this? What would they do if I said this to them? Once you know the answer, that's it. That's all they are."¹²⁷ Flowey is detailing what the game expects players to experience, that after returning after the pacifist ending they will complete the game's happiest path over and over, until the emotional connection they feel with the game's characters becomes worn away by boredom. Eventually, *Undertale* suggests, the desire for something new will beat out their care, compassion, and morality: "It all started because I was curious. Curious what would happen if I killed them. 'I don't like this,' I told myself. 'I'm just doing this because I HAVE to know what happens.' Ha ha ha... what an excuse! You of all people must know how liberating it is to act this way [...] Nowadays, even that's grown tiring. You understand, Chara. I've done everything this world has to offer. I've read every book. I've burned every book. I've won every game. I've lost every game. I've appeased everyone. I've killed everyone. Sets of numbers... Lines of dialogue... I've seen them all."¹²⁸ The way in which repetition slowly deadens his experience of the world can be examined through two fan works, each of which presents a few interesting possibilities for (player) Retraumatization and the interaction between video games and trauma.

¹²⁷ NewHome14, G.

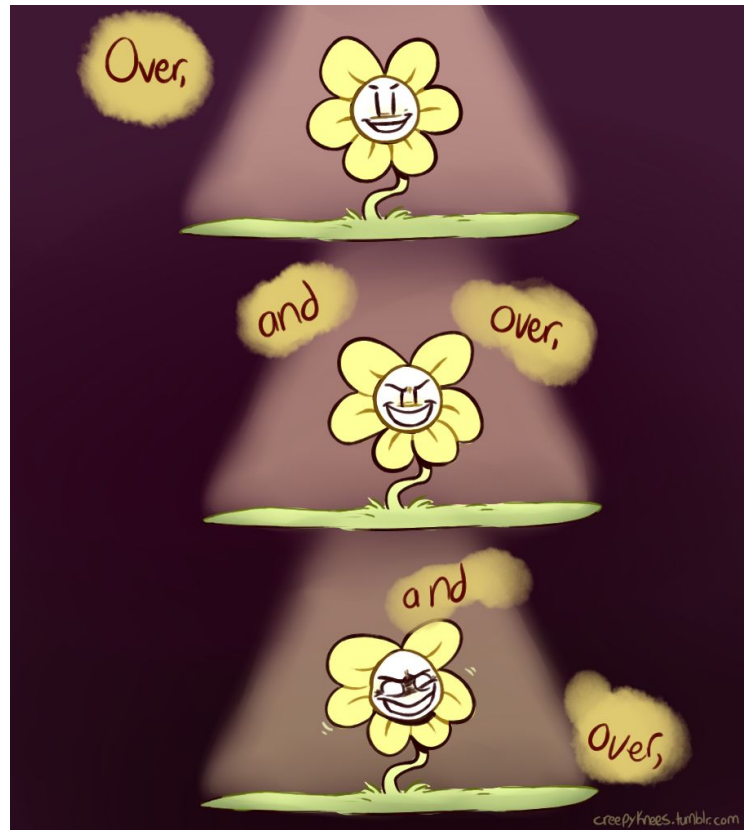
¹²⁸ NewHome15-16, G.

A four-panel comic strip illustrating a character who is 'too nice'.

- Panel 1:** A character with a large, round head and a wide, toothy grin is speaking. A speech bubble says: "You're lucky you can't remember. You don't get how... BORING, reliving everything is." A small, sad-looking yellow flower in a pot is next to him.
- Panel 2:** The character is now lying down, looking exhausted or sad. A speech bubble says: "i think i could probably guess." The small yellow flower is still next to him.
- Panel 3:** The character is sitting up, looking frustrated or angry. A speech bubble says: "No, you can't." The small yellow flower is now gone.
- Panel 4:** The character is lying down again, looking sad. A speech bubble says: "Do you know what it's like?" A new, larger yellow flower with a sad face is now next to him.

At the bottom of the comic, there is a single yellow flower with a happy face. A speech bubble next to it says: "Having to introduce yourself, trying to act friendly." Another speech bubble next to it says: "Pretending you've never done any of it before."

creepypines.tumblr.com



¹²⁹ Lyle 'Creepyknees', "Floweypot-AU," weekend dandelion special (Tumblr, September 3 2016), <https://creepyknees.tumblr.com/tagged/floweypot-au>)



Boredom serves as the motivating factor, and this boredom eventually destroys his compassion, which does not vanish magically, as the game suggests. Instead, because he is playing god he comes to see the other monsters as nothing but “Lines of dialogue.” He turns to violence and inflicts trauma just so that he does not wilt away, creating his world of meaning out of the morally apathetic pursuit of anything new.

Alternatively, Flowey’s violence can be explained as emotional, rather than emotionless. One blog from the “Flowey Answers” ask blog depicts Flowey’s reaction to losing his emotional

connection to the necklace Asriel gave to Chara:¹³⁰ he is at first confused, then as he repeats his existence within the world over and over he becomes increasingly upset until he turns his frustration at not feeling anything into anger against the object, destroying it. As even more time passes, he finally abandons the necklace altogether. The necklace can stand in for the monsters Asriel knew and loved. He *does* keep returning because he cares about the emotional connection, but its weakening alarms and upsets him. Ultimately, the committing of an act of violence numbs him towards the object, or allows him to push his lingering care into deep

¹³⁰ Agnes Aspgren, “Flowey Answers,” *Tumblr*, August 1, 2016, <https://flowey-answers.tumblr.com/post/148313261926/hyperdeath-i-mind-to-tell-me-what-did-you-do>.

enough crevices that he abandons it, with only bitterness remaining to mark the emotional wound (“I can’t believe you got attached to a worthless chunk of metal”).

Both possibilities¹³¹ highlight the commentary Flowey’s story presents on video games, especially as a critique of completionism.¹³² Completionism, the obsession with finding every last crumb of the game’s experience, becomes problematic when the search for more content becomes an end unto itself. As Flowey shows, completionism can lead one to prioritize the search for new content above one’s own pleasure or morality (although as Sev demonstrates, morality and pleasure are interconnected in video games, as to act in immoral ways even in a game can be upsetting and ruin enjoyment). The impulse for players to go to sometimes extreme lengths to make certain they didn’t miss anything worthwhile is extremely common in video games, even if the repetition necessary for that certainty destroys the original purpose of play.

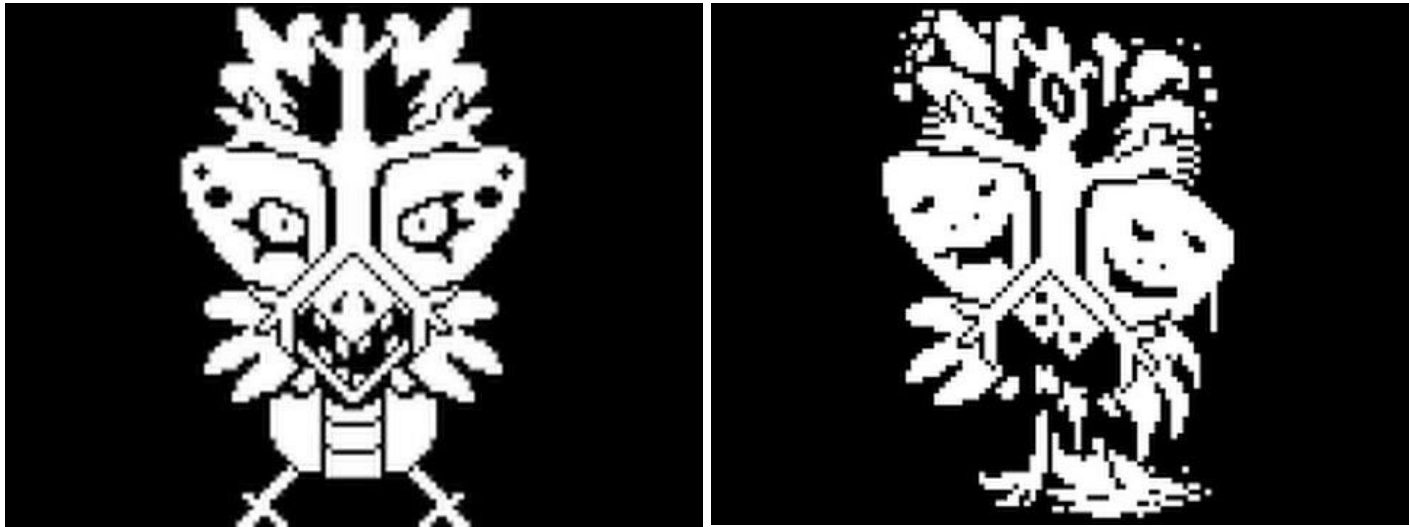
Flowey presents the player with a dark mirror, and, considering that the story he tells of his origin, in which he directly compares himself to the player, occurs near the very end of the genocide route, he provides a last warning for players who are well on their way towards repeating his mistakes to turn away from his ruinous path. To continue to follow his example would place players in the Retraumatized states they have already grown familiar to in witnessing Toriel, Asgore, and the monster society. However, the game provides more direct warnings besides character examples and Flowey as an analogy for the player.

Using the metaphor of determination, *Undertale* warns that extreme perseverance can develop into a harmful inability to let go and accept imperfect realities. The game explains the

¹³¹ Although the two frameworks above provide valuable insights for this chapter’s argument, they ultimately fail to include Flowey’s inciting trauma when considering his character. While it has been cut from this paper, a more fleshed out Retraumatization reading of Flowey is possible.

¹³² See Appendix 6.3, for definition and discussion of completionism.

ability to save, reset, and load through the concept of determination: if one is determined enough to press on, to never surrender, to keep trying, they are able to persist after death in order to do so. Determination as a physical substance within the game world is dangerous: it comes from the souls of humans (who themselves represent trauma), and its injection into monsters causes them to melt into undying “Amalgamates” that contain only limited cognition and a confused sense of their own identity.



Snowdrake (left) and his mother, who has been turned into an Amalgamate (right).¹³³

These creatures exist in a state between life and death, reminiscent of Retraumatized characters--who themselves entered half-life states due to their determination to deny the loss of their beloveds. Flowey provides a verbal warning of determination when he mocks that

I just want to reset everything. All your progress... Everyone's memories. I'll bring them all back to zero! Then we can do everything ALL over again. And you know what the best part of all this is? You'll DO it. And then you'll lose to me again. And again. And again!!! Because you want a "happy ending." Because you "love your friends." Because you "never give up." Isn't that delicious? Your "determination." The power that let you get this far... It's gonna be your downfall!¹³⁴

¹³³Snowdin5, AR, Snowdrake fight, and TrueLab18, P, Amagamate fight.

¹³⁴ NewHome22, N, post-Asgore fight.

The quote highlights a video game convention and forebodes that the offhand regard players pay that convention will lead to endless, hopeless repetition. When confronted with failure, it is normal for players to retry the task until it is completed successfully, no matter how long it takes. In traditional video games, such behavior leads to a happy ending, which Flowey warns is not true in this world. Harkening back to the framework of the Flowey Answers blog, the player's inability to accept their fading emotional connection to the world "Because you 'love your friends'" will not lead to a resurgence of positive emotion, but the gradual destruction of everything except bitterness and grief. This dialogue occurs just prior to the neutral ending, which is fitting considering that in the likely trajectory of routes, the player WILL return in hopes of a better ending.

The final type of warning *Undertale* offers players, explicit ones such as this chapter's epigraph, melds together with the commentary *Undertale* makes on the condition of players who are either already Retraumatized or on that "DANGEROUS PATH." The game uses pathological language to describe players who engage with repetition that is not fun or harmless. If players kill Sans and then reload to do it again, his initial dialogue will change, and if is killed again and the player loads once more, he will comment "you're really kind of a freak, huh?"¹³⁵ Not only is this repetition an immoral usage of the player's power, it is also a masochistic, unenjoyable one, since Sans' battle is incredibly difficult: it took me over twenty hours the first time. The player is pathologized when the game senses that their completionist impulse has take priority over both morality and pleasure. Flowey also calls out the player for self-destructive behavior if they die repeatedly in their battle against him: "Are you letting me kill you... .. on PURPOSE? SICKO.

¹³⁵ NewHome17, G.

Ha ha ha.” If they die again: “Honestly, fighting you IS pretty fun... .. So even if you ARE a sicko, I’ll take it!”¹³⁶ He too accuses the player of having something wrong with them when they engage in the joyless, completionist repetition Flowey fell into himself. The last pathological lash the player receives is from Chara, who provides the game’s most direct explanation for a Retraumatized player’s actions when they complete two genocide¹³⁷ routes: “There is a reason you continue to recreate this world. There is a reason you continue to destroy it. You. You are wracked with a perverted sentimentality.”¹³⁸ Retraumatization, according to these snippets, goes beyond bad *decisions* and enters into the territory of sickness, where the player’s completionist urge and obsession with the world overpowers their ability to control themselves and act as an ethical subject in the pursuit of enjoyment.

This pathological language is saved for instances of repetition that do not offer players ethically harmless fun. When repetition does not involve death or violence, *Undertale* engages players with repetition playfully. In one famous encounter, players can repeatedly pet a dog monster who becomes more and more excited,¹³⁹ stretching his head further and further to meet the player’s hand, until:

¹³⁶ NewHome22, N, Omega Flowey fight.

¹³⁷ As will be detailed in the next section, genocide routes are extremely unenjoyable.

¹³⁸ NewHome22, G.

¹³⁹ Snowdin14, AR, Lesser Dog fight.



The effect of this nuance is that it shows players that their playing of games, which are inherently built out of repetition, is not inherently wrong. Instead, it highlights how reckless repetition and determination can lead to extremely grim situations. This latter commentary does not only apply to the world of video games, since “the influence of games, and their ethics, [extends] beyond the act of playing and into the realm of cultural behavior.”¹⁴⁰

Undertale also uses the motif of consequences to critique Retraumatized players. When players open the game again after their first genocide route, Chara greets them and reveals an important element of player Retraumatization:

Interesting. You want to go back. You want to go back to the world you destroyed. It was you who pushed everything to its edge. It was you who led the world to its destruction. But you cannot accept it. You think you are above consequences.

The players are offered a chance to answer Yes or No, and after Chara’s response to their answer a long black screen and silence follows, forcing the player to consider this argument. The idea

¹⁴⁰ Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 73.

that one is above consequences is crucial to the experience of Flowey and the Retraumatized player. Both experimented with atrocities because they could erase them, and both come to suffer the emotional consequences themselves. Sans makes this clear when, during his battle in the genocide route, he concludes “i guess that means we never really WERE friends, huh? heh. don’t tell that to the other sans-es, ok?”¹⁴¹ In future runs of the game, only the player is left with the emotional consequence of knowing that awful knowledge.

The language of pathology and especially consequences is commonly co-opted by fans, whose works engage with the themes of repetition and ethical play and demonstrate that the moralizing project of *Undertale* is an effective one. Lyle’s comic (above) is only one of *many* instances of fan works which focus on the particular word “Consequences.” By reversing this language back onto the cast, as Lyle and Fatz¹⁴² (comic below) do, fan works explore player experiences through the cast of *Undertale*.



Undertale not only allows for players to engage in the particular traumatization they witness in the cast of *Undertale*, but provides them a framework in Flowey by which they can come to an

¹⁴¹ NewHome17, G, fight again after accepting Sans’ ‘mercy.’

¹⁴²Fatz. “The Mistake Part 4,” *Dreemurr Reborn*, Tumblr, October 26, 2015.

<https://dreemurr-reborn.tumblr.com/post/131995733421/the-mistake-part-4-previous-next>.

(or perhaps a few) understanding of the traumatizing situations they are putting themselves in. *Undertale* clearly illustrates some of the moments when players are slipping into the traumatized state the game has warned them of, and finally it provides players with a commentary upon their Retraumatized state, which players co-opt the language of to perform creative introspection. This introspection which *Undertale* facilitates is very important to what makes the game a valuable moral experience for its audience, rather than a recklessly traumatic one.

4.2 (Re)traumatizing the Player

To expand the narrative of the Retraumatized player, they start on neutral routes, complete the pacifist ending, but are not willing to let go of the game. This unwillingness could be explained through video game conventions, which is to say they could be fulfilling the completionist impulse to see what content they missed, but it can also be explained through trauma theory. Returning to the words of Neil Postman, “Constantly rehearsing the details of somebody’s life and death shows that people are trying to continue the story. We always try to do that when the story ends before we’re prepared for the ending.”¹⁴³ The ending in question is the player’s own relations with the game--they are not willing to release the world and cast of *Undertale*, despite the warnings discussed above.

The game’s pacifist ending, the happiest ending players are offered, has a crucial imperfection that makes it too unsatisfying for many players to put the game down. With the barrier destroyed the monsters can all go free, but Asriel chooses to stay down below. Without a soul of his own he’d eventually change back into Flowey and hurt everyone again, so he refuses

¹⁴³ Neil Postman in *Christian Science Monitor*, quoted in *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a literary context*, pp. 3.

to be free in order to sacrifice himself for their happiness. Many fans view this moment as the game's most tragic, and are unable after the credits roll to stop thinking about and grieving for Asriel. They return to the game, and those who disregard Flowey's warning take their first steps towards Retraumatization, either because they cannot accept Asriel's fate, or they cannot accept their own removal from a world that still has such a powerful emotional hold on them. As *Undertale* predicts, as they replay the game players come to test more and more horrible things, until they begin the genocide route, and come to traumatize themselves.

Undertale generally presents violence in ways that do not glorify it, a subversion of video game and Western media conventions in its own right, but the genocide route takes this considerably further. The player is forced to grind¹⁴⁴ against monsters, which quickly grows boring and the emotional connection to those monsters is numbed as they become merely the necessary targets of violence. The repetition leads the player to parallel Flowey's experience, captured by the lyrics "I've watched all my friends die/ A thousand times/ I'm sordid and bored out/ of my mind"¹⁴⁵ from a fan song that takes his perspective. The repetition of each death drains away their particular meanings in similar fashion to how repeated traumatic reenactments drift into one another to form a singular amalgamation of trauma for the Retraumatized subject. When the violence is not boring it becomes disturbing, as when the player kills a Tsunderplane, an innocent enemy who comically tries to hide the crush it has on the player.

¹⁴⁴ See appendix 6.3 for definition and discussion of the term "grind."

¹⁴⁵ Fandroid the Music Robot, *FLOWEY SONG*, Fandroid Music Group, released May 12 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOCvpB8nNOM>).



The explosion is loud and surprising, and the entire screen shakes. Then there is silence.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Hotlands12, N/G, Tsunderplane fight.

The distinct elements of the genocide route weave together to represent for the player the destruction they are inflicting, both upon the world and upon themselves. Returning to Scarsella's theorization that "When trauma undoes one's ability to sustain particular relations, it does not *lead* to the disintegration of the person; it quite literally *is* the disintegration of actual parts of the person,"¹⁴⁷ this understanding of trauma can be coupled with Jason Yu's exploration of the usage of leitmotifs within the music of *Undertale*.¹⁴⁸ Yu argues that through leitmotifs characters are linked not only to each other but to certain places, tying the whole underground together in the understanding of the player. After murdering all of the available monsters in an area, the music is replaced by an eerie and monotonous track, which ends the player's relational understanding of connectivity within the game's world. Following Scarsella's argument, the destruction of music can be seen as a self-inflicted trauma upon the player, as it clearly "undoes [the player's] ability to sustain particular relation." Similarly, during genocide the echo flowers, which give the player insight into the society of monsters, fall silent, silencing not only the monsters' history but also the player's understanding of monsters. The same could be said of the evacuation of the towns--outside of a two particular shopkeepers, all of the monsters the player used to be able to speak to vanish. The genocide route is an experience of isolation from the society of monsters, just as Retraumatization is for Toriel.

¹⁴⁷ Emphasis in original. Scarsella, "Trauma and Theology in Light of the Cross," in *Trauma and Transcendence*, pp. 271.

¹⁴⁸ Yu, Jason. "An Examination of Leitmotifs and Their Use to Shape Narrative in UNDERTALE - Part 1 of 2." Jason M. Yu, November 15, 2018. <http://jasonyu.me/undertale-part-1/>.



Buy, Trade, and Talk are replaced by Take, Steal, and Read in this abandoned shop. Where previously the shop keeper served as a source of town history, now the shop possesses only a note that reads “Please don’t hurt my family.”¹⁴⁹

If the player’s motivation is an unwillingness to leave the world behind because they are too attached to it, then this destruction of the world represents a self-destruction as well. The genocide route reveals the player’s trauma-centric identity to be similar to Toriel’s: both cut away all the parts of themselves that do not revolve around the goal of rectifying their trauma. Toriel becomes the caretaker of the ruins, a hermit, to try to retroactively save her children, and the player becomes a killer, utterly alone, to try to find new content and maintain a meaningful relationship with the game.

¹⁴⁹ Snowdin26, G. Snowdin shop.

The husk of a world parallels the empty gameplay the player is offered in genocide routes: all the puzzles shut down, and many optional paths close to the player. The only thing they are left to do is grind monsters, and this singular repetitive goal, in total opposition to any sort of relational interaction, creates the experience of Retraumatization in the player. They are entirely consumed by the traumatic process they themselves enact. The game only offers two challenging moments within the genocide route: the battle against Undyne and the battle against Sans, both of which are so brutally difficult that most players take many hours and countless deaths to beat them, if they don't give up. To repeat the miserable fights over and over, which become less enjoyable the longer the player tries, the player must be determined enough in their completionist pursuit that they are willing to be unhappy in the pursuit of only further unhappiness. The Sans fight in particular emphasizes this, as his funny, evolving dialogue before every fight melts away after the ninth try, and he begins to monotonously repeat "let's just get to the point."¹⁵⁰ The effect this repetition of violence has on the player is encapsulated by the lyric "When you kill me/ again, and again, and again, and again,/ don't expect me to shed/ any tears in the end,"¹⁵¹ the player becomes an empty husk, losing their empathy and emotions just as Flowey did before them.

Smethurst and Craps argue that games oscillate between "on-line" and "off-line" moments, wherein the player's control over the unfolding of the games events waxes and wanes, and though critics (inside and outside of academia alike, I add) tend to be interested only in the highly interactive on-line moments, both types of moments and the grey mercurial areas between

¹⁵⁰ NewHome17, G.

¹⁵¹ MandoPony, *Chara*, released February 20 2016, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QM3hpHE28hw>).

them must be analyzed to paint a full picture of the experience of the game.¹⁵² *Undertale* plays with the complexity around control in the final capstone to the player's traumatic event: Flowey appears before the player and pathetically begs for his life, even assuming his original face and voice of Asriel in hopes of rousing sympathy. Instead, Chara seizes control and cuts him apart in the most emotionally brutal moment of the game. The rhetorical effect of inconsistent levels of control and self-determination resonates with the "symptomology of trauma"¹⁵³ outlined by Smethurst and Craps. As a game which uses the game medium to explore trauma, it is unsurprising that *Undertale* plays with this balance. Until the last scene of the route, Chara has only seized control to give little pushes towards committing atrocity, leaving the ultimate decision to attack or spare up to the player. In killing Flowey control is stripped totally away--shocking to the player in itself--and after the final murder, Chara appears to the player and asks them to chose between destroying this whole world or not. If the player chooses not to, Chara asks "Since when were you the one in control?" and rushes at the screen horrifically, then destroys the world anyway. Their question of control is more complex than simply who moves Frisk around. Control refers to the player's ability to control themselves in light of their completionist/Retraumatized impulses, and in the moment that they complete the genocide route players are made fully aware that they have lost that control. Just as they cannot undo the damage of their genocide upon the world, they cannot undo the Retraumatization they have inflicted upon themselves.

Repetition, shock, emotional numbing and brutality are all traditional marks of trauma, examined under the lens of fright even by Freud.¹⁵⁴ But *Undertale* affects specifically

¹⁵² Smethurst, Craps, "Playing with Trauma," pp. 273.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, pp. 61-62.

Retraumatization, as opposed to traumatization, upon its players by giving them control over their decision to remain within the cycle. When the player opens *Undertale* after completing genocide the screen is black, and remains that way for ten minutes, forcing the player to reflect on what they have done, and what the game has become to them. Chara eventually returns and speaks to the player briefly, then offers to restore the world if the player gives them their soul. Without accepting the offer the game remains unplayable forever, but if they accept it the ‘happy’ pacifist ending is ruined forever, replaced by an evil parallel version.

This moment transforms player traumatization into Retraumatization as the player is purposefully repeating their existence, their cycle, without any chance for redemption or happiness, proving Chara’s point that “You cannot accept it [that they destroyed the world themselves].” By surrendering their soul, the player enters into the unreality which preserves the idea that they can still enjoy this world as they once did, keeping their connection with this world unnaturally alive, but the cost is that they are hollowed out and doomed to repeat endlessly evermore. The only other possibility the game offers is to let the connection die, to accept the misery they have entered, and walk away. After breaking the linear temporality of the pacifist ending, the game becomes a downward spiral without an end. As one fan puts it: “After you start killing you begin opening doors and descending down paths that you never really get out of. You can feel it as if you've committed a crime against nature, it hangs over your head like a guillotine”¹⁵⁵ that a dozen subsequent pacifist playthroughs can not erase.

¹⁵⁵ IamCaptainMan, 2016, comment on “[spoilers] Flowey’s Story - Undertale (Genocide)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qph9HYpS8V4&t=234s>.

4.3 Retraumatized Player Responses

Through the varied fan works *Undertale* players create, they demonstrate their “symptomology of trauma” along with a thoughtful consideration of that process, carrying out the same kind of analytical work creatively that I do traditionally in this paper. Players often represent themselves as Frisk, the player character, and rarely use their own names within fan works, which allows their personal testimonies to be consumed sympathetically by other fans, who can place themselves into the imagined Frisk. Bina’s comic¹⁵⁶ uses this technique, while also illustrating the experience of a player whose engagement with *Undertale* can be theorized under Retraumatization.



¹⁵⁶ Bina, *The biggest threat*, Tumblr, November 1 2015.

<https://binart.tumblr.com/post/132368587815/remember-the-one-who-poses-the-biggest-threat-to>





As Bina illustrates, the player is numbed through repeated experiences of the game, but they persist because they care too much about the world to let go of their connection to it, striving in vain to recapture those genuine first feelings. The comic ends with a black panel and the insinuation of a reset, which implies that the player is doomed to endlessly repeat in their numbing Retraumatized cycle, increasing their trauma by their efforts to respond to it. The goal of finding something new and the goal of recapturing that first time experience are connected, as the former is in service to the latter, and operate similarly: the player, unprepared for the story to end, rejects completion and rehearses the story in any way they can. Given enough time, enough new content, they expect to completely process the game emotionally and finally be able to let it go, but the opposite occurs.

A very common experience upon completing *Undertale*'s pacifist ending, besides replaying the game immediately, as noted by many players in blogs and conversations, is to turn to fan works, available online, and consume them voraciously. After completing the pacifist ending for the first time (and after already completing the genocide route), I found myself

googling “Asriel sad fanart” at home, in class, as I walked, and listening to remixes of the songs associated with him. I began to create my own fan poetry and stories, trying to process the powerful emotions *Undertale* had stirred in me. After months, this obsession had not diminished and I was still just as upset at the lack of a happy ending--of a satisfying *completion*, of the game. These experiences are not unique, and it takes only a cursory glance at the *Undertale* fandom to prove that. One particularly explicit example of this phenomenon comes from “React” videos. These videos collect clips from *Undertale* playthroughs, focused on highly affective moments of the game, such as “YouTubers react to Tsunderplane death in undertale genocide route,”¹⁵⁷ and allow players to watch and vicariously approach the first time experience of other players. The comment sections of these videos see many fans relate their own first time experiences, representing the connection between the inability to process and finish *Undertale* and the desire to experience it all anew. These react videos or google searches like “Asriel sad fanart” represent traumatic reenactments, sought by fans who, in trying to sate their emotional obsession, only strengthen it. Caruth argues that traumatic flashbacks are the psyche’s “attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place.”¹⁵⁸ These fan work consumption habits can be read similarly, as they parallel Caruth’s flashback in that they only succeed in retraumatizing the victim and never by providing relief to the symptoms of trauma.

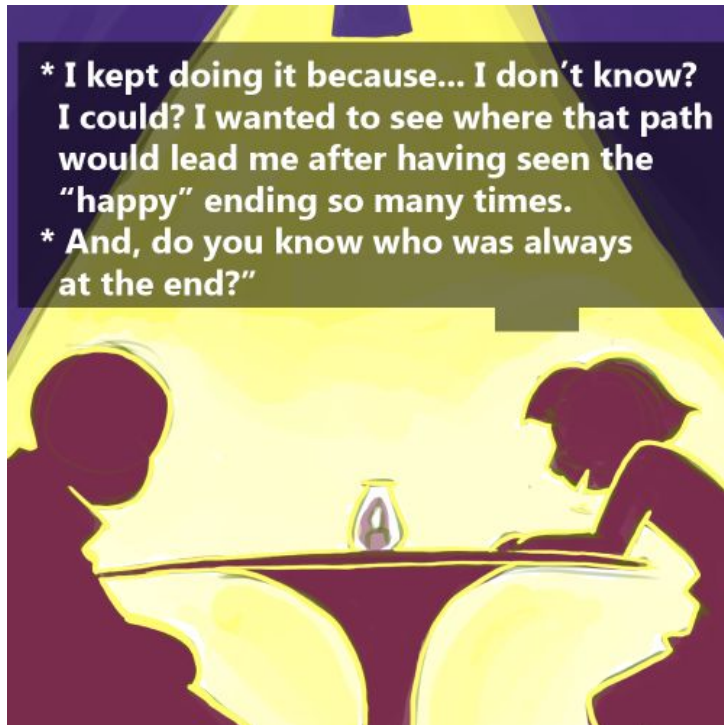
The game anticipates that this denial of an ending will inevitably lead to the (self) destruction of genocide, which Bina’s comic ominously anticipates as well in the line “Whatever I do from here, just know... I’m only doing this because I care about everyone VERY much.”

¹⁵⁷ Ahh FOOKE, “Youtubers react to Tsunderplane death in undertale genocide route,” released July 25 2017, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ar250ghLSKE>. The description of this video reads: “Remember the undertale days? Well now you can by watching people viciously murder Tsunderplane.. in.. undertale. [• _ •]” which speaks to both the motivation to watch such videos, and the fans’ consciousness of their disturbing situation.

¹⁵⁸ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, pp. 62.

Although divergent from my own experience of the game, the majority of fans who try a genocide route do so after completing the pacifist route, sometimes many times. Another comic picks up right where Bina leaves off, unrelated but borrowing the same rhetorical format of a confession to Sans:





This presentation cuts out a few panels that show Sans' reaction. This group of images is meant to be read from left to right. Barrien, "Confrontation," October 12 2015, Tumblr, <https://asexualmew.tumblr.com/post/131018427259/below-the-cut-is-a-comic-contains-spoilers-for-the>).

Fan works mirroring the sentiment of Bina and Berrien are so common that I was able to find two which meshed together perfectly, demonstrating that the *Undertale*'s theoretical player exists, and is not rare. Millions of real people who played *Undertale* developed the affectation of Retraumatization: their fading connection to the world formed their lost beloved; the self-destructive measures they chose to rekindle that connection formed their trauma; their emotional obsession with the game formed their trauma-centric identity; and their endless replaying of the game and consumption/creation of secondary content formed their traumatic reenactment, all encouraged by the unreality that promised some sort of fulfilment and (happy) end to the process. One extremely notable departure from the cast of *Undertale* is the extent to which players generated content out of their wounds. Theories, comics, playthrough

compilations, Asriel sad fanart: players created art out of their experience at an incredible rate. Only one other game¹⁵⁹ had ever pushed me to create fan fiction and poetry.

The intellectual, analytical engagement with the Retraumatization process (if not by that name) of many fan works easily rival the work of this paper, such as the fan music video “Dead Silence.”¹⁶⁰ Taking the perspective of Chara, Sharp sings “You speak my language, you can’t erase me, you and I, we’re flesh and blood [...] I’ll always be part of you [...] You’re just a monster just like me, just as it’s meant to be. You’ll always be a part of me” which brilliantly connects the game’s notion of humans-as-trauma to players, who fall into Retraumatization by the nature of the conventions *Undertale* critiques. Diving into Retraumatization, “Dead Silence” asks “Why aren’t you getting, there no resetting? You can’t go back, I won’t lose track [...] Go on believe it, or just repeat it, you start again, their lives will end, they’re always broken they won’t mend” which plays with the game’s use of Chara as arbiter of consequences to emphasize the inability of players to move past their Retraumatization or recapture the lost beloved they endlessly seek. The video ‘ends’ with the repetition of the line “You’ll always be part of me” which begins to break into flashes of the Chara sprite, increasing in frequency until Chara’s post-genocide rush at the screen consumes it entirely, and the video ends exactly as a genocide route does if the player refuses to destroy the world. This non-ending artistically represents that same argument contemporary trauma theorists create through dozens of pages of analysis--that trauma does not conclude, and “Dead Silence” is only one of many fan works which could have been showcased as examples of rich player engagement with the process of trauma.

¹⁵⁹ The immaculate *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number*, another game whose engagement with trauma and player trauma deserves a thesis and then some.

¹⁶⁰ Nathan Sharp, “Dead Silence,” released Apr 4 2016, Give Heart Records, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6MKHn3oddk>).

Fans of *Undertale* are also players of *Undertale*, and so the ways in which they contemplate the game are often¹⁶¹ grounded in their own experience of the game. Barrien's poem *The Fallen* provides analysis of player Retraumatization on par with my own through their own experience. The work starts "I fell./ The flowers wrap around my body," and after weaving through *Undertale*'s events, repeats "I fell./ I fell./ I fell./ I fell./ What were those feelings again?/ I fell./ I fell./ I/ f/ e/ l/ l/ I fell/ I fell./ The flowers wrap around my body./ Teetering on the edge of death, I might have felt more dead than alive. But I must do it./ I must allow myself to be saved,"¹⁶² in 30,000 fewer words than this paper, this and other fans present *and* work through player Retraumatization, by writing, drawing, etc. into their own experience. This is a promising methodology for cultural studies, since reader response is too often ignored when conducting textual analysis. It is also crucial to ground any theory of trauma in lived experience, so that trauma theory is always conducted with the goal of aiding the real subjects of trauma. *Undertale* and video games generally then promote not only thoughtful engagement with trauma in their audience, but embodied engagement.

5.0 Chapter Five: The Ends of Retraumatization

One of the video game conventions relevant to Retraumatization which *Undertale* subverts is that of the happy ending. The game critiques the blind pursuit of a happy ending, as when Flowey explicitly lures the player into a trap by offering "Say. What if I told you... I knew

¹⁶¹ Fan works not featuring Frisk/the player are not uncommon, but most do center the role of Frisk/the player, as the game does.

¹⁶² Barrien, *The Fallen*, October 29 2017, Tumblr, <https://berriens-artblog.tumblr.com/post/166912659487/the-fallen>).

some way to get a better ending?”¹⁶³ As shown above, dissatisfaction with the imperfect pacifist ending led many players to continue to play until they were ruined by Retraumatization. Regarding Retraumatization itself, the question of whether a happy ending is possible, or if the self-destructive cycle has any resolution at all, is complicated by the dichotomy between fan-proposed solutions and *Undertale*’s solutions; *Undertale*’s critique of efforts to overcome Retraumatization; and the dichotomy between player Retraumatization and character Retraumatization. This chapter concludes this paper’s analysis of Retraumatization by considering how or if Retraumatization can be resolved. The first section, Bleak Conclusions, considers the theoretical ends of Retraumatization as they are presented by the game, and argues that there are three possibilities that can be drawn from the game. First, that Retraumatization cannot be solved through an active measure, and the only means to exit a Retraumatized cycle is to simply stop carrying out Retraumatized actions. Second, that Retraumatization *can* be cured, but the solution has not been discovered by this paper. And third, that a Retraumatized subject can find a livable equilibrium within their state, so that Retraumatization does not have to be resolved. This chapter’s second section, Player Defiance, examines some of the most common or notable conclusions to Retraumatization that fan works elaborate which either fall beyond or defy the logic of *Undertale*. This section, and this paper, ends by considering the tension between the defiant fan works and *Undertale*.

¹⁶³ Post-neutral ending, Flowey and all other monsters spared but Undyne, or Papyrus, or Alphys not befriended.

5.1 Bleak Conclusions

Undertale provides numerous warnings about the dire consequences of not accepting an unpleasant reality: this paper has already examined how the Retraumatized characters fell into their cycle in order to deny the truth of their lost beloved, and how the player is frequently warned about using their “ability to play God”¹⁶⁴ to strive towards “perfect” outcomes. An additional warning comes in the form of Alphys, the royal scientist who experimented with the physical essence of determination. She injected it into dying monsters, who were revived and prompted Alphys to write to their families with the good news that their unpleasant reality could be altered.¹⁶⁵ Unfortunately the monsters quickly morphed in the Amalgamates discussed previously. The families, who had put aside their mourning only to receive sudden silence from Alphys rather than their revived family members, found themselves in a purgatory just like their family members, in a state more painful than if they had just mourned the death and moved on. The moral of Alphys’ story reinforces *Undertale*’s theme: there is real harm in denying loss and pain by pursuing a cure or solution. Freud presents mourning as painful processes that allow a subject to move past loss over time,¹⁶⁶ and *Undertale* demonstrates that this pain must be accepted or positive work of mourning will remain incomplete, causing lengthier and potentially greater suffering.

Speaking specifically to cures or solutions to Retraumatization, *Undertale* provides Sans to illustrate the danger of rejecting Retraumatization. Although too little is confirmed about the

¹⁶⁴ Ruins48, N/P, Toriel spared after being killed in a previous save.

¹⁶⁵ TrueLab13, P.

¹⁶⁶ Freud, *The Standard Edition... Freud*, pp. 245.

mysterious skeleton monster to sketch his anatomy of Retraumatization, he notes that “i gave up trying to go back a long time go”¹⁶⁷ which, paired with other evidence,¹⁶⁸ implies that Sans has some trauma which he tried to rectify, likely through Retraumatizing means. Unique among the entire cast, he recognized his cycle and abandoned it; but like Freud’s melancholia, an awareness or understanding of one’s Retraumatized situation is “not the essential part of it, nor is it even the part which we may credit with an influence in bringing the ailment to an end.”¹⁶⁹ Rather than providing a beacon of hope for other Retraumatized characters, Sans’s diagnosing of the situation and rejection of the cycle throws him into despair, thereby validating the fears of Toriel and Asgore to surrender their unrealities. His depression is one of his most depicted character traits by fans, and its source is in his awareness, greater than the rest of the cast, of the resets and the Retraumatizing cycle they’re all trapped in. As Sans reveals, “knowing that one day, without any warning... it’s all going to be reset [...] it makes it kind of hard to give it my all”¹⁷⁰ and that hopelessness due to reset awareness can be extended to Retraumatization awareness--knowing that he is trapped in a cycle and that the pursuit of solutions will not help him breaks his spirit. This is corroborated by Flowey’s decision if the player decides to reset after a pacifist ending: “I don’t think I could do it all again. Not after that. [...] You have to erase my memories, too”¹⁷¹ knowing and understanding actually harms, rather than heals. As with Freud, for the solutions of Retraumatization we will have to look elsewhere besides knowledge.

¹⁶⁷ NewHome17, G, Sans fight.

¹⁶⁸ See Sans’ broken machine and postcard of smiling people (Snowdin26, N) and *Undertale*’s various hints of W.D. Gaster, who is possibly Sans’ and Papyrus’ father or brother who fell into the core long ago and was destroyed. Community sourced, “W. D. Gaster,” Undertale Wiki, Accessed January 7, 2020. https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/W._D._Gaster.

¹⁶⁹ Strachey, *The Standard Edition... Freud*, pp. 257.

¹⁷⁰ NewHome17, G, Sans fight.

¹⁷¹ Speech when *Undertale* is opened after pacifist ending.



Sans' room contain have a treadmill, which the player walks onto in darkness. The effect of tricking the player into believing they are making progress when they are making none and the realization of that reality is played for comic effect, but as ZKCats illustrates, the piece of equipment may represent a much grimmer realization for Sans.¹⁷²

Although disheartening, Sans' reaction is not surprising. If the Retraumatized subject builds their world of meaning out of their trauma and the pursuit of its rectification, then the abandonment of Retraumatization leaves them, as Sans shows, hopeless and devoid of any meaning at all.

This would suggest that Retraumatization cannot be positively resolved, but then what is to be made of the apparent contradiction between this suggestion and the player's curing of all the monsters' Retraumatization in the pacifist route? I chalk it up to *Undertale* abiding by the convention of the hero/savior which the player must be in order to be the game's protagonist. The way that the player heals the monsters is by extending Christ-like attributes: patience, mercy, and love are used to befriend monsters and ease them away from their Retraumatization. But if the extension of these traits, especially love, was enough to save one from Retraumatization, then surely Flowey would have been saved by his loving parents when he first awoke. One of the areas in need of major further analysis, then, is how exactly the player saves monsters, in light of Flowey and Sans, who show that love or understanding and cold turkey

¹⁷² ZKCats, "unrelenting treadmill," DeviantArt, November 24 2019. <https://www.deviantart.com/zkcats/art/unrelenting-treadmill-821315152>. Treadmill located in Snowdin35, N/P.

abandonment are not enough, respectively. *Undertale*'s player can be fit into an analogy for the therapist or healer, but my own analysis therein has yielded unsatisfying results; so although *Undertale* presents characters escaping from their Retraumatization into healthy states in the pacifist route, I conclude that it does not provide a workable framework for that transition.

Regarding player Retraumatization, *Undertale* is more explicitly grim. After completing the pacifist route, the player can *always* go back to the game, breaking linear temporality and setting down the path to Retraumatization as discussed in chapter four. Flowey's plea to let the world move on when the player returns after a pacifist route ends with the despairing realization that "You've probably heard this a hundred times already, haven't you...?" which makes it clear that *Undertale* not only sees an eventual fall into Retraumatization as a possibility, but expects it. Despite all of the warnings it provides, the game does not expect its players to escape the mistakes of Flowey. Furthermore, although the possibility for the player to return to *Undertale* is never foreclosed no matter how many times they repeat the pacifist route, if they complete a genocide route even once, the 'happy' pacifist ending is spoiled forever. Player Retraumatization is always beckoning, and can never be fully precluded, yet it can never be redeemed once encountered. To lean back into Bina's comic, *Undertale* offers players only two options, broadly speaking:



As discussed in the previous chapter, replaying the game or consuming/creating secondary works falls into the trap of Retraumatization, leaving only a non-active solution: to do nothing but cease Retraumatized activities. The equivalent to telling players to simply stop being (Re)traumatized, this solution flies in the face of Western aesthetics, wherein active solutions are the only ones possible. Additionally, it would place players in the same position as Sans, wherein

Retraumatization is ceased without addressing the underlying emotional obsession. To continue to play or engage with *Undertale* in an effort to redress Retraumatization only draws the subject further in; but to stop leaves the traumatic damage unaddressed.

Three possibilities can be drawn from *Undertale*'s presentation of the ends of Retraumatization, and the first is that it has no escape or cure. At best, one can only move on and accept the lingering emotional wounds and other consequences of their Retraumatization, risking the despair of Sans to escape the purgatory of Alphys. The second possible end is that a cure exists which remains undiscovered in my analysis but may lie in the potential of player-as-therapist. The third possibility is that one may find equilibrium in Retraumatization, and be content not to escape it.

Undertale's presentation of Retraumatization lacks any sort of positive aspect, but Sans demonstrates how dangerous it can be to recklessly abandon the state, considering it comes to sustain both its subject's identity and world of meaning. In lieu of a workable solution to Retraumatization offered within the text, this third possibility pulls not from the game's material, but from the theory of Measham and Rousseau. They argue that trauma cannot be described in a dichotomy of health and disability, and trauma and its symptoms affect the continuous development of the traumatized subject in ways that should not be viewed like cancerous growths that can be cut away while leaving the subject whole. Instead, trauma *partially* informs the person they develop into: "The manifestation of symptoms is one aspect of the metamorphosis to a new state of equilibrium"¹⁷³ thus the symptoms of trauma demand more nuanced attention than they are given generally within trauma theory. They point out that

¹⁷³Rousseau, Measham, "Posttraumatic Suffering as a Source of Transformation," in *Understanding Trauma*, pp. 280.

“Although there is ample documentation of [the positive effects of trauma], there has been little systematic investigation of the positive effects of trauma”¹⁷⁴ which can be partially attributed to the “inability to incorporate nonmedical and non-Western sources of knowledge”¹⁷⁵ into trauma theory, which takes by default a Western “clinical perspective.”¹⁷⁶ To reconsider Retraumatization as a sustainable equilibrium, it must be viewed outside of the Western logocentrism prevalent within the Western clinical perspective, and its ‘symptoms’ must be evaluated without the assumption of negative valence. Retraumatization is affected after a subject has suffered the loss of something substantial in their personal value system and identity, and the trauma-centric identity and lost beloved-preserving unreality both work to fill these absences. It is a highly logocentric assumption to suggest that a mother *should* live in the reality in which her two children have died rather than exist within an unreality which psychically preserves them--or at least helps to shield her from their loss. What makes Retraumatization inarguably negative for its subject are traumatic reenactments. These are shown to negatively impact at least the subject, and often those around them, as in Asgore’s case. Perhaps then the solution to Retraumatization is not to target the condition as a whole, but specifically attempt to eliminate the effort to rectify the trauma, from whence the traumatic reenactments spring. Additionally, it seems more feasible to combat the effort to rectify the trauma if the ‘curing’ of Retraumatization as a whole is abandoned.

The way in which many Retraumatized players try to rectify their trauma and fall, under *Undertale*’s framework, back into the cycle of Retraumatization is often through the consumption of fan works and the building of community around those works. As such, the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. pp. 281.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. pp. 279.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. pp. 278.

Undertale fandom is reminiscent of Waterfall and can also be theorized under the lens of a transitional space. To restate the theory of transitional spaces:

Individuals and communities are not passively transformed by a traumatic experience. To varying degrees, they actively engage and take part in their own transformation. In the process of adjusting internal reality to external reality, transitional spaces are key. Through creative expression they provide a transformative power that can channel overwhelming emotions; facilitate the interplay of multiple, contradictory meanings; and, through the transmission of fragments of the experience, reforge social bonds.¹⁷⁷

The fan works and fandom spaces located on Tumblr, Reddit, Amino, and others can be read under this framework as necessary productions to facilitate, if not a curing of Retraumatization, then a processing of it into something not entirely negative. By turning the overwhelming emotional experience of Retraumatization into creative works and/or social interactions, players transform their obsession into less destructive aspects of their life and may be capable of establishing equilibrium without leaving *Undertale* or their Retraumatization behind completely. On the react videos discussed earlier, players not only comment their own reactions but speak to each other about their experiences, facilitating the reforging of social bonds that were so effectively shattered by the genocide route. Some of these fan works offer both their creator and their audience the opportunity to reflect upon the game and their (Retraumatized) experience of it, such as the “Flowey and Frisk” ask blog by Lord Artist.¹⁷⁸ The blog provides a space for players to ask Flowey questions and enact the kind of conversations that the game cannot provide, as well as to engage with each other on those conversations. It exists as a means for players to never stop ‘playing’ and never escape their obsession, perhaps, but it allows for players to process that obsession in a non-stigmatized, non-pathologized space.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. pp. 289-90.

¹⁷⁸ Lord Artist, “Illtrytobegood,” (blog) (Tumblr, November 6, 2015), <https://illtrytobegood.tumblr.com/post/132686280778/first-previous-next>

I present all three possibilities that can be drawn from *Undertale* because I can not conclude with any certainty the primacy of one over another. Regarding this third possibility, I can confirm that the creative productions and social interactions that came out of my own player Retraumatization were positive, and did integrate into my life, but they did not nullify the guilt and sadness which also descended from the Retraumatization. In fact, connecting to others who had experienced similar feelings to me and delving into my melancholy state through art (or analysis, as this paper has) stoked those very feelings. Ultimately, the ends of Retraumatization as offered by the game are deeply unsatisfying, and become palatable only if one accepts that a traumatized state cannot be cured, only partially disarmed.

5.2 Player Defiance

Fan dissatisfaction with the conclusions *Undertale* offers has been critical to player Retraumatization and the project of this paper, and it is critical also in contemplating the ends of Retraumatization. Players deny the game's bleak conclusions in a diverse set of ways, and although this paper cannot represent all of them, analysis of a few exemplary and novel fan works, in lieu of any singular conclusion to Retraumatization, will provide a fitting end to this paper in anticipation of future analysis. The first fan work I highlight is Rynny Ryn's video "Undertale: Asriel after breaking the Seal,"¹⁷⁹ because it corresponds with the third possibility I presented above, of knowing yet accepting Retraumatization. The video shows the last conversation with Asriel after the pacifist ending, where he refuses to join the other monsters on the surface, staying behind to sacrifice his own salvation for their happiness. If the player

¹⁷⁹Rynny Ryn, *Undertale: Asriel after breaking the Seal*, YouTube September 16, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0dlm_p1ZxA&t=163s.

continues to speak to him he eventually asks “Don’t you have anything better to do?”¹⁸⁰ and repeats this line, endlessly. The sadness of this moment made it one of the most memorable within *Undertale* for many players, myself included, who wished so desperately for any alternative ending that they fell into Retraumatization to deny this reality. Ryn’s video ends not with the player walking away, but speaking to him and being asked “Don’t you have anything better to do?” over and over again, 18 times, until the video cuts out mid sentence. This ending implies that they will repeat this sequence ad infinitum, will stay below with him and leave behind all the other monsters and the ‘happy ending’ they offer. If considered under Retraumatization, this decision constitutes a conscious rejection of reality and freedom, acceptance of the trap, and sacrifice of the self. Works like Ryn’s do not necessarily show Retraumatization as positive, but the acknowledgement that it cannot be escaped and the willingness to be held is a radical decision not anticipated by the game. A subject who knowingly embraces Retraumatization challenges its pathological conceptualization and proves the possibility of a Retraumatized equilibrium.

Other rejections of *Undertale*’s unhappy ending are more direct, such as when players go into the game’s files and manually clear the game’s data so that they can still get the happy pacifist ending after completing a genocide route. These are rejections of the very spirit of *Undertale*, that one cannot find an *active* solution to Retraumatization. Although there exist many fan works like Ryn’s, which accept the premise of *Undertale* that a perfect ending is impossible but nevertheless find a ‘solution,’ most defiant fan works follow the logic of active solutions, such as through redemption stories. Redemption stories tend to focus on Frisk (the

¹⁸⁰ Ruins1, P, post-Asriel fight.

player), Asriel/Flowey, and/or Chara, and usually focus on the deployment of a virtue, such as kindness, love, determination, or patience in order to eventually achieve forgiveness. Chara abandoning their hatred of humanity, Asriel surrendering his Kill or Be Killed motto and coming to the surface with everyone else, and/or Frisk being forgiven/forgiving themselves for a genocide run frequently feature as outcomes of such stories. The motif most in common between redemption works is self-forgiveness; not coincidentally, the second most frequent motif is the centrality of guaranteeing that there will be no more resets, such as in Fatz's¹⁸¹ redemption series:



This comic redeems both Asriel, who forgives himself for what he did as Flowey, and Frisk, who is finally able to accept reality and let it remain unchanged.

¹⁸¹ Fatz, "The Mistake, Part 7," Dreemurr Reborn, (Tumblr, November 9, 2015), <https://dreemurr-reborn.tumblr.com/post/132861108421/the-mistake-finale-previous-thank-you-very>.

Players recognize the sources of their own Retraumatization, whether it is Asriel's remaining behind or their own guilt, and extend the tactics canonically applied to save Toriel, Asgore, and other monsters to solve the issue. These works reject the dark conclusions of *Undertale* and imagine brighter possibilities which allow for their own liberation. The connection between forgiveness and an end to resets signifies a willingness to accept consequences, as it is the willingness to make and accept mistakes in the present and the past. These stories reject *Undertale*'s foreclosing of the pacifist ending, which represents the conclusion that some mistakes are irredeemable.

Redemption stories are sometimes connected to what I call Surface Stories, wherein all the monsters, as well as Frisk and often Flowey/Asriel too, are imagined living on the surface after being freed from the underground. In contrast with my construction¹⁸² of redemption stories, which deny the impossibility of escaping Retraumatization, surface stories can be seen to reject the clean simplicity with which *Undertale* allows certain characters, such as Toriel and Asgore, to escape from their trauma. Fan works such as TC-96's "Endertale" comic series (below)¹⁸³ depict a deeper engagement with trauma than offered by *Undertale*, even though they claim a happier ending than what the game provides. These nuanced views of redemption and liberation come closer to Rousseau and Measham's theorization of trauma as a process, rather than a dichotomy.

¹⁸² The diversity of fan works cannot be overstated. Fan works are sometimes surface stories and redemption stories, and are not limited to the simplified morals analyzed in this paper.

¹⁸³ TC-96, "Bad Days," DeviantArt, April 17 2018.
<https://www.deviantart.com/tc-96/art/Undertale-Bad-Days-740903173>.

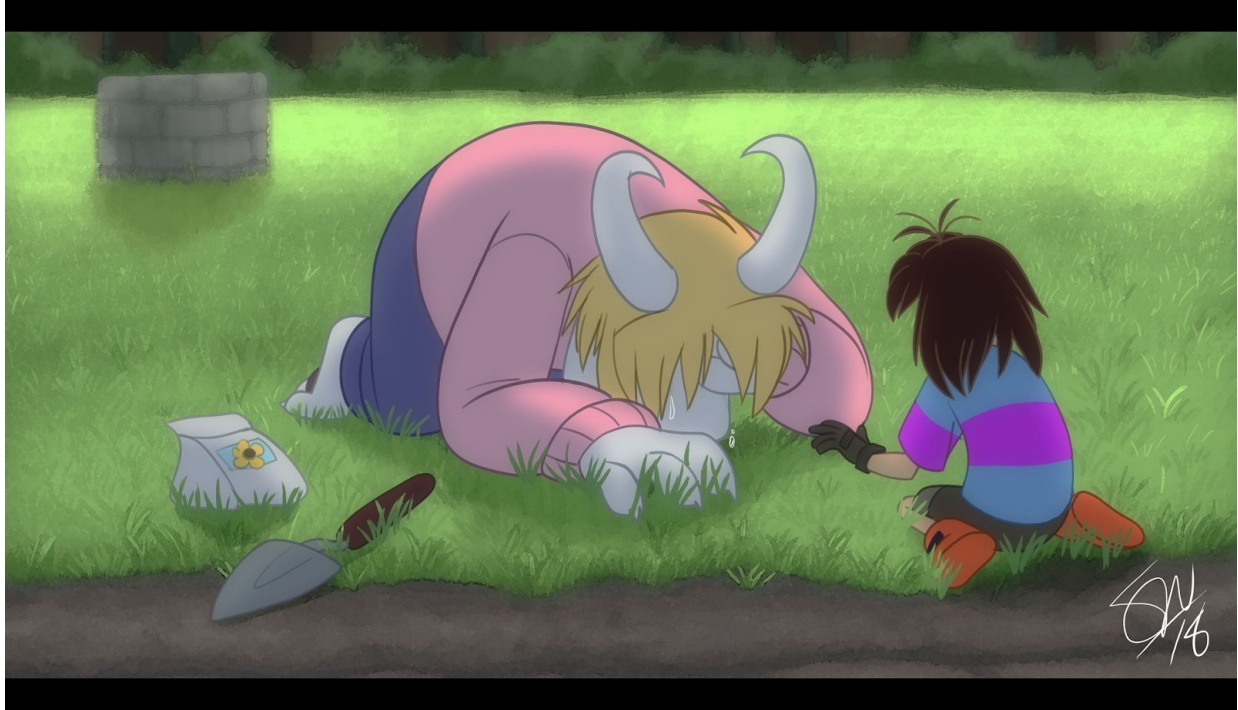


Image is captioned by TC-96: “‘dad has his good days and bad days... today was a bad day.’ poor goat dad still can’t forgive himself”

In considering the ends of Retraumatization, anything but providing an escape from the trauma *Undertale* presents, these works deal directly with the lasting effects of trauma and do not shy away from conclusions just as grim as the game they’re based off of. However, in representing Retraumatized characters *struggling* with their trauma rather than existing within miserable stasis, they present the possibility of Retraumatized subjects as living, growing subjects despite their condition.

This paper can only provide a cursory appraisal of the fan works grappling with the outcomes of Retraumatization. Many, such as TC-96’s “Endertale,”¹⁸⁴ Zarla’s “Handplates,”¹⁸⁵ and Lyle’s “Floweypot AU”¹⁸⁶ demand their own dedicated analysis into the presentations of

¹⁸⁴ TC-96, “Endertale,” DeviantArt, August 23 2016. <https://www.deviantart.com/tc-96/gallery/61037007/endertale>.

¹⁸⁵ Zarla, “Handplates,” Tumblr, February 18, 2016. <https://zarla-s.tumblr.com/post/139516306171/okay-i-get-a-lot-of-questions-about-what-order-the>.

¹⁸⁶ Lyle 'Creepyknees', “Floweypot-AU,” weekend dandelion special (Tumblr, August 4, 2019), <https://creepyknees.tumblr.com/tagged/floweypot-au>

trauma and the ways it can be processed and possibly escaped. The only work that this paper can do is highlight and briefly analyze the most common themes in fan works which create their own ends of Retraumatization. While this paper does not exhaust the theoretical possibilities of *Undertale*'s cast, especially in regard to Chara, Asriel/Flowey, and the collective society of monsters, the interpretive work regarding these characters is inherently limited by their fixed nature within the game. Players present an infinitely more diverse and dynamic source of examples of Retraumatization, and as living subjects of Retraumatization their experiences and the insights they provide through testimonials demands further investigation.

This paper's consideration of Retraumatization ends with a question crucial to the study of fan works and *Undertale*'s presentation of traumatization. Fatz's comic above presents Frisk and Asriel embracing tomorrow and leaving their Retraumatization behind, but the comic series extends far into the future, imagining the life of Frisk and Asriel all the way into adulthood. The story transcends the original trauma in content, but the continuous writing of these characters' happy lives could be read as confirmation that the artist never escaped their obsession with the game's unsatisfying ending. Such a reading is reductive, as any form of engagement with player Retraumatization could be thusly assimilated into its symptomology, but it is ultimately the reading *Undertale* provides. This paper itself, as an example of a fan work, has deeply increased my understanding of trauma, my comprehension of my own emotional obsession, and led to numerous social connections with other fans based on our shared engagement with the trauma of *Undertale*. It has not, however, cured me of Retraumatization. Contrary Di Nicola's argument that trauma theory alone can save us,¹⁸⁷ I found, like Sans, that comprehension does not equate to

¹⁸⁷ Di Nicola, "Two Trauma Communities," in *Trauma and Transcendence*, pp. 42.

healing. Neither does the reforging of social bonds, if the continuous focus on trauma by *Undertale*'s fandom 5 years after the game's release is considered. If efforts to move on lead to further entrapment, how should Retraumatized subjects move forward?

6.0 Chapter six: Appendix

6.1 Further Explanation of Citation

Before delving into discussion of the DCM, the purposes of citation must be developed so that contrast between the 'ideal' method of citation and the real citational practices present in video game theory, as well as my own method, is readily apparent. Citation must allow readers to locate the source cited. One means of achieving this is the Digital Object Signifier (DOI) system, which is used to help identify sources such as scholarly articles or commercial videos, especially when by-name searches are not reliable, as when a source's title is translated, multiple sources exist with the same title, a source is untitled, or multiple editions of one source are available. Readers must be able to locate a source by its citation in order to continue to expand their reading of the source beyond its presentation in the work that is citing it, as well as to verify that the work is not misquoting a source. For both of these purposes, citation must guide readers quickly, clearly, and easily to the location of particular quotes or areas of citation, so that readers can explore the context of quotes that interest them as well as confirm that the quotation is accurate. In order to make citation clear and easy to use, it must be standardized so that readers do not misunderstand the method. Citation must be clearly signified and, related to that ideal, not intrusive to the argument of its work. Footnotes are used in many citation methods because they

do not interrupt the argument in which they are placed and it is immediately obvious to readers interested in citation where citation can be located. Citation methods must be complex and versatile enough to be applicable to a variety of sources which may vary, such as in the number of authors or editors. Citation must not place a heavy burden of work on writers that limits the amount of quotation they deploy.

A concise and standardized method of citation is crucial within a work like mine, which makes frequent usage of quotes from its source material. Unfortunately, there is absolutely no industry standard which outlines how video game citation is to be completed. The Modern Language Association (MLA), Chicago Manual of Style, and American Psychological Association (APA) style of citation lack specific methods of citation for video games. To fill this gap, some universities and editors suggest various workarounds, such as treating games like films or software. Even these workarounds only cover how to place video games in footnotes, a bibliography, or works-cited lists; they do not provide a means of locating specific dialogue within a game. This inconsistency is reflected within literature that makes use of video games: games are only semi-frequently included within a work's bibliography, and are often relegated to a single footnote or parentheses that includes the year of publication and perhaps the publisher and/or developer.

When authors attempt to cite specific instances within a game they usually deploy one of three methods. The first method is a description of where exactly in the game an event occurs. This requires a few cumbersome sentences of game summary per quote. These sentences do not add to analysis, cannot be standardized, and does not necessarily guide readers quickly to the location. A work like mine would be flooded by summary I used this method. The second

method is the deployment of screenshots from the game, which show the exact moment when a quote is made. Naturally, this limits how often authors pull from their source material. Such a method would also flood this paper, though with images rather than descriptions. This method does prove that a quote occurred within a game (although only if all the dialogue quoted occurs within one single image, which is rarely the case), but it does not help readers to locate the quote within the game. The final common method of citation is to provide some (often limited) citation of publication year and developer, and then not to provide any further citation. Quotes and moments pulled from the game are simply stated, which does not allow readers to locate quotes or prove that they are accurate. All of these methods are intractably flawed when the purposes of citation is considered, but citation of a video game is a difficult task. The two core issues at the heart of video game citation are the lack of fixed points to base citation on, such as page numbers or timestamps, and the variability of games, which complicates the formulation of fixed points, as the choices of the player profoundly changes the game. The three methods fail because they attempt to work around these core issues, sacrificing clarity, brevity, and accuracy to do so.

For video game theory to advance as a field it must adopt a standardized method of citation that resolves these issues and satisfies the purposes of citation listed above. One project of this paper became the creation of such a method, which I have dubbed the DuBois Citation Method (DCM) since Geographical Multi Route Video Game Citation Method (GMRVGCM) was too long. My solution to the two main issues plaguing common video game citational practices was to create a secondary resource which supplies a fixed point, and to accommodate player choice within the citation. I considered three types of resources: video playthroughs, game scripts, and game maps.

If the author could create a video playthrough of their game they could post this video on an online database and use timestamps within their paper that reference specific moments of the playthrough. This method would be concise, but would impose a massive work toll on its author. To demonstrate every single dialogue in *Undertale* and how each dialogue was unlocked would require many dozens of hours of footage, and other games could take much more time. Additionally, it would require the author to be proficient enough to complete their game on the hardest difficulty settings. Some games include random elements, which could also take many hours for an author to reveal in their video playthrough.

If the author could create a script of all their game's dialogue they could make use of page numbers within their paper that refer to this script. The two major issues with this method is that it would require a large amount of work by the author, who must rewrite the game's entire script, and it would be difficult to capture the multi-route nature of many games in a traditional, linear script. The author would have to include many "If player does X, then this character says A, if player does Y, then this character says B, if player does Z, then this character says C" clauses. Finally, such a method would neglect the visual and non-dialogue components of games, unless the author also includes descriptions of game settings and actions, which would be a monumental task and destroy the potential for this method to be standardized.¹⁸⁸

If the author could create a map of their game with labeled rooms and sections they could refer to those labels to signify in what room a quote was made. The workload for this method of citation would vary considerably, dependent upon whether the game includes maps of its world already--as many do--or if fan-made maps are readily available. The map could be placed within

¹⁸⁸ To see how such a script would look, and the difficulties it presents, see Sinistera, Lizzy. "UNDERTALE: The Game's Script." Wattpad, updated October 22, 2016. <https://www.wattpad.com/267297171-undertale-the-game's-script-intro-tutorial>.

the paper, if the size of the map made that feasible, or it could be posted in an online database. I ultimately concluded that this third method was the most feasible by examining the workload it required and by considering this method of citation's applicability to other games besides *Undertale*. This method is most effective when the contents of a room changes--as when entered by different characters, or dialogue changes depending on player choices--but the shape of the room remains the same. However, it is not difficult to create secondary versions of maps illustrating geographical changes in a game--for instance, the True Lab section of *Undertale* is only available on pacifist routes, but since the map I ultimately generated for this paper is broken into multiple images according to their section, I simply included a True Lab image. The map that I made was based off of Papikari's *Undertale Complete Map*,¹⁸⁹ and, as I argue in the next section, the usage of fan works as resources is critical to the development of video game theory as a field.

One potential weakness of creating a resource and placing it on an online database is that citation would require a reader to have computer and internet access to use the resource. However, considering that video games are a digital format and many are only available online, this weakness is unavoidable since any effort to use a citation method would require the video game, and often internet access as well.

In order to accommodate the variability of *Undertale*, I broke *Undertale* into its three major routes and established these as a second citation mark besides the geographical signifier of the room label, including a third optional citation mark for secondary details that do not fall within the route. The drawback of this secondary citational mark is that the thing they are based

¹⁸⁹ "Undertale Complete Map," DeviantArt, December 4, 2016, <https://www.deviantart.com/papikari/gallery/56522627/undertale-complete-map>

on (routes, in the case of *Undertale*) is dependent upon the game being cited, and may not always be as clearly distinct as *Undertale*'s routes.

The DCM was created in order to be applicable to other multi-route video games besides *Undertale*. Unfortunately I could only devote a limited amount of time to this project, but did test this method across two games, *Fallout: New Vegas*¹⁹⁰ and *Fable II*¹⁹¹ which contain significant alteration depending on player choice. Across both games, the DCM could be applied with very limited adaptation. *Undertale*'s rooms are separated by small loading barriers, but across games such as *Fallout* and *Fable*, which have much larger open areas, it is necessary for maps to include arbitrarily drawn borders so these open areas can be broken down into smaller rooms. These borders should be created to match visual signifiers whenever possible. When visual signifiers are not available, borders should be kept away from any dialogue to minimize confusion as to which room dialogue falls into. The actual labeling of rooms can be totally arbitrary and should prioritize the reader's ability to quickly locate a room within a given section of the map. To achieve this goal I would recommend, as my map does, labeling rooms in a linear progression that follows the path of the player.

The second citational mark, used within *Undertale* to designate route (such as pacifist, genocide, or neutral), will be specific to the game this method is applied to. In *Fallout*, the route was substituted by player allegiances, such as to the Legion, New California Republic, Unaligned, etc. so that L, NCR, U replaced this paper's P, G, N, and AR. In *Fable* this citation marked whether the player was Good, Neutral, or Evil and Pure, Neutral, or Corrupt, which could be represented as the first alignment/the second, such as G/P, E/C, N/N, etc. Across both

¹⁹⁰ Obsidian Entertainment, *Fallout: New Vegas*, Bethesda Softworks, October 19 2010.

¹⁹¹ Lionhead Studios, *Fable II*, Microsoft Game Studios, October 21 2008.

games and *Undertale*, it was useful to include a catchall in this section, such as AR (all routes) for *Undertale*, AA (any allegiance) for *Fallout*, or A/A (any/any) for *Fable*.

The third citational mark, which catches any player-influenced outcome not covered by the second mark as well as special situations like cutscenes, should be kept as short and infrequent as possible. If too many citations require this third mark, it suggests that the second mark was not made to contain enough player decisions, and citation will most resemble the plot paraphrasing described above as one of the common current methods of citing a video game. There are moments which the DCM citation fails to capture without heavy use of description, such as content that occurs in cutscenes, credits, or menus. It is my hope that the DCM will provide a jumping off point for other scholars to further develop video game citation methods, as the DCM is far from a perfect method.

6.2 Discussion of Video Game Theory

It is a trope within video game theory to bemoan the discrepancy between the cultural importance of video games or the size of the video game industry and the amount of scholarly attention academia pays video games. While it is true that academia continues to imagine video games as PacMan, Pong, or mindless generic first-person shooters despite the increasingly compelling stories video games are telling, I am not concerned with the current size of video game theory. Millenials know what video games are, and recognize the rich analysis they offer. As my generation enters into academia as professors and scholars video game theory *will* grow. However, the field is not only in its infancy in terms of size and respectability, it is also far behind other fields in certain regards that severely impact the ability to conduct video game

analysis. In my writing of this paper I encountered a number of issues relating to the field which I will address here in hopes of spurring the kind of growth that will *not* happen naturally as my generation ages.

The field must utilize fan works as both resources that assistance in conducting video game theory, and sources of critical theory and analysis themselves. Video game theorist Tom Bissell writes that:

certain aspects of video games make them resistant to a traditional critical approach. One is that many games are not easily re-experienceable, at least not in the way other mediums are re-experienceable. If I am reviewing a book, I go back and look at my margin notes. [...] If I am playing a game that takes dozens of hours to complete and has a limited number of save slots, much of it is accessible only by playing it through again, the game itself structurally obligated to fight me every inch of the way. Another problem is that criticism needs a readily available way to connect to the aesthetic past of the form under appraisal, which is not always so easy with video games. Out-of-date hardware and out-of-print games can be immensely difficult to find. Say you want to check on something that happens about halfway through some older game. Not only do you have to find it, you will, once again, have to play it. Probably for hours. Possibly for days.¹⁹²

Many of the issues that Bissell presents can be solved by the deployment of fan made resources. Playthroughs can be quickly pulled up on a phone, and just by skipping forward or back in the video one can navigate to “something that happens about halfway through” a game in seconds. It is a difficult task to find a game--any game--that does not have at least one playthrough readily available on YouTube. In addition to playthroughs, dataminers go into game files and extract the code to be placed for free online. I used such a dataminers script during my own work to quickly ‘ctrl f’ search for dialogue within the game, which was even faster than using a playthrough. I edited a fan made map to generate the map that I use for the DCM, and that fanmade map was in turn made by editing a map compiled by another fan, who made the original map out of files

¹⁹² Tom Bissell, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), pp. xii.

extracted by dataminers. For games that do not supply their own maps, the DCM relies on fan resources. To neglect such resources would, like Bissell suggests, make video game theory nigh impossible.

I also looked towards fan works when determining how to format my paper to best capture the audiovisual textual elements of *Undertale*. Video games are a technologically advanced hybridized art form, whereas current works of video game theory are not. Within academia, the expectation is that an article must be just as comprehensible if it is printed in a black and white copy form as it would be online. Outside of academia such expectations do not exist, and as such fan blogs include gifs, hyperlinks, videos, and audio samples which allow their authors to better represent the work they analyze. Within this paper, if I wanted to represent a conversation that occurred in the game I had to quote its entirety and use a single still image to demonstrate one of the expressions made during that conversation. A fan blog could have included that entire conversation in a gif, which would not only take less space but also show the changing facial expressions of the characters. I advise that as video game theory advances as a field it should look to the advanced deployment of technology prevalent in fan works in order to capture the technologically advanced medium of video games. An author could either describe the mechanics of a game and the feelings those mechanics roused in players, or they could embed a simulation of that game in their very paper itself, so that readers could experience the mechanics and feelings for themselves, which would be both faster and impart greater understanding on the part of the reader.

Fan works should also be utilized, as they are within this paper, as both material to be analyzed under the lens of reader response criticism and as critical theory. While analysis of all

mediums should include reader response, the player of a video game often plays an important role within the story of that game. If one of the reasons video game theory is worth pursuing is the increased emotional and meaning-making engagement video games offer players, then the testimony of those players cannot be ignored. As this paper demonstrates, fan works offer valuable insights into games and should be deployed as critical theory is in other fields, rather than excluded from academia because they did not originate in academia.

A major issue facing the growth of video game theory is a lack of standardization. Starting with the name: what I call video game theory goes by a number of other names, such as computer game theory, videogame analysis, and other variants as awkward as “digital game analysis theory,” which makes it difficult to find works of video game theory in databases. A lack of standard practices also make it difficult to learn, teach, or even conduct video game theory. I spent a considerable amount of time attempting to determine whether or not there was a particular standard for some practice involving formatting or citing games, and was inevitably faced with a multitude of suggested variants which I had to pick from or invent my own method. The time I wasted on such trivial pursuits could have been spent bolstering my analysis of Retraumatization.

As discussed above, the lack of a standard method of citation is a massive issue for video game theory which it *must* overcome. Although the DCM requires authors to create both a map and an explanation of the second citational mark, it includes a variety of rules, such as “When dialogue or content may occur at multiple points throughout the game, the citation refers to the first available instance of occurrence” which allows authors to save time by not having to try to locate an industry standard and then choose or invent a method, and *then* write up an explanation

of whatever method they have settled on, as I was forced to. For readers, the availability of industry standards means only having to know one set of rules and avoiding having to read or puzzle out every individual author's particular style.

The growth of video game theory is inevitable, but given the complexity of the medium there stands a very real possibility that the academic field will remain both a uncoordinated hodge podge of other academic fields and an paltry shadow of non-academic video game theory. Video game theorists must work intentionally to create a standardized field, rather than selecting their favorite practices from other fields. Although I do not suppose that the methods proposed in the DCM should be adopted, it is my hope that its guidelines provide a starting point for theorists to work towards a unified set of best practices.

6.3 Video Game Crash Course

For readers who do not feel confident in their understanding of video game or Role Playing Game (RPG) conventions, or for readers interested in my own definitions of conventions, this section outlines a few of the video game tropes that *Undertale* plays with which are most relevant to the topic of Retraumatization.

1. The first convention is “save scumming.” In video games, players will often be allowed to “save” their progress, so that they can come back and start from that “save point,” like placing a bookmark in a book or pausing a movie so that you can leave and come back. However, you can also leave these save points behind you as you continue to play, and go back to this point by “loading your save,” like turning a book back several pages to where you began reading that day. Saving takes on an oversized importance in video games

compared to books or movies because, 1) the ability to make choices means that every time you play through a section the experience or results may vary, and 2) in video games you often face challenges that can kill or defeat you, sending you backwards to your most recent save point so you can try again. “Save scumming” is abusing a save point for a specific purpose: if you do not like the results of what happened and wish to go back to gain the advantage of knowing what will happen in advance; if you are curious to see what will happen if you try something but do not wish to deal with the consequences of that action permanently; or if you want to know every possible outcome to a scenario by testing all available choices through repeated loading of your save. It is sometimes considered cheating, depending on the game and purpose, as it may drastically reduce the challenge of a scene, or allow players to act without regard for consequences.

2. The second convention is “completionism,” and is tied into the third, “replayability.”

Video games often grant players a variety of optional content which nevertheless impacts the non-optional content. This does not really apply to other media: if the novel’s protagonist or the movie’s star is walking through a festival, you will read every word of description and see every frame of the festival that the work offers--nothing more, nothing less. In a video game, however, one may decide “Before I go get on the train I’ll look behind that tent/talk to that woman,” or “I will not look behind the tent/I will ignore that woman, and I will go immediately to the train.” “Completionism” is the compulsion to explore every nook and cranny a game has to offer, to try every possible dialogue option of every last character in order to see what they do and say. If it *can* be done, it *must* be done. Reading all of a book’s acknowledgements or watching every bonus scene

in a movie does not really correspond, since the optional content a game offers may drastically affect the results or outcome of a game. Watching a bonus scene or reading a foreword may lend insight into the story, but discovering and picking up a gun behind the tent or becoming allies with that woman may change the entire outcome of the story. Generally, the more time it takes to “complete” a game fully, the higher the game’s “replayability.”

3. Replayability is the concept of how rewarding it is for a player to play a game again and again. A game with low replayability would be one that is very narrative focused without many choices, so that the thrill of the game is finding out what happens next; but once you know, there’s not much appeal in going back. A game with high replayability is one that offers a large volume of meaningful choices or random elements, so that each time playing the game feels like a new experience, just as rewarding as the first time playing through. Video games can also achieve replayability if there is little interest in narrative and more in gameplay, which could correspond to watching a kung fu movie, where the appeal is mostly in seeing the exciting fights. It may be enjoyable to see those fights repeatedly because it is the art of the action, not necessarily the suspense of the outcome, which is enjoyable. Many games offer multiple endings in order to increase the player’s ability to make meaningful choices in the story and to increase replayability. *Undertale* has three major endings, an overabundance of smaller neutral ending variations (over twenty), and many endings and content which require more than one playthrough of the game to be unlocked (including one of the three major endings). Additionally, *Undertale* increases certain elements of randomness, which increases replayability as well.

4. The fourth convention is that of the “happy ending.” Games that offer multiple endings very commonly include a good ending, which is awarded to players for making the “right” moral choices, or for performing excellently in the game’s challenges. A bad ending is given to players who made the “wrong” moral choices, or who failed challenges too often. This ending may be unhappy (the bad guys win) or evil (you win, but you are the bad guy). A neutral ending is given when a player failed to meet the requirements for other endings. These neutral endings can vary drastically but most strive not to be completely satisfying, thereby enticing the player into trying once more for the happy ending. The happy ending is often considered the “true ending,” which is to say that if a sequel is developed it would pick up from the happy ending. Happy endings are often explicitly the best in every regard.
5. The fifth convention, the “power trip,” is less codified than the others. Many games, especially in the RPG genre, place you in the controls of a hero (or group of heroes) who becomes more and more powerful, slays monsters or bad guys by the dozens, fights against evil, and eventually saves or takes over the world. Many games offer love interests, who you may decide to pursue and almost always win in the end. The trope of a power trip is most frequently referred to by the idiom “Save the world, get the girl,” or “Rescue the princess,” to use a variant more common in gaming communities.
6. The sixth convention, which is typically specific to the RPG genre, is “grinding,” also called “farming” or “farming mobs.” When a player comes across a boss or difficult section that they are too weak to deal with, they may be forced to return or remain in an area and fight against nameless monsters, who are usually unlimited, to train and “level

up,” or get stronger. This is boring, as the monsters rarely present much of a challenge, and players dislike it.

7. Finally, the seventh relevant convention is the “protagonist-as-player” convention, which is so ubiquitous among games that there is no real term for it, and it is rarely even discussed. Games tend to be very clear on whether you, the player, create your character, often naming them and deciding their history, so that your character is more or less just you imagined in the game world; or whether you are inhabiting a character who is already made, already named, and has a distinct personality and history of their own. Because this convention’s relevance to this paper is limited, it is best to point out that players of *Undertale* would expect that the child depicted climbing Mt. Ebott in the year 201X and falling into the Underground was their character, and that “name the fallen human” refers to the character they play. They expect that they are Chara in the year 201X.. That they are naming Chara, and not Frisk, comes as a surprise to them, and that their character, Frisk, has their own name and identity outside of the player also comes as a surprise.

I note these conventions’ ubiquitousness to say that *Undertale* expects its players to understand them before entering into its story. Much of the game’s richness is missed by a player who is not familiar with the concept of save scumming, as they would not recognize Sans’ meaning when he argues that “if you have some kind of *special power*... isn’t it your responsibility to do the right thing?” The uninitiated would also miss out on the commentary on the medium of video games provided by Flowey’s experiences. *Undertale* makes frequent usage of subversion to achieve the effects on players that this paper is interested in, but that means that

Undertale is not fully accessible to non-video game/RPG fans. Even without playing *Undertale* one may be off put by the immediately apparent differences between it and, say, a novel, for instance the occasional uses of capital letters when describing nouns, or odd fonts, colors, or ellipsis (“**TORIEL**, caretaker of the **RUINS**”). This paper was designed to be accessible to all readers, and as such has many of *Undertale*’s idiosyncracies to make engaging with the text less jarring for unfamiliar readers.

6.4 Call for Further Study

As an introduction to a ‘new’ theory, this paper is unable to exhaust the theoretical potential of Retraumatization even within *Undertale*’s cast, let alone its millions of players. It would be appropriate to call for further study on all the topics which this paper covers, but I will narrow this call to a few critical areas which hold the greatest potential for Retraumatization.

Due to the sake of brevity and my own lack of background in collective trauma theory, this paper’s engagement with collective Retraumatization is shallow. Yet the importance of the communal element of fan works becomes increasingly apparent as player Retraumatization is examined. The question of how to consider fan works in light of *Undertale*’s cynical anticipation of such engagements with trauma cannot be answered without the application of community trauma theory. The monster society *Undertale* also presents interesting possibilities as a society built around trauma and processes of maintaining trauma, but this paper can do little more than highlight that potential. The first call for further study, then, is in regards to the communal element of both fan works and the underground.

The second call for further study is for more devoted attention to how *Undertale*'s player can be read in a variety of analogues. Briefly hinted at in chapter five, I devoted some time to consider how the player plays as a therapist within the underground, which led to the realization that *Undertale* toys with the concept of vicarious trauma: the player and other characters (notably Asriel and Napstablook) come to be traumatized themselves by their connection to traumatized characters. I also devoted some time to considering the player as an analogy for Christ, since they fall into the underground in a humble form, just a Christ came to earth, and can save the downtrodden by resolutely expressing mercy and patience, even though they have the power to destroy the entire world if they so wished. This analogy also proved promising, but I ultimately discarded both since they initially appeared to fall outside the topic of this paper. However, dedicated analysis of player analogies might be key in exploring how the player's saving of the monsters can be applied to real Retraumatized subjects.

Although this paper attempted to fully investigate the possibility of Retraumatized equilibrium, at the end of chapter five it remained only an intriguing possibility. Since it is my belief that the 'solution' to Retraumatization most likely lies in the establishment of equilibrium, the third call for further study is for the continued application of diverse trauma theory to probe this prospect. The attempt to create a livable traumatized state, rather than seek an outright cure, falls most in line with trauma theory produced on the topic of therapy, which I was not able to thoroughly research. In chapter three I note that Retraumatization would not be an inherently negative state if somehow the subject's traumatic reenactments could be specifically targeted and halted. Theories of therapy seem the best equipped to discover how such a psychic amputation could be performed.

Finally, chapter five attempted to make it clear that fan works deserve their own devoted study. Not fan works as a general concept, but specific fan works demand the type of attention which this paper paid *Undertale*. The fan works that have been produced out of *Undertale* contain complex and often unique engagements with trauma, and offer their own trauma theories far beyond the framework of Retraumatization. Additionally, many are built out of the embodied experience of their authors. Some, such as ask blogs, are built as collaborations between audience and author, all of whom bring their insights and experiences of trauma to bear in the creation of a work. Just as this paper is meant to encourage scholarly interest into *Undertale* and video games generally, it is my hope that readers will be inspired to pay fan works the attention they deserve. If the solution of Retraumatization can be found and argued, it most likely already has been by a fan whose work remains undiscovered to the field of trauma theory.

6.5 Bibliography

- Artist, Lord. "Illtrytobegood." *Illtrytobegood* (blog). Tumblr, November 6, 2015.
<https://illtrytobegood.tumblr.com/post/132686280778/first-previous-next>.
- Aspgren, Agnes. "Flowey Answers" *Flowey Answers* (blog). Tumblr, August 1, 2016.
<https://flowey-answers.tumblr.com/post/148313261926/hyperdeath-i-mind-to-tell-me-wh-at-did-you-do>.
- Bina. *The biggest threat*. Tumblr, November 1 2015.
<https://binart.tumblr.com/post/132368587815/remember-the-one-who-poses-the-biggest-t-hreat-to>
- Barrien, "Confrontation," October 12 2015, Tumblr, <https://asexualmew.tumblr.com/post/131018427259/below-the-cut-is-a-comic-contains-spoilers-for-the>.
- Barrien. *The Fallen*. October 29 2017, Tumblr,
<https://berriens-artblog.tumblr.com/post/166912659487/the-fallen>).
- Bissell, Tom. *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2011.

- Boogiepop, *The Lonely Monsters Are Getting Lonelier*. Independently published, 2015.
<https://archiveofourown.org/works/5582554/chapters/12866515>.
- Boynton, Eric, Peter Capretto, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, eds. *Trauma and Transcendence: Suffering and the Limits of Theory*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.
- Community sourced. "W. D. Gaster." Undertale Wiki. Accessed January 7, 2020.
https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/W._D._Gaster.
- 'Creepyknees', Lyle. "Weekend Dandelion Special." weekend dandelion special. Tumblr, August 4, 2019. <https://creepyknees.tumblr.com/tagged/floweypot-au>.
- Dennaton Games & Abstraction Games. *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number*. Devolver Digital, March 25 2015.
- Di Nicola, Vincenzo. "Two Trauma Communities: A Philosophical Archaeology of Cultural and Clinical Trauma Theories." In *Trauma and Transcendence* , 17–52. New York, New York: Fordham University Press, 2018.
- DuBois, Max. "Gallery of MaxDuBoisThesis." DeviantArt, January 8, 2020.
<https://www.deviantart.com/maxduboisthesis/gallery/all>.
- Fandroid the Music Robot. *FLOWEY SONG*. Fandroid Music Group, released May 12 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOCvpB8nNOM>.
- Fatz. "The Mistake Part 4." *Dreemurr Reborn*. Tumblr, October 26, 2015.
<https://dreemurr-reborn.tumblr.com/post/131995733421/the-mistake-part-4-previous-next>.
- Fatz. "The Mistake, Part 7." Dreemurr Reborn, (Tumblr, November 9, 2015).
<https://dreemurr-reborn.tumblr.com/post/132861108421/the-mistake-finale-previous-than-k-you-very>.
- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013.
- Fox, Toby. "Retrospective on UNDERTALE's Popularity." Tumblr, September 14, 2016.
<https://undertale.tumblr.com/post/150397346860/retrospective-on-undertaes-popularity>.
- Fox, Toby. *Undertale*, independently published, September 15 2015.

- Freud, Sigmund. 1957. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis.
- Hound, Silva. *Serial Dreamer*. Released March 5 2016. Vocals by Mando Pony.
<https://silvahound.bandcamp.com/album/serial-dreamer-ft-mandopony>.
- Isbister, Katherine. *How Games Move Us Emotion by Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.
- Irrational Games. *Bioshock: Infinite*. 2K Games, released March 26 2013.
- Juul, Jesper. *Art of Failure - an Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Mit Press Ltd, 2016.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture the Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- Karlyn 'Papikari'. *Undertale Complete Map - The Ruins*. 2015. Digital map.
<https://www.deviantart.com/papikari/art/Undertale-Complete-Map-The-Ruins-568934668>.
- KEH. *[KL] Close to You | Eng Cover [TY 6K SUBS]*. YouTube (Google, February 17, 2019),
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oMvPaoAxw>).
- Kumalegs. *[Undertale] Close to you - Sans (voice)*. YouTube (Google, December 1 2015,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UeW_oWNs0wo).
- Niki. *Close to you / lily*. YouTube. Google, February 17, 2019.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcQxAqtNeKA>.
- Niutellat. "DeviantArt." *DeviantArt*, February 22, 2016.
<https://www.deviantart.com/niutellat/art/Undertale-Comic-Echo-Flowers-Story-592417170>.
- Pugh, Sheenagh. *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*. Bridgend: Seren, 2015.
- Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature ; with a New Introduction by the Author*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1991.
- Roberts, Samuel. "Now Playing: Spec Ops' Most Troubling Scene." *pcgamer*. PC Gamer, December 3, 2014.
<https://www.pcgamer.com/now-playing-spec-ops-most-troubling-scene/>.

- Rousseau, Cecile, and Toby Measham. "Posttraumatic Suffering as a Source of Transformation." In *Understanding Trauma: Integrating Biological, Clinical, and Cultural Perspectives*, 275–93. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Ruberg, Bonnie. "Straight-Washing 'Undertale': Video Games and the Limits of LGBTQ Representation." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 28 (September 15, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1516>.
- Rynny Ryn. *Undertale: Asriel after breaking the Seal*. YouTube September 16, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0dlm_p1ZxA&t=163s.
- Sands, Diana, John Jordan, and Robert Neimeyer. "The Meanings of Suicide: A Narrative Approach to Healing." In *Grief After Suicide*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2011.
- Sharp, Nathan. "Dead Silence." Released Apr 4 2016, Give Heart Records, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6MKHn3oddk>.
- Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: the Design of Ethical Gameplay*. S.l.: MIT Press 2019.
- Sicart, Miguel. *The Ethics of Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.
- Sinistera, Lizzy. "UNDERTALE: The Game's Script." Wattpad, updated October 22, 2016. <https://www.wattpad.com/267297171-undertale-the-game's-script-intro-tutorial>.
- Smethurst, Toby, and Stef Craps. "Playing with Trauma." *Games and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2015): 269–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014559306>.
- Smethurst, Tobi. "Playing Dead in Videogames: Trauma InLimbo." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 5 (October 19, 2015): 817–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12330>.
- TC-96. "Bad Days." DeviantArt, April 17 2018. <https://www.deviantart.com/tc-96/art/Undertale-Bad-Days-740903173>.
- TC-96. "Endertale." DeviantArt, August 23 2016. <https://www.deviantart.com/tc-96/gallery/61037007/endertale>.
- "Underlab." YouTube. Google, March 29, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXEiQSP33MnlR67JzaR8eNw/videos>.
- "Undertale Complete Map ." DeviantArt, December 4, 2016. <https://www.deviantart.com/papikari/gallery/56522627/undertale-complete-map>.
- Undertale text dump*, github, made by 'Hushbugger,' accessed 12/31/19, <https://hushbugger.github.io/dialogue/>.

Undertale - Text Dump, GameFAQs, made by 'Sans,' updated 10/22/15,
<https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/pc/180989-undertale/faqs/72468>.

Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line*. 2K Games, June 26 2012, digitally purchased.

Yu, Jason. "An Examination of Leitmotifs and Their Use to Shape Narrative in UNDERTALE - Part 1 of 2." Jason M. Yu, November 15, 2018. <http://jasonyu.me/undertale-part-1/>.

Zarla. "Handplates." Tumblr, February 18, 2016.
<https://zarla-s.tumblr.com/post/139516306171/okay-i-get-a-lot-of-questions-about-what-order-the>.

ZKCats. "unrelenting treadmill." DeviantArt, November 24
2019. <https://www.deviantart.com/zkcats/art/unrelenting-treadmill-821315152>.