When Reader Becomes Player

A study of future narratives, agency, the ludonarrative framework, and morals within the ludic experience.

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Abstract

Video games have broken their niche appeal, becoming a mainstream medium on par with literature and cinema. The popularity of the medium is not the only thing which has evolved, but also the capacity for video games to produce and create unique experiences for its players within the ludic playground. The aim of this thesis is to explore in which ways video games present a more attractive experience in comparison to the traditional narrative of literature and cinema. To aid in this pursuit, the video games *Undertale* and *Disco Elysium* have been selected as case studies. To aid in the discussion, the theoretical framework of future narratives, non-unilinearity, the ludonarrative and ethical and moral have been selected to gain further understanding of how they work in each video game.

As a result of employing the theoretical framework, the thesis expounds on the many ways video games utilizes these tools to afford the player a distinct experience unique to the medium.

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You find yourself in the small city of Revachol, where the cold looms closer with each falling of new snow. The streets, a graveyard for remnants of war, carcasses of destroyed buildings remaining and the people trying to find footing after the shockwaves and turmoil it caused. But you are not tasked with solving this crime, no, it is a different carcass which has brought you here. Behind a humble hostel, in a courtyard reserved for trash, there hangs a single corpse. It has been here for seven days. The smell of death and decay still lingers in the air as you enter its vicinity, like a malevolent curse attempting to protect its originator. In the courtyard, two children play and at the sight of you, shout profanities at you, probably not an insult to your person, but to your occupation. The boy throws rocks at the corpse, watching them bounce off the discolored skin, while the girl hides crouched behind a wooden fence, sizing you up with squinted eyes.

They must know something about the corpse, how could they not?

The boy refuses to answer, only responding with slurs and snubs, the girl encouraging it from behind her defenses. Your partner suggests there is no useful information to obtain from them. But something within you tells you otherwise. There is something these children are not telling you. But your continued persistence triggers the adolescence in them, and before you know it, the silent air is filled with accusations of police brutality and pedophilia. Lies, of course, but to any passerby, it might disrupt and cause unnecessary complications to the ongoing investigation. Your partner still insists they will provide nothing. But something still tells you otherwise.

Something within you tells you to reason with the kid.

Something else suggests you back off for now

And something else urges you to shut him up and prove your authority.

So what will you do?

Will you reason with him?

Will you stop the questioning?

Or will you punch *the kid?*

(Narrativization by author of a gameplay scenario in *Disco Elysium*)

Introduction

In a world constantly evolving, there is an immediate demand for storytelling and narratives which break the previously established mold and push the boundaries of what stories are and can be. From the simple pages in a book, to dazzling moving pictures on the screen, new technology is invented to aid the audiences' submersion into worlds created by writers, producers, and directors. The most recent, and arguably the most technical medium: Video games. Video games have broken out of its niche appeal and established itself as part of the mainstream. Having played at the very least one video game has become as common as having read one book or seen a movie, at least, for the current generation. Much like movies, the medium has seen transformation from its infancy to present day, from 8-bit pixels to animations of lifelike caliber, from 8-bit music to fully orchestrated soundtracks, its development has skyrocketed in both quality and production budget (Young 1). However, it is not only the scope of video games which have expanded over the years, but also the possibility for exploring more elaborate, grand, and unique narratives within the medium.

One of these types of narratives is what Christoph Bode has termed *future narratives*, narratives which have an underdetermined outcome until interacted with by a user (Domsch 1). Choose-your-own-adventure (CYOA) novels conservatively explored the concept within the limitations of the medium, offering the reader multiple outcomes and narratives. However, as Sebastian Domsch argues, it is within video games the concept is allowed to flourish and pivot into its potential (3-4). However, it is not just simply interactivity which affords video games their fascinating nature, it is the element of agency. Albeit their similar nature, interactivity and agency are not one and the same. Interactivity is the way a player interacts and influences the storyworld while agency, as Janet Murray explains, is "the satisfying power to make meaningful action and to see the results of our decisions and choices" (Domsch 60). Hence, the most important part of agency is the consequences which follows, arguably those with narrative force which may affect the player in their playthrough.

The study of video games is still an emerging field, evolving much like the medium itself. Initially, the study of video games was the study of the games' rules and systems, simply put, the gameplay. This school of thought was termed ludology. Of course, there were those who believed video games could also be read as narratives, and stood on the opposite spectrum, namely narratology. In the early stages of video games' conception, the ludologists claimed that

video games should only be studied based on their gameplay, however, in recent years, the scales have tipped, and narratologists' perspective have become increasingly relevant. Now, some scholars have pursued a third path, tipping the scale into equilibrate state, with the creation of the term *ludonarrative*, the merging of gameplay and narrative, two aspects of the same activity giving birth to the term ludonarrative resonance, where gameplay enhances the narrative and vice versa (Toh 5).

Insofar, it may seem that video games allow for intricate and unique storytelling within the boundaries of the medium. The question then becomes, what does a video game narrative offer the player which is more attractive than traditional narrative? The purpose of this thesis is to further explore the topics of future narratives and ludonarrative in their relation to agency and narrative within the framework of video games. I believe that the components which provides video games their unique approach and narrative is agency and narrativizing ludic elements. Furthermore, I believe a discussion of moral, and ethics will supplement the thesis in exploring the alluring nature of video games. To subsidize the analysis two video games have been selected as case studies: *Undertale* (2015) and *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut* (2019). The video games have been selected based on their synergy with ludonarrative resonance and the fact that both present future narratives. I believe that the two video games will offer an interesting insight and highlight the selected theory. Additionally, *Undertale* was selected due to its critical acclaim within the gaming community and overall massive success despite being an indie game, independently developed by one individual (Yale Daily News). However, as Domsch argues "…there is a dearth in originality and innovation, let alone experimentation in big-budget games", thus supporting that indie developed video games affords riskier and unique game design as they are often a result of passion (170).

There is a wealth of scholarship on video games[1]. For the purpose of this thesis, I will firstly, present relevant terminology and selected theory that will aid in the exploration of my research question. For this I have selected Weimin Toh's *A Multimodal Approach to Video Games and the Player Experience,* Sebastian Domsch's *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games* and Miguel Sicart's *The Ethics of Computer Games* as my primary sources, with

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[1] *Video Games and Education* by Harry J. Brown, *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play* by Diane Carr, *Digital games as history: how video games represent the past and offer access to historical practice* by Adam Chapman and numerous others.

supplementary articles to further explore and support claims and arguments. Thereafter I will dive further into three distinct dimensions with the selected case studies; future narratives, ludonarrative resonance and ethics and moral, to establish the distinct methods video games employ to create a unique narrative and experience for the player. Finally, I will conclude with a summarization of the findings in each case study.

Clarifications

Before dwelling further into the thesis, I would first like to clarify that I do not wish to suggest that all video games should encompass the same narrative dimension as the thesis explores. Some video games put emphasis on their ludic elements rather than story and narrative which offers a greater diversity on the frontier that is video games and its many genres. Rather, the thesis seeks to highlight that, with the incorporation of agency, ludonarrative resonance and morals, video games can offer a distinctive experience. Furthermore, this work will contribute to the ludology versus narratology debate, and suggest that, instead of one dominating the other, plenty of video games allow the union of both.

I would also like to clarify that I will be using the term video game(s) as opposed to game(s). The thesis will not waste time discussing the merits and what constitutes a game, I believe that Michael James Heron and Pauline Helen Belford expounded how fruitless such an endeavor would prove (6-7). The difference, swiftly explained, is that games refer to the entire spectrum, including games like chess and backgammon, while video games specifically refer to games played on a computer or console like Xbox or Switch. Moreover, whenever the word 'ludic' is used it is aimed specifically at the ludic nature of video games and not towards the spectrum of games.

Additionally, I would argue that video games have the potential to create an ethical experience, one which rival that of the other art forms. I will approach the topic of ethics with the notion that video games are ethical experiences, and not debate whether video games are moral objects or not, instead focusing on how they are and to what effect. I believe Miguel Sicart perfectly argues for video games' ethical and moral nature: "Games are not only objects, but also experiences triggered by that object", "The game experience is different from the game object because it presents a moral agent interacting with it, and it ceases being purely an object to become a procedural experience" (53;55). Thus, I need not weigh in further on the debate,

instead providing examples on how video games engage the player morally and ethical and to what effect.

Finally, the thesis will continuously refer to the consumer of video games and its multimodal elements as 'player' and not reader. In many instances of the video game conveying narrative, the player will be reading, but since they are predominantly engaging with a video game the most appropriate term is player.

Theory and Terminology

As the study of video games is a growing field, some of the terminology and theory is still emergent, some even interchangeable in their definition yet use different terms. I have selected the terminology I find most appropriate, modern and in line with the direction of the thesis, which will allow for a sense of consistency throughout. On par with the suggested structure of the thesis, I will first describe and define the *model player* who the thesis is modelled after, then present *future narratives* and the dimensions it encapsulates, thereafter *ludonarrative* in the same manner, and finally establish terminology and theory regarding moral which will be applicable to video games and the case studies. To clarify, each segment will not exclusively focus on the specified term, but also discuss and explain theory and terminology related to the topic.

The 'Model' Player

The player who this thesis builds upon is a specific type of player, a model player, who fulfills a certain criterion (Formosa et al. 213). Namely, a *reflective player*, as Sicart expounds, a player who engages morally and ethically with the video game and its storyworld (Ryan et al. 300). As Paul Formosa and colleague further elaborate, it is not a necessity for game designers to create such an experience, but rather underlines the capacity and opportunity the medium holds to engage the player at this level. Domsch further supports this notion, that a player who suspends disbelief and engages fully with the storyworld will experience immersion, the very same engagement that is required when reading a novel (27).

The player should not be confused with the playable character (PC) either. The PC is the avatar within the video games, the visual representation of the controllable agent within the storyworld, the player's surrogate. The two might seemingly overlap, with the player projecting themselves onto the PC, most often occurring within the role-playing game (RPG) genre where players are able to build their PC from scratch, or they might dissociate themselves completely from the PC. Even the PC may appear in different forms, either as an *avatar* for who the player may project themselves on, or a *preexisting character* who exist in the storyworld which the player is allowed to control. In the video game *Bioshock (2007)* the PC is established from the onset as a preexisting character, Jack, who has a place in the storyworld and narrative as an individual. While in *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (2011*)* the PC appears as an empty shell who are

given a name and shape by the player. Sometimes the player might even roleplay the PC and play them and act how the player perceives the PC would within the gameworld based on their appearance, this effect called the *proteus effect* (Dominguez et al. 3444). This may occur both for an avatar and preexisting character, albeit it is easier regarding the avatar. Nevertheless, as Weimin Toh observes in his many interviews, certain players built an interpretation of the preexisting character and role-played how they believed the PC would act. This does not dismiss the prospect of the player's own identity as an individual, nor their identity as a player according to Dominguez et al. (3439). As explored in later chapters, despite the player's inducement for the proteus effect, the player may bring their own identity, beliefs, morals, and ethics into the ludic playground of video games.

Finally, as the discussion is regarding the player and their ludic experience within a video game, most discussion of space will be within the virtual realm and not the physical. Entering the world of video games is entering what scholars have termed *the magic circle*, which Juul defines as "the special social and psychological space of a [video] game", meaning that the space of a video game is a special construct where designated rules of the real world may be absolved in favor of the fantastical (*The Magic Circle* 58). However, as Ryan and colleagues have argued, the reflective player is able to step outside the magic circle and is able to comprehend the ethical and moral dimensions and implications of the video game (300).

Future Narratives

The theoretical framework of future narratives is allotted to Christoph Bode, however, it is Sebastian Domsch' further exploration of the term and additions to the framework which will be used in this thesis. In its simplest form, a future narrative is a narrative which has undecided potential, its potential lies in its future (Domsch 1; 113). As Bode continues explaining, events are not the minimal unit of a future narrative, but rather "one situation that allows for more than one continuation" which he refers to as a node (Domsch 1). The node is typically the fork in the branching narrative where the decision is made. A classic example is that of choose-your-own-adventure novels (CYOA), where at the nodal situation the novel will prompt "go to page x to follow the left path, or page x to follow the right path". CYOA novels encompasses the future narrative genre's simplest form, providing nodal situations for its reader and allowing a sense of interactivity between the medium and consumer. However, as Domsch notes, although CYOA

novels are actively nodal, the medium itself is static, where movement and temporality can only be enforced by activity of a user (6-7). In contrast, dynamic media is a movement in time, not initiated by the user (Domsch 7). Domsch continues to argue that video games fall under the category of a dynamic and actively nodal media as it has two distinct features that non-dynamic media has: It may enforce its rules and initiate processes unrelated to player input, yet the player may intercept and stop them, like enemies spawning and shooting towards the playable character (PC) (9). This distinction provides the clearest differentiation between a CYOA novel and a video game, as there is a perceived *rule* when reading a novel, you do not skip pages unless clearly stated to do so, however, no one can enforce that rule which Domsch terms <u>*tmesis*</u> (33). In video games, the player is restricted to following the ruleset of the gameworld with no way of tampering with certain rules or skipping undesirable segments or narrative, unless the video games offer the possibility. Although hacks or read-only memories (ROMs) may be used to bypass or modify such obstacles, most casual players will not possess the required knowledge nor means to conduct them, and so the thesis will not account for this phenomenon.

Additionally, the thesis will use common terminology within the study of video games, for example, the four basic types of information provided by a video game: *Textual commentary*, *narrative text*, *visual commentary*, and *visual representation* (Domsch 25-26). Textual commentary is text used to explain or aid the gameplay, while narrative text is textual elements which helps constructing the player's interpretation of the storyworld. Visual commentary are elements of a video game which give visual effects to the ludic elements, like a health bar or map, while visual representation are elements which constitute the storyworld, or rather, elements which are diegetic to the storyworld.

Thus far the terms storyworld and gameworld have been used, and although they share similarities both in nature and in name, it is important to highlight where they vary. *Storyworld* is the mental construct a player perceives of the world which the video game presents. Domsch presents four aspects which may aid in understanding the entirety of the mental construct: The backstory, the world state, the events, and foreshadowing (28). These aspects encapsulate what Domsch believes assists in the mental construct of player's perception of the storyworld. *Gameworld* on the other hand is a culmination of the storyworld but also the video game system of a specific playthrough the player has finished of the game (Domsch 30). As he further elaborates: "[T]he progression of game states is not a fixed property, but rather a range of

possibilities that is dependent on the player's agency" (29). This further fuels the future narrative aspect of video games but also defines a distinction between a storyworld and gameworld, where gameworld encompasses the entirety of the game, not simply the world for which the player and PC explores. Imagine a chessboard, the player(s) have the pieces, the board and knowledge of each piece and what is about to come, the battle between the white pieces and the black pieces. That would be chess' storyworld. However, every game of chess is not resolved the same nor have the same results. Knights can take out towers, pawns can become queens, white may win or black may win. Essentially, the *gameworld* of chess may vary widely from game to game, however, the *storyworld* stays mostly stable, as is the case with video games, the player interacts with the storyworld to create a gameworld.

One of the defining features of video games is their *non-unilinear* approach to narrative and storytelling, which Domsch heralds as the precondition for video games to produce future narratives (53). Uni-linear, as Domsch uses it, refers to a fixed existence (53). Therefore, non-unilinear narrative refers to a narrative which is not fixed, both in perception of the player but also in the gameworld. To further elaborate, Domsch divides non-unilinearity's existence into three aspects: Materiality, the player's options and consequences of actions (61-62). Materiality encompasses the existence of the video game as experienced by the player, thus if the player experiences multiple states of differing gameworlds in differing playthroughs, the video game offers non-unilinearity in materiality. The aspect of player's options deals with the tools the video game offers the player to complete their objective or quest. As Domsch argues: "[Video] [g]ames are…always non-unilinear in the area of player's choice" (62). This may range from what weapons to use, to what attributes to level up in differing playthroughs. Finally, and perhaps most interesting for this thesis, consequences of actions. Many choices in video games are unilinear, take *Bioshock* as an example. Choosing to engage with an enemy will lead to aggravating them, pressing W on the keyboard makes the PC moves forward and pressing right-click on the computer mouse will always fire the equipped weapon. Essentially, choices which the player knows the consequences of on a ludic level are predominantly uni-linear. However, choices of ambiguous nature present an engrossing non-unilinear experience, as will be mentioned in the upcoming chapter with continued examples from *Bioshock*.

The Anatomy of a Choice

Agency is the catalyst for not only this thesis, but for the progression and development of the narrative, storyworld and subsequently, gameworld. However, as Timothy Day and Jichen Zhu suggests, there are two dimensions of agency. They suggest that there is *theoretical agency* meaning what the video game offers, but also *perceived agency*, what the player experiences (1). The perceived agency will always be subject to the subjectivity of the player, nonetheless, it is an important distinction to make, as the theoretical agency afforded to the player can be vast but without proper implementation the player may never know or experience it. Day and Zhu then propose that video games have a toolset to allow theoretical agency to become perceived agency, namely *agency informing techniques* (AIT) (1). They detail six: Binary choices, user interface (UI) cues, choice visualization, choice manipulation, skillchecks and visible branching points (2). Most of these are self-explanatory, and even some video games combine multiple AITs to convey agency. *Bioshock* combines two AITs to convey agency. Throughout the playthrough the playable character (PC) will encounter genetically modified girls named Little Sisters. When the player has ventured through the necessary gameplay to interact with them, the video game offers the player a binary choice, to kill her or save her. Whichever option the player opts for, a cutscene, a choice visualization, follows thereafter showcasing the consequence of the player's choice. Either the PC terrifyingly rips the girl apart to harvest the slug within her which provide gameplay benefits, or he saves the girl from her terrible medical condition. A player would most likely deduce a consequence was inbound as the non-playable characters (NPC) inform them thusly, yet the consequences are never specified until the player reaches the ending where they come face to face with a final cutscene which may alter based on how many Little Sisters the player has saved or slaughtered, fueling the non-unilinear nature of video games and demonstrating the player's agency within the ludic space.

To further convolute the horizon of video game terminology in relation to agency, Bettina Bodi and Jan-Nöel Thon have mapped two different types of agency: *Narratologically-oriented agency* and *ludologically-oriented agency*. However, unlike Day and Zhu, this applies to the gameworld rather than player perception. Narratologically-oriented agency is agency which impact the story and storyworld of the game, while ludologically-oriented agency impacts the game mechanics (Bodi et al. 158-159). To use *Bioshock* as example again, harvesting or saving a Little Sister would be considered a narratologically-oriented agency as it impacts the potential

ending the player can achieve within the game and additionally impacts dialogue the PC receives from NPCs. While ludologically-oriented agency would be the different power-ups a player can acquire to modify their PC and their abilities, granting them different powers varying from shooting lightning bolts out of their hand to setting objects ablaze.

Thereafter, Bodi and Thon suggest four dimensions for agency, again, their focus is on the gameworld in contrast to Day and Zhu who associate their dimensions with the player's perception of agency. Firstly, there is *spatial-explorative agency*, which is encompasses the game space, the virtual space the PC is allowed to traverse, and what the player is allowed to interact and perform within it (Bodi and Thon 160-161). Secondly is the *temporal-ergodic agency*, which encompasses two distinctions between the temporal and ergodic. Both entail the diegetic time of the gameworld, the temporal is the pure mechanics which keep track of time, while ergodic is how the player may influence the temporal (162). Thirdly, there is *configurative-constructive agency* which allows the configuration and alternation of the PC's appearance and attributes, as well as altering the material space of the storyworld (162). Finally, there is *narrative-dramatic agency*, where the narrative agency aspect is primarily the power to affect cutscenes and scripted sequences, while dramatic agency is the narrative simulations brought by the ludic elements of the video game, yet still upholding the narrative potential of it (164-165). The dramatic agency will not be included as part of the analysis, as this term overlaps with another term, ludonarrative resonance, which I will use in favor of dramatic agency. As Bodi and Thon argue, there may and certainly does occur overlaps in the categories, some interacting with one another to create the experience the game designer wishes (166). To reuse *Bioshock* as an example, it mainly lends itself to the configurative and narrative agency, configurative in the sense that the PC is constantly changing both visual appearance with plasmids[2] and ludic elements when different power-ups are equipped. The narrative agency occurs as the ending of *Bioshock* is a product of the choices taken by the player regarding the Little Sisters, whether the player and PC has harvested or saved them. Depending on the decisions, the player will experience a different ending, thus proving their narrative agency in a fully animated final cutscene to end its narrative.

At the crux of agency is choices, without choices presented to the player, there would not

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[2] For example, the plasmids 'Electro Bolt' will have tiny sparks of electricity bursting around the PC's hand, while 'Incinerate' will set the hand ablaze, all to visually communicate to the player which power is currently equipped

exist a video game. The simplest definition of a choice is Domsch's: "[A] choice situation contains at least two different options" (113). Considering this definition, a video game is littered with choices, even during the main menu screen, where the player may choose either "load game" or perhaps the "setting" option. However, certain choices are more attractive for this thesis, I suggest two types: *Narratological choices* and *ludological choices*. As with agency, narratological choices are oriented around choices which affect the storyworld or narrative, while ludological choices are focused on the gameplay. Albeit their similar nature to Bodi and Thon's types of agency, they are not one and the same. Agency is the impact *of* a choice. Most video games are crammed with ludologically decision, from weapon selection to simply the movement of the PC. Most of these are not interesting, just an extension of the ludic experience and playtime of said video game, however, are important in the continued engagement of the player. As will later be discussed however in regard to the case studies, is when ludological choices becomes narratological ones or vice versa.

Dominguez and colleagues expound on the structure of video game choices using the definition of Mawhorter and colleagues. Choice structure consists of three aspects, the framing, the options, and the outcomes (Dominguez et al. 3439). The framing is how the storyworld presents the content to contextualize the player's decision, ergo, the framing of narrative and story elements prior to the decision to influence the player's state of mind. The options are presented as interface elements which may take the form of the aforementioned agency-informing techniques. Finally, the outcomes are the content presented to the player after said choices have been made, which may echo the agency-informing techniques in form of choice visualization, UI cues or visible branching points. These aspects of choice structure work in a symbiotic relationship, and primarily focuses on narratological decisions.

Despite knowing how a choice is structured, what may influence a player's choice besides the framing? I suggest that there are several different factors which may affect the player's choice. Firstly, Frederic Seraphine discusses the philosophical concept of *logocentrism*, which is defined as a desire for ultimate truth (12). In relation to video games, it is applied when video games contain multiple gameworlds with differing endings or narratives, thus allowing the player to experience variations or understand different aspects of the narrative. While Marie-Laure Ryan believes that rereading and exploring variation is a way for the player to be convinced of their agency, as differing gameworlds solidifies their proactiveness in the creation

of the narrative, J. Yellowlees Douglas on the other hand suspects rereading is done for closure, to experience ultimate logocentrism (Tan and Mitchell 149). Thus, a player may completely disregard the framing upon replaying the video game as their desire is for logocentrism.

Secondly, is what Toh terms *incomplete information problem*, which relates to the player having to make a decision for which they do not yet know the consequences of (59). It may be purposefully hiding prudent information in the framing or in the outcome with the intent of forcing the player to make decisions of ambiguous nature. One prime example is Telltale's *The Walking Dead* where numerous decisions' consequences are not resolved until later in the narrative or even in later episodic installments[3]. This may impact the perception of choice, and thus the player's priorities in decision making, as they may deliberately choose decisions which may benefit them later instead of instantly, for example take decisions which may appear disadvantageous in the moment but may end up saving a character as the narrative develops, as often occurs in *The Walking Dead*.

Lastly, a player may have their decision-making influenced by their approach to video games and its fiction, mainly, to either roleplay as the PC, or for self-reflection (Toh 108-109). In Toh's qualitative interviews some participants express their desire to portray their ideal self in decision-making, making decisions which they perceive in-line with their ideal self in real life (108). However, others showcased a commitment to the storyworld and how they perceived the PC would act and decisions they would take, echoing the proteus effect. Despite the many factors mentioned, ethics and moral are an additional element to take into consideration when it comes to the player's decision making, whether it may be a roleplaying or a self-reflective player, as both will still be met with moral and ethical decisions. This will be explored in later chapters.

Domsch implies two differing types of decisions within the ludic playground, namely, *rational decisions* and *ethical decisions*. Rational decisions are decision which only serve to complete the gameplay goal, and completely disregard the fiction of the storyworld and its characters (Domsch 156). Meanwhile, ethical decisions encapsulate decisions made in accordance with the video game's fiction, or at least, to act ethically correct within the ludic experience. As this thesis focuses solely on a reflective player, henceforth, I will disregard

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[3] Telltale's *The Walking Dead* operates on episodic releases, season one being compromised of five episodes, each a new 'installment' in the narrative.

discussion of rational decisions in favor of ethical decisions, however, it is important to note the distinction, and once more acknowledge, that different players have a different relationship with the medium of video games. As Jesper Juul states in his book, different players will have different preferences and thus gravitate towards certain experiences, either from the same video game or differing ones (*A Casual Revolution* 147). However, echoing Sicart's sentiment, the reflective player will lean towards making ethical decision within the ludic playground of video games in contrast to rational ones, perchance developing their ethical personae through the experience (Ryan et al. 300).

The Ludonarrative Framework

The term *ludonarrative* originated in a blogpost by game designer Clint Hocking who criticized *Bioshock* for the ludonarrative dissonance he claims it invoked (Click Nothing). The post critiqued some aspects of the video game, however, never provided a clear definition, rather just exemplified what it could entail. Weimin Toh provides the framework for the term, exploring it extensively through qualitative methodology where participants are asked to play video games and relay their understanding of the narrative and ludic elements. He suggests that *ludonarrative dissonance* occurs when the player is allowed to perform ludic actions which they consider conflicting or contradicting with their mental model of the narrative (53). To summaries Hocking's example, *Bioshock*'s central themes and narrative revolve around the ideologies the player is presented with, that of freedom and Randian Objectivism, as the main antagonist, Andrew Ryan, says: "A man chooses, a slave obeys" (Click Nothing; Bioshock). However, the player is restricted in ways they may affect the narrative besides the choice of harvesting or saving Little Sister, even in the final confrontation with Andrew Ryan, the player has no choice but to watch the cutscene where the playable character (PC) brutally beats him to death[4]. Hocking claims that this confrontation borderline mocks the player and their inability to control the PC, creating dissonance between the themes of the video game and the narrative presented[5].

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[4] The twist of the game, which was a key point in its praise and critical acclaim, is that the PC, Jack, is under mind control by the non-playable character who guides him for most of them game. By using the phrase "Would you kindly?" the PC is forced to do whatever Atlus, the NPC, says. Of course, the player would not initially notice this, as they would assume to progress the linear narrative, they must fulfill the main quest given by Atlus, which served as one of the groundbreaking subversions of video games' typical structure.

[5] Interestingly enough, Sebastian Domsch praises this element, claiming that it reveals how players blindly follow the commands of the video games without questioning its intentions (133).

Toh continues to expand the term, stating that ludonarrative dissonance may occur as three different types: Information dissonance, narrative, dissonance, and logical inconsistency. Information dissonance can either occur as the video game promoting specific gameplay which clashes with the player's narrative interpretation of the PC, or when gameplay prohibit specific gameplay which the narrative appears to promote, resonating Hocking's argument (Toh 54-56). An example of an occurring narrative dissonance is when NPCs still give quests despite the narrative's progression thus far, as occurs in *Mass Effect* (2007) where certain NPCs offer quests despite the PC aligning themselves with the opposition or enemy (Toh 53). Finally, logical inconsistency occurs when the narrative representation in cutscenes or narrative themes clash with gameplay, most notably in *The Last of Us* (2013) where a zombie apocalypse has left the world in a drought of resources, yet the PC will reliably find ammo and healing items throughout the playthrough (Toh 56-58).

In contrast, *ludonarrative resonance* occurs when the gameplay communicates a narrative experience, narrative can emerge from the interaction with gameplay and game mechanics, while the narrative enhances and alters the gameplay as well (Toh 75). To further support ludonarrative resonance, Toh defines three features: Game objects, character features and actions and movements. Game objects refer to items found within the gameworld which aid the player, to use the example of *The Last of Us*, items scavenged are often broken and needs crafting to make into a useable object, much reflecting the dire state of the storyworld (Toh 76). Character feature entails the extensions and limitations of the PC, which can refer to concepts as limited inventory space or ammunition capacity (Toh 77). Lastly, actions and movement refer to the way PC and enemies act during gameplay. In *The Last of Us* zombie enemies will have differing movement from human enemies, often appearing more rabid and mindless to their human counterparts who will hide behind cover and strategically approach battle scenarios (Toh 77).

Ludonarrative resonance also includes subcategories defined by Toh in an attempt to further examine the many mechanics at work in a video game (78). Some subcategories will be omitted as they provide little to the case studies. *Ludonarrative Resonance Guidance* Toh defines as the narrative instructing the gameplay of the player, such as providing objective or formulating specific strategies for the gameplay (81). *Bioshock* incorporates some aspects of this, informing the player of dangerous enemy, the 'Big Daddy', through a scripted narrative

sequence where the player may gauge their power and danger. However, other aspects, as informing the player of uses of their powers or the workings of weapons are provided through visual commentary in the form of text boxes, which are <u>not</u> considered ludonarrative resonance guidance. *Ludonarrative Resonance Semiotic Metaphor* occurs when the narrative may remove or alter gameplay elements from the player to convey a metaphorical shift within it (Toh 85). As Toh exemplifies with *Bioshock*, later in the narrative, the playable character (PC) injects himself with a remedy to remove a mind-control application he has been under. However, this causes side effects which results in the PC's powers being randomized, and thus the player is forced to only used the powers available to them until later in the narrative where the PC is completely restored (Toh 85). Finally, there is *Ludonarrative Resonance Parallelism Integration* which occurs when gameplay and narrative are integrated to communicate a specific experience, namely, that of the playable character (Toh 89-90). In *Bioshock* whenever the PC consumes too much alcohol[6], the camera will start to sway and blur to replicate the sensation of being intoxicated. These subcategories will be explored further during the ludonarrative chapters of the case studies.

Moral and Ethics in the Ludic Space

"There is a persistent hope, that by virtue of their interactivity, [video] games can present a very different, and perhaps more powerful, type of ethical engagement than other art forms" (Ryan et al. 300). Video games treading ethical ground has been debated, as the argument of the magic circle, the player solely participating in the storyworld of the video game as just that, has been used to absolve the player from any ethical dimension of impact the video game wishes to convey (Ryan et al. 299-300). However, with the argument aimed at a reflective player, the possibility for ethics and moral in video games become a reality.

But how does one define moral and ethics? I propose to use the definition of William Arthur Wines, that morals serve as a code of principles which motivates an individual's actions, behaviors, and decisions, while ethics refer to the active usage and appliance of morals to specific choices or context (Schrier 309). By this definition, video games are more prone to

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[6] The reason for consumption of alcohol in *Bioshock* is for the PC to restore EVE, the resource used to fuel plasmids with

engage the player ethically, however, perchance they may add or modify the moral code of a player? This will be discussed in later chapters.

Building off previous arguments, that a video game can provide a powerful, ethical engagement, how does one attempt to understand a subjective experience? Kevin Veale suggests that *affective materiality* may aid in exploring how "engaging with textual structures shapes the affective experience of a story" (3). To note, textual structures refer to narrative elements within the video game. Veale describes it as a feedback loop, wherein player's will affectively invest in a storyworld in hopes that their decisions and actions will lead to consequences and have a meaningful impact (4). Thus, the more the video game affectively engages the player, the more the player will affectively engage with the video game. Both case studies in this thesis have been selected based on their agreement with affective materiality, and thus the concept itself will not be employed during analysis in later chapters.

One of the ways a video game may affectively engage a player is by establishing *emotional proximity* (Toh 79). Emotional proximity occurs when the player has empathy and identification towards their playable character (PC). This often transpires when the PC resembles the player or at least possess characteristics which the player can relate to. The emotional proximity bond is not necessarily exclusive to the PC but may extend to the non-playable characters (NPCs) as well. Michele D. Dickey, the originator of the term, expounds that by creating multidimensional characters enables the player to experience emotional proximity towards them, as Toh notes in his interviews, certain characters motivated the players' choice, often the multidimensional ones (Toh 80).

Typically, older video games which incorporated an ethical element to its narrative usually adhered to a good versus evil ideology, where one choice would be the undeniably bad one, while the other good. To track the player's moral standing, the video game would assign points to a *karma meter* deeming the choices either good or bad, with either having a *catholic version* of the karma meter or a *protestant version* (Domsch 161). The catholic version often being a bar, for which good or bad actions may skew the needle, while the protestant one holds two separate meters to measure every action. An example of the catholic karma meter would be the video game *Overlord* (2007) where every evil choice or action will give percentage in 'Corruption' while good deeds will remove percentages, skewering the PC towards the good side. While older video games retorted to this categorical ethical approach, modern video games

lay heavy emphasis on ethical engagement with their narratives, portraying choices, and decisions as morally grey, not one necessarily being the good or the bad option. Telltale's *The Walking Dead* relies heavily on morally ambiguous choices, and many story-heavy video games followed suit[7].

To gain an understanding of the player's moral functioning, Formosa and colleagues suggests that moral psychology will aid in exploration of the field. One of the more prominent theories is the *Four Component model* developed by James Rest and his colleague to encapsulate moral expertise (Formosa et al. 220). This model is divided into four interconnected categories: *Moral Focus, Moral Sensitivity, Moral Judgement* and *Moral Action*. Each category includes seven sub-skills, but there is significant overlap between them, and thus only the main categories will be included, as they themselves cover the upcoming analysis (Formosa et al. 220). Moral Focus entails one's commitment to making moral choices and to leading a moral life. Moral Sensitivity involves identification of moral in the real world and understanding consequences of one's actions. Moral Judgement requires understanding moral concept and the ability to reason moral dilemmas. Finally, Moral Action is the closest to the previous definition of ethics, the ability to resist temptation and doing the right thing. With these categories established, they will be further explored in the analysis chapters, and will aid in exploring how the case studies may provide the player with Rest's moral expertise by engaging them in said categories.

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[7] This is <u>not</u> to say there never were morally grey video games prior to this, but with the release of Telltale's *The Walking Dead* it set a precedence for video games of the genre to encompass this.

Undertale – The Friendly Role-Playing Game Where *No One* has to Die

Undertale was created by Toby Fox and released in 2015 to critical acclaim. The video game follows an androgynous child who has fallen down Mt. Ebott into the Undergrounds where monsters live after being banished by humankind. The goal is quite simple, escape the Undergrounds and return home. On the journey, the player character (PC) meets a variety of different monsters either as enemies or non-playable characters (NPCs). Although the video game is considered a role-playing game (RPG) it adds a unique mechanic to its battle system, the ability to spare every enemy the player encounters. Additionally, the NPCs urge the PC, and subsequently the player, to show mercy to the creatures of the Undergrounds. So rather than being only traditional battles where blows are traded with one another's health bars, the player may also attempt to persuade the monster(s) not to engage further, allowing them to be spared.

Simply in its battle system does *Undertale* prove its distinctiveness within the genre. The battle screen features the model for the enemy viewed from a first-person perspective with four options for the player to engage in the battles: [FIGHT], [ACT], [ITEM] and [MERCY][8].

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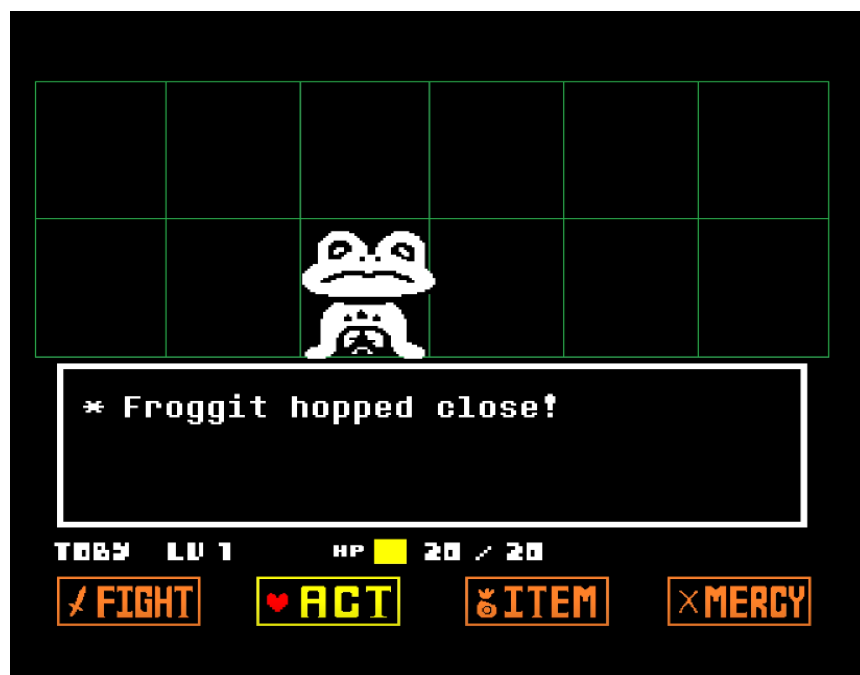
[8] The brackets will be used when referring to specifically the battle UI, this replicates how they appear visually in the game and will clearly distinguish when I refer to the option in the game or simply use the word itself

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[FIGHT] will prompt a button input the player must time on a grid to deal the most amount of damage. [ACT] will include different commands based on which enemy the PC is facing, ranging from [Cry] to [Make fun of]. [ITEM] allows the PC to use an item, mostly for healing. [MERCY] allows the PC to either [Run away] or [Spare] the monster. In between enemy attacks, the player must use the PC's soul, a heart, to dodge incoming bullet missiles in varying styles[9]. Coincidently, the heart is used to select the varying battle options as well, symbolizing narrative elements which will be discussed during the ludonarrative chapter of the case study. Enemies in *Undertale* are not just considered mindless monsters who attack you and serve to fuel the PC's growing attributes and strength through experience points (EXP). Instead, every enemy requires specific *acts* to be done to befriend or pacify them, allowing them to be *spared*[10]. The acts required to show the enemies mercy are often related to the dialogue they convey in-between attacks or in their visual representation. For example, the PC encounters a snowbird within the first main area. They may beat it to a pulp and receive EXP, however, if they resolve to follow the path of the pacifist, instead what they will do is to use the [ACT] option when it tells a joke and proceed to use the [Laugh] action. This will please the enemy, as the enemy aspires to be a comedian, albeit its disastrous humor, and all it desires is to make people laugh. Others, like the 'Lesser Dog' enemy, requires only vigorous patting to be contempt and allows the PC to spare them. This underlines the constant theme the video game is trying to convey, that every enemy is not simply a punching bag or an obstacle to overcome, but an individual who has their own personality and perchance is not an enemy, but a potential friend.

There are three overarching routes in Undertale: True Pacifist, Neutral and Genocide. As the name implies, the gameworld of the True Pacifist route is where every single enemy or boss encountered has been spared, the PC not having accumulated any experiences points (EXP) nor levels (LV). Genocide is where the PC has slaughtered every enemy and boss encountered, mostly doing what is standard in an RPG, to overcome any foe, and additionally, every area of the game requires a certain amount of enemies to be killed to advance the Genocide route. The

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[9] The bullet missiles are appropriately styled after the enemy, for example, Papyrus, the skeleton's 'missiles' are bones in varying shapes and sizes. While Muffet, the baking spider, will hurl baked goods as her bullet missiles while the player must dodge on a spiderweb-like line.
[10] Enemies may also be spared by depleting a certain amount of their health bar, although it gives less variation in gameplay

Neutral route entails a gameworld where the PC has killed some enemies, neither having killed all or none. This gameworld is typically the one most first-timers will encounter unless having done research prior to playing the video game. It will still be considered a Neutral route whether you have killed a single enemy or perhaps killed everything and spared a single one, as additional conditions need to be fulfilled to advance the final climax of either the True Pacifist Route or Genocide, therefore this underlines the assumption that most of the first-time players of *Undertale* will complete and experience the Neutral route first[11].

The gameplay consists of two parts: *Exploration* and *combat*. When not in combat, the PC will traverse the many sceneries of the Undergrounds, from a snowy town, to an industrial inferno, talking to the many inhabitants and solve the occasional puzzle. Albeit the overall structure of the area progression is largely fixed in a linear[12] fashion, the non-unilineraity becomes apparent as the player progresses. As stated earlier, every NPC is considered an individual, and thus, killing them will remove them from the storyworld. The first main area outside the tutorial area, Snowdin Town, some of the enemies the PC has previously encountered will now be NPCs instead. This becomes apparent in the locale 'Grillby's Bar' where some enemies who would have become NPCs are missing, even other NPCs commenting on their absence. Especially noticeable in the Genocide route, where many inhabitants have fled the town or are hiding in fear of a monster, the monster in question being the PC.

The video game adapts to the decisions made by the player, proving its non-unilinearity. Numerous playthroughs of the game would yield varying gameworlds and different dialogue based on who the player has spared or killed. Meaning that the theoretical agency the video game affords the player is numerous, albeit the perceived agency might not be apparent until the player experiences the many alterations. What *Undertale* mostly afford the player in terms of agency is narrative agency and explorative agency, allowing the player to modify scripted sequences based on every decision made and interacting with the navigable space within the storyworld. Every enemy encountered can be considered a nodal situation, specifically for the first area, as every decision regarding enemies' lives will either add or remove narrative elements from the storyworld. The narrative does not simply take a new turn but adapt its storyworld by the active participation of the player, as scripted sequences are altered or interactive elements are removed as a consequence of the player's actions, further underlining the future narrative aspect of video games. Even Timothy Day and Jichen Zhu conducted a study which proved that *Undertale* afforded their players high agency as their choices affected dialogue and visual details (3).

This type of story structure within video games is what Adam Chapman refers to as *open*, meaning that the player has some control over narrative fragments or the overall framing narrative (Toh 217). By deciding which monsters to spare or to kill the narrative elements presented within the gameworld will be altered, even so far as altering ludic elements and gameplay mechanics, as will be discusses later. Nevertheless, by the story structure being open, in contrast to *deterministic*, it allows for a greater immersion but also affords the player a greater sense of agency during the narrative as the storyworld is affected by their decisions.

The agency informing technique (AIT) employed by *Undertale* is mainly choice visualization. One could argue that the options during battle serve as a binary choice, however, unlike *Bioshock* which clearly states the consequences and outcomes of the binary choice, *Undertale* hides it behind the front of a battle user interface (UI). There is a single instance in the Neutral route where the player is presented with a binary choice, however, the choice is made with the battle UI icons, forwarding the thematic of the video game that every battle is a choice. Furthermore, on the occasion, during segments of side quests containing humorous elements, the player may encounter additional binary choices, however, they bear no significance to the overarching narrative, instead providing differing dialogue. Of course, this further reinforces the

nodal situation and non-unilinear aspect of the ludic experience, however, as it has no lasting impact on the overall framing narrative, it will not be subjected to further analysis besides this mention.

The NPCs in the storyworld will relay whether the player's choices are good or not. In the tutorial area, Toriel, the goat who serves as a motherly figure to the PC, will urge the PC to practice 'talking' to a dummy, instead of fighting it. If the player choses to instead resort to violence Toriel will reprimand the PC for not talking to the dummy instead. Later in the same area, the PC will have to confront Toriel to progress the narrative. However, seemingly the only option is to fight Toriel, as 'acting' will resolve nothing, even the visual commentary stating so. To spare Toriel, the player must continuously press the [SPARE] button, making Toriel talk with the PC, and when the dialogue is exhausted, Toriel will admit defeat and let the PC proceed. The easier option would be to beat Toriel like a typical video game boss. Thereafter, the PC reencounters[13] the main antagonist of *Undertale*, the seemingly innocent flower, Flowey. If the player spared Toriel, Flowey will tease them that this is a "kill or be killed" world. If the player kills Toriel, Flowey will taunt the player, calling Toriel and idiot for attempting to help the PC. However, what if the player loaded the last save file, and changed their decisions after either killing or sparing Toriel? Flowey even flaunts the idea to the PC after they have killed her. But *Undertale* remembers *everything*. If the player kills her, then reloads the save file, Flowey will gloat his knowledge of the PC's, and subsequently player's, previous choice of killing Toriel. Even dialogue prior to the Toriel battle changes, Toriel telling the PC: "It looks like you've seen a ghost" (Veale 11). This is not the first nor last instance of the video game attempting to unnerve the player with knowledge the player is not typically confronted with. After all, it is a video game, is it not?

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[13] The first encounter is during the tutorial on combat where Flowey tricks the player to run into his bullet missiles.
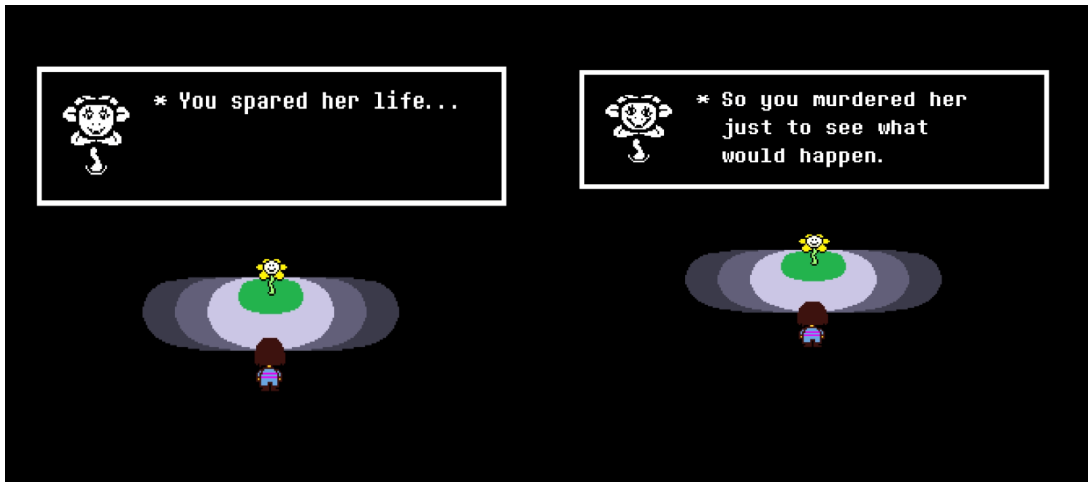
One of *Undertale*'s main storytelling tools is what Kevin Veale refers to as *metamedia storytelling* (10). Metamedia storytelling entails the player's mode of engagement, and the subversion of these creates a storytelling device (Veale 10). Furthermore, Marie-Laure Ryan defines a *principal of minimal departure*, which describes an avid player of video games having an inherent comprehension of how to act in the ludic playground due to assumptions of how it works based on previous experiences with the medium (Domsch 16-17). These concepts then work in a symbiotic relationship, as metamedia storytelling relies on the principle of minimal departure to effectively create its subversion of expectations.

Firstly, as discusses extensively thus far, the RPG genre typically entails the mindless slaughtering of monsters to gain strength and grow attributes, which *Undertale* then questions, and through its NPCs, evoke a sense of guilt within the player for engaging with the genre in a traditional sense. Even common terminology used within the genre is used against the player and their expectations. Level, which symbolizes how strong the PC has gotten since the beginning of the journey, is often referred to as 'Lvl' and in *Undertale* it is abbreviated to 'Lv' which a regular player of RPGs would promptly assume meant levels, per the principal of minimal departure. The same applies to experience points which is normally abbreviated to 'EXP'. During the final judgment of an NPC called Sans, it is unveiled that 'Lv' stands for 'LOVE' which in turn is another abbreviation for 'Levels of Violence', determining "someone's capacity to hurt" essentially making killing easier the more it is enacted (*Undertale*). 'EXP' is revealed to stand for execution points, explained as a measurement of the pain and suffering inflicted upon

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others. The revelation is to bring about perspective to the player, specifically those who have yet to realize the themes of the video game. Toh defines this occurrence as the ludonarrative tool *anagnorisis*, a revelation which alters the player's perception of gameplay actions and the narrative (60). It is important again, to highlight that the player is a reflective player, engaging morally and ethically with the game, a reactive player would not see the ethical problems the video game poses, presumably rushing through every route without a second thought nor care. However, the video game still attempts to persuade even the reactive player to choose to pacify enemies and if not, evoke a sense of guilt within them for disregarding the many lives they have taken as exemplified with the moment of anagnorisis.

Secondly, as mentioned previously, the video game remembers and reminds the player of their virtue or sin, to some degree even holds them accountable for it. The PC appears as an androgynous child, allowing the player to project themselves onto the protagonist of the video game. At the very start, the player is asked to "name the fallen human", the assumption that the fallen human is the PC, which blurs the lines between PC and player, as the NPCs often use the pronoun 'you', creating a sense that they are addressing the player directly (*Undertale*). Another fuzzy line *Undertale* treads is the fourth wall, as on numerous occasions certain NPCs seemingly address the player and not PC. This is significantly noteworthy where the PC's sprites are absent, and the player cannot discern whether it is a first-person perspective or the video game appealing directly to the player.

Thirdly, the PC themselves are an interesting subversion of expectations. As previously discussed, there are two types of PCs, the avatar which is a blank canvas for the player to build as they see fit, or the preexisting character who already have a place in the storyworld, the player is simply allowed to control their movement, action and occasionally speech. Initial assumption of the PC in *Undertale* would be that they are an avatar for the player, evident by the player being able to name the PC and the PC lacking any key characteristics. However, during the conclusion of the True Pacifist route, it is revealed that the PC is not who the player names in the beginning. The PC is named Frisk, and the name the player inputs is the name of the first human to fall into the Undergrounds. Thus, the player merely influenced an aspect of the storyworld, instead of shaping the PC as an avatar.

Fourthly, the functionality of saving progression is not merely an aid in the ludic experience to retain progress, but an integral story element in the narrative. During the climax of

the routes, it is revealed that the PC possess the power to 'save' whenever they wish to, meaning, they may go back to a previous gameworld if they so desire. The principle of minimal departure would prescribe this ability strictly as visual commentary and the player's privilege to retain progression in the video game. However, now it is part of the narrative framework, used on multiple occasions to explain strange occurrence in the storyworld. The aforementioned example with the PC remembering killing Toriel underscores this narrative element. Moreover, during the penultimate boss fight against Asgore, if the PC dies and the player reattempts the fight, the PC will mention how many times Asgore has killed them previously: "You tell ASGORE that he's killed you [X amount of times] before. He nods sadly" (*Undertale*). Especially notable is that Flowey possess this power as well, and during the end of the Neutral route, prior to the final boss fight, Flowey will corrupt the player and PC's save file, even denying the player the ability to restart the gameworld, forcing them to face whatever danger their decisions have created in the ludic experience. The save function is as much a ludic element as a narrative element in *Undertale*, and even the manipulation if it removes control from the player in an attempt to unnerve their sense of security in the nature of video games.

Finally, as the player is the active agent in the unfurling narrative and gameplay, it is assumed the player is also in control for the entirety of the adventure. That is the presumed mode of engagement, as is with cinema, the viewer assumes they passively view the movie, and with a novel the reader actively reads and construct a mental image of the world, the player is the agent in control of the medium. However, towards the end of the Genocide route when the PC encounters Asgore, the presumed final encounter, the option [MERCY] is completely removed from the battle UI, and the PC instantly attacks Asgore without any input from the player. Continuing, Flowey is also slaughtered without the player being able to interject, only pressing the button to continue dialogue. As the player reaches the final scene, the assumed[14] PC standing in a dark void, directly facing the towards the screen as if addressing the player directly, the player is given one final binary choice: To erase the world or to not do it. However, it is merely an illusion of choice, as if the option [DO NOT] is selected, the PC will simply respond "Hmm…How curious. You must have misunderstood. SINCE WHEN WERE YOU THE ONE IN CONTROL" before landing the final destructive blow on the world (*Undertale*). Choosing the other option results in the same outcome, only differing in the dialogue. In a paradoxical and

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[14] Assumed is used here as the visual representation of the PC has altered yet bear the same characteristics.

ironic turn of events, the player's agency thus far has led to their abolition of it, as they are deprived from participating further in the unfurling narrative, forced to watch the PC they created destroy the very ludic space itself.

As Frederic Seraphine expounds, *Undertale* plays with established conventions of what a video game does and affords the player, what he terms "inversion of expectations" (8). However, to what effect? Simply, it does something no other media has yet to do, hold the agent responsible for the narrative and events. The Genocide route is a consequence of the player deliberately killing every single creature they encounter, despite some even attempting to offer the PC mercy or dissuading them from killing. Thus, the video game slowly removes elements from itself, to deteriorate the player from pursing this path, but also punish them, for what the creator considers cruel, two crucial points which will be elaborated in later chapters. Since the NPCs flee, fearing for their lives, interactions and various dialogue is not present. Battling is a constant repeat of mashing the same button to beat the enemy into a pulp, in contrast to the True Pacifist route, where every monster requires some unique approach to be spared. Even encountering the enemies to kill to continue the Genocide path become a mindless slog back and forth in hopes of triggering battle, just to continue the slaughter, and even then, once enough enemies have been defeated, the game will refuse to give the player more, simply giving the player an empty screen with the text "But no one came" (*Undertale*). Puzzles which previously asked for engagement from the player are in the Genocide route already solved, removing the little interaction the player could have with the exploration aspect of the gameplay. And it is not only limited to ludic elements, even the soundtrack will shift during the Genocide route, becoming, slow, ominous, and lackluster in comparison to its counterparts.

Additionally, another expectation of the medium is that consequences may be erased by simply starting a new save file, hoping not only to wipe the gameworld but perhaps also a guilty conscious. However, as underlined previously, *Undertale* remembers every decision made by the player, simply erasing the gameworld yields not a complete reset. Even upon doing so, certain previous decisions will still lurk in dialogue. The most notable consequence encountered when the player completes the Genocide route. After it is completed once, the player will be unable to ever obtain the True Pacifist ending again, as it is tainted by the previous Genocide route. During the final moments of the Genocide route, the PC ends by destroying the world. Upon reentering the video game, the PC will talk from a black void, offering to restore the world the player

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chooses to annihilate in exchange for the player's soul[15]. If the player then proceeds to complete a True Pacifist route an alternate cutscene will play. During the final cutscene, Toriel leaves a piece of pie for the slumbering PC before exiting. In the normal True Pacifist ending she closes the door and the title with 'THE END' flashes in. However, if the player has completed a Genocide route, instead, when Toriel closes the door, the PC has turned into the murdering psychopath from the Genocide route. Thereafter, the title and 'THE END' show up, however, the front is a blood-red, suggesting the player has unleashed an unfathomable evil upon the world. Thus, consequences from previous playthroughs cannot simply be removed by deleting the gameworld, they are lasting ones which will taint the video game forever[16]. This sense of irreversibility of consequences echoes the sentiment previously suggested Ryan and colleagues that "games can present a very different, and perhaps more powerful, type of ethical engagement than other art forms" (Ryan et al. 300).

Kenneth Tan and Alex Mitchell discuss the irreversible storytelling of *Undertale* further, specifically calling out the limiting save files as another enabler of the phenomenon (150). In *Undertale* the player is limited to a single file and only allowed to save when a specific symbol is encountered in the storyworld. By limiting the player's access to save and save states, *Undertale* ensures that not only may the player <u>not</u> switch between gameworlds, even completely discarding one in favor of another, but also every time they save, it is a commitment to the choices taken thus far. As Tan and Mitchell also point out, the video game is truly never reset, but it is not until new playthroughs the player is faced with the consequences of their actions (151). This approach to irreversibility through saving occurs in Telltale's *The Walking Dead* as the video game saves the gameworld after every major choice taken, to ensure that the only way the player can redo a choice is by starting the entire story anew. *Undertale* goes one step further, ensuring that a gameworld's memory is never erased and neither is a guilty conscious.

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[15] During this sequence, it may seem as if the PC is speaking to another entity, not of the player, but as the PC uses the pronoun "you", the analysis will assume the game addresses the player, as it supports the moral and ethical lesson of the video game.

[16] There is a way of course to completely reset the video game, however, it involves digging around in the video game's files and removing certain values which triggers it. As argued in clarifications regarding hacks and ROMs, most players will not possess the knowledge to locate this and so the argument will not account for this option.

The Ludonarrative Resonance Magic of *Undertale*

As stated earlier, ludonarrative resonance occurs when the gameplay conveys a narrative experience and vice versa, Toh defining three key features of it: Game objects, character feature(s) and movement. Regarding game objects, the most notable occurrence in *Undertale* is the different weapons which may be found in various locations if explored thoroughly. During the narrative the player is given the information that Asgore has, prior to the playable character (PC) falling into the Undergrounds, killed six other fallen humans, acquiring their souls with the intent to destroy the barrier imprisoning the monster in the Undergrounds. However, seven souls are required and thus the PC is the last human soul needed. During the final battle of the Neutral route, Flowey uses the six human souls to turn into a monstrosity which prompts the final battle. Some of the battle sequences' bullet missiles are oddly reminiscent of the weapons found in the storyworld. The implication being that every weapon found belonged to a previously fallen human[17]. If not for the gameplay of the final battle, the player may not have realized the meaning behind the seemingly random game objects, not realizing its narrative weight. Some equipment even changes their attributes based on which route the player has chosen. Towards the end, the player will enter an area resembling the one they traversed in the tutorial, wherein they will encounter an item. In the Neutral or True Pacifist route the items are a 'heart locket' and a 'worn knife' with +15 in in defense and +15 in attack respectively. However, in the Genocide route, the 'worn knife' is simply a 'knife' and the 'heart locket' is 'the locket', and additionally, now the equipment attributes +99 in defense and +99 in attack. At first glance, it may appear as an occurrence of a ludonarrative dissonance logical inconsistency, where objects have changed in differing gameworlds for seemingly no reason. However, *Undertale* promotes that events take place in the same storyworld, despite the effects the player and PC have on it, yet two game objects change both name and attributes. However, the observant player will note that in the library a book will state: "If a monster doesn't want to fight, its defense will weaken. And the crueler the intentions of our enemies, the more their attacks will hurt us" (*Undertale*). The implication is the intent of the PC during a Genocide route is crueler than that of the Neutral and True Pacifist route and therefore the weapon and armor are considered stronger. Thus, the game objects in combination with an *encyclopedic narrative*, a narrative relayed not through linear

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[17] This would be a combination of ludonarrative action and movement and game object(s), where the action and movement convey the narrative importance of the game objects.

events but different sections to further establish worldbuilding, create a mental construction of the overarching narrative in *Undertale*, underscoring how narrative enhances gameplay and vice versa (Domsch 106-107). The player may also derive from narrative implications from playing multiple routes that the PC gets corrupted at the end of the Genocide route by the first fallen human, who also is revealed to have been a murderous fiend[18], thus the game objects relay this narrative information to the player, the alien presence of a villainous entity in the narrative, further cementing the gameplay and narrative wrapped into a single mental construct of the ludic experience.

Additionally, another game object which provides a narrative experience is a consumable item which can be obtained in Toriel's home, the "Butterscotch pie". If used during the Asgore boss fight it will trigger the text "the smell reminded ASGORE of something…" (*Undertale*). Doing this will lower both Asgore's attack and defense. During the True Pacifist ending the player learns that Asgore and Toriel previously were married but divorced prior to the current narrative. This narrative element is hinted at throughout a Neutral route as well. Thus, if the player can piece together these clues, they are provided a gameplay benefit as reward. By seeing the pie, Asgore is reminded of the time he was happy with his son and wife, and thus, when the PC uses the item, his resolve waver. Not only does it provide a gameplay benefit, but additionally supply the player with deeper characterization of Asgore's character, his hesitation towards the path he is pursuing, whether it is right or wrong. Another instance where a game object affects a fight is during the fight with the spider Muffet. The pre-battle dialogue will allude to the fact that she is the head of the spider bakery sale which the player may encounter twice prior to the boss fight, her bullet missiles supporting the notion. If the player has bought an item from the spider bakery sale in the Hotlands, the area preceding the fight, she will let the PC go immediately not even triggering a fight. If the player bought an item from the spider bakery sale within the tutorial area, the Ruins, and use it as a consumable during the fight, Muffet will assume the player stole the item, however, before unleashing her next attack, a telegram from the spiders in the Ruins interrupt the fight. As Muffet acknowledges the PC supported their bakery sale, she is allowed to be spared, and thus the fight in its entirety may be skipped altogether, the narrative element carried in the game object affecting the gameplay, thus coherently tying the two elements as mutual benefactors.

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[18] This is the same (N)PC at the end of the Genocide route who destroys the world.

Character feature(s) of ludonarrative resonance in *Undertale* carries little weight in comparison to the other features, however, it is worth noting that the same occurs in *Undertale* as with *The Last of Us*, namely, limited carrying capacity, as the PC can only hold eight items. Movement is the feature of ludonarrative resonance in which *Undertale* excels in, both in presenting narrative elements through gameplay, but also influence gameplay through the narrative progression. Each enemy employs a unique bullet missile for the player to dodge, often relating to the enemy's personality or visual representation. Each enemy behaves differently, conveying their identities as individuals rather than mindless brutes who provide ludic elements and experience points. The most interesting aspect of this is during the True Pacifist route, the player learns that the royal scientist, Alphys, has conducted experiments on her fellow monsters, injecting them with *Determination*, a substance the monsters believe make the human soul persist even after death. However, the monsters instead melt into one another, fusing into a monstrosity. This part of the narrative element is only grasped through gameplay. When encountering the fused monsters, they bear visual similarities to previous enemies encountered, as well as bullet missiles and their patterns, and the way the player must [ACT] to pacify them. Even little snippets of dialogue provide clues to who the previous monsters were prior to fusing with one another. Thus, to grasp the entirety of *Undertale*'s narrative, not only must the player engage and decipher narrative text but also interpret the ludic elements at play[19].

In some cases, if a player desires to pacify the enemy, not only must they [ACT] but also interact with certain bullet missiles during as the player dodges which are colored green for the player as to provide distinction between harmful bullet missiles and helpful ones. As Toh argues, when the player is familiar with the gameplay mechanics, narrative elements may be intertwined with the "gameplay mechanics as a mental construct" (83). One enemy encountered is Washua, and to pacify it, the PC must [ACT] and asked to be cleaned. Washua's bullet missiles are droplets of water, and after being asked to clean the PC, the occasionally droplet will be green. If the PC's heart can touch the green droplets, Washua will be content as it hates dirty stuff and is pleased that it was able to clean the PC, thus showing narrative and gameplay wrapped in a single mental construct.

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[19] There are occurrences of embedded narratives in form of diary entrees from Alphys which clue the player towards the revelation, however, it is through the symbiotic relationship of the ludic and narrative that cements this interpretation.
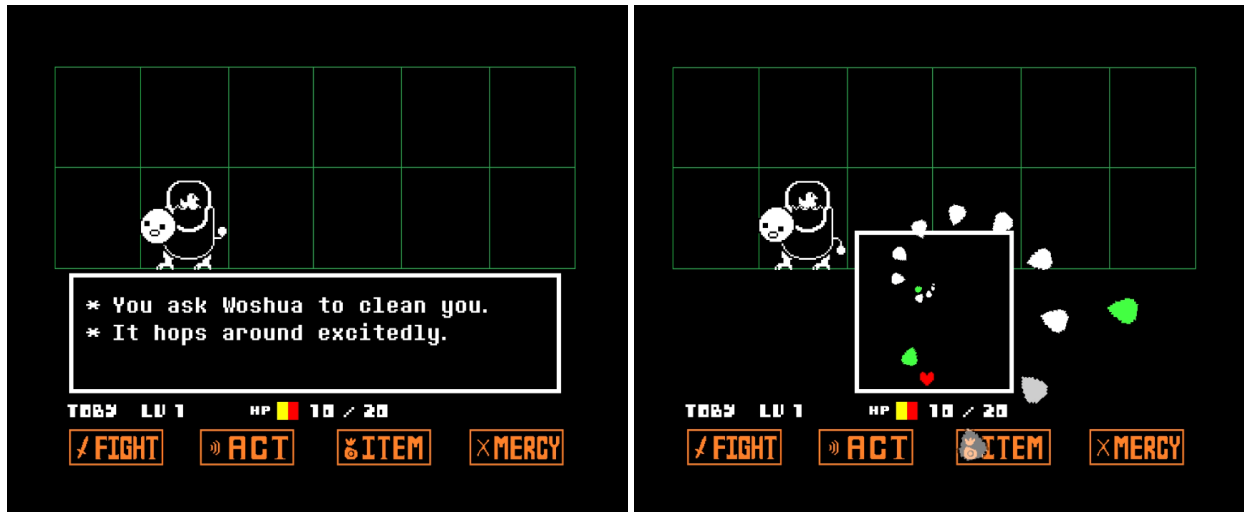
Fig 4 – *Encouraging Washua to clean the PC and subesquent bullet missles where the heart must touch the green droplets. Screenshot by author.*

Another occurrence of interacting with bullet missiles happens when the PC encounters two guards, and if the player prod enough, will learn that one guard has a crush on the other. If then the player [ACT] and chose to 'polish' the other guard's armor, the bullet missile will be a green armor piece, and if continuously touched by the PC's heart, will become unbearably hot, resulting in the guard removing it. In an absurd turn of events, this triggers a proclamation of love from the other guard, and the player is allowed to spare them both, as they are seemingly more into each other, than the PC's capture.

Another intriguing example of the usage of bullet missile to convey narrative elements and characterize the enemies, is during the Toriel boss fight. Prior to the boss fight, Toriel acts as a caregiver for the PC and shows hesitation in fighting them during the dialogue leading to the confrontation. This notion is further underscored during the fight, where if the PC's health drops beneath a certain threshold, her attacks cause less damage and even her bullet missiles purposefully miss the PC's soul. She is unable to defeat the PC[20] despite her seeming resolve before the fight. Another instance of narrative element carried in the behavior of bullet missiles is during the Undyne fight. If the player has dodged a certain amount of attacks, subsequent attacks will be sluggish, signaling the growing weariness of the boss. The bullet misses will move slower and not appear at same rapid rate as in the beginning of the fight. *Undertale* provide

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[20] One may run into her bullet missiles, thereby triggering a "Game over" screen, but just before it, there is animation of Toriel being surprised and even frightened by what she has done.

characterization and enhancement of the narrative and characters through ludic elements with the incorporation of ludonarrative resonance actions and movement.

Moreover, *Undertale* implements another of Toh's categories of ludonarrative resonance that of *ludonarrative parallelism integration*. The subcategory entails the creation of a specific player experience which seeks to evoke the same emotions in the player as are experienced by the PC. Albeit not as noticeable, during the Genocide route, some ludic elements disappear, and the gameplay becomes repetitive and dull. Additionally, as is one of the main draws of the combat system, enemies' personalities are not explored nor cared about during a Genocide route, as each foe is simply an obstacle to overcome in pursuit for the video game's narrative, challenges, and subsequent completion. This approach to the storyworld is reflective of the PC during the Genocide route as they too have an inherent lack for the Undergrounds and its inhabitants. By limiting the gameplay and narrative elements does *Undertale* evoke the same indifference in the player as the PC experiences, relaying a narrative experience through the ludic experience.

Another approach *Undertale* employs to convey narrative elements through gameplay is what Toh defines as *Ludonarrative Resonance semiotic metaphor*, the removal of gameplay elements, or altering them, another method to allow the ludic to communicate a narrative aspect (85). In the Neutral route, the penultimate boss is the king, Asgore. Preluding this fight, numerous non-playable characters (NPCs) have informed the PC and player that battling the king is an unavoidable outcome of their encounter. However, the player might be inclined to believe that even the king might be spared, the very same way all other enemies and bosses could. However, just as the battle begins, the king uses his weapon to destroy the [MERCY] button into pieces, solidifying the inevitable truth: There will be no mercy in this fight. However, upon completing the final boss of the game, Photoshop Flowey, the player is presented with the binary option to [FIGHT] him, thereby killing him, or a cracked [MERCY] button, implying it has been fixed to show mercy one last time. The narrative thematic of the video game is suspended to elevate the climax but shortly reestablished thereafter, to highlight once more the notion that every single creature can be spared, even the most despicable one, Flowey[21]. It also transforms the visual commentary into visual representation, further unionizing the gameplay and narrative

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[21] In order to spare Flowey the [MERCY] button must be continuously pressed, much like Toriel's fight, until Flowey's dialogue is exhausted, and he finally runs away in the end.

into a single mental construct.

This occurs multiple times during various routes as well, visual commentary integrated as a diegetic part of the storyworld. When encountering an enemy, an exclamation point is shown above the PC's head to indicate the encounter. Upon first assumption, this would be a visual commentary indicating an incoming battle, however, after finishing the first area, Snowdin, on a Genocide route, this icon is transformed into a smiley face, attempting to convey that the PC is happy to encounter a new enemy for which they may kill. This is one of the few instances it becomes clear that the PC and the player are not identical while informing the player of the PC's nefarious nature, or rather, the monster the player has created in their mercilessness. Furthermore, the heart shaped object used for selection during the entirety of *Undertale*'s ludic experience becomes more than simply a decorative flourish to the selection process. Not only is it used to dodge the bullet missiles with, if defeated in combat, the heart will shatter, transcending simply visual commentary to becoming visual representation. Another instance is during combat, if the player decides to run away, the heart will grow legs and run away, not only communicating the act to the player, but additionally highlight that the heart seen in-game is the PC's. Thus, it conveys the narrative function of letting the player know their agency over the character, there are not simply controlling the PC's actions, but also their heart, symbolically shaping them with the actions performed by the player.

Another occurrence of ludonarrative resonance semiotic metaphor is during the battle[22] with the hero, Undyne. The [MERCY] button has always contained an option to [Run away], however, as the Undyne battle begins, she promptly informs the PC that they will "no longer be able to run away…As long you're GREEN, you CAN'T ESCAPE. Unless you learn to face danger head-on…" (*Undertale*). The PC's soul is turned green to symbolize a shift in gameplay, as the heart is locked in place and must shield the incoming arrows by using the keyboard or joystick to tilt a shield in one of the four directions: Up, down, left, or right. If the player then checks the [MERCY] button the option to [Run away] is removed, only [Spare] remaining. The only way to spare Undyne during the battle, is as she suggests, face her bullets head-on until she turns the PC's soul back to red, which then allows the PC to run away, resulting in her chase until eventually the player reaches Hotland which proves to be too boiling for her and her heavy armor. Although the option to [Spare] was not specifically used, this counts as the pacifist

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[22] This only applies in a True Pacifist route or Neutral route, the Genocide route has a completely alternate battle.

approach to Undyne's battle[23].

Finally, an alternation in gameplay occurs during the final battle of the True Pacifist route. During the battle, it becomes clear for the player and PC that defeating the boss seems impossible, however, the PC realizes that although they cannot 'save'[24] to salvage the situation, they may 'save' something else. The [ACT] button is transformed into the [SAVE] button, in which the PC must save previously befriended bosses or monsters encountered. *Undertale* consistently integrates ludic elements and visual commentary as part of the narrative and storyworld, blurring the lines between gameplay and narrative. As mentioned, *Undertale* continuously reaffirms its central thematic that every creature can be saved and killing is not the only option to progress the narrative. Additionally, it reaffirms the player's sense of agency as their ludological decision have both ludologically and narratological-oriented agency. However, it must be recognized, that without established norms for a multitude of video games, *Undertale* would not successfully subvert them at every opportunity (NintendoLife).

Toh's *Ludonarrative Resonance Guidance* occurs within the tutorial area, as Toriel urges the PC that fighting is not an option in every battle encounter. The PC and player are allowed to practice with a practice dummy, wherein Toriel will voice her distaste if the player decides to traditionally fight the dummy instead of performing pacifistic actions. Moreover, even NPCs in the area will divulge tips to follow a Pacifist route. On a more interesting note, none of the ludonarrative resonance guidance provided in the tutorial area even humor the idea of genocide, with exception of Flowey who practically flaunts it in the player's face, yet he is painted as a villain and liar.

As argued thus far, *Undertale* employs a multitude of Ludonarrative Resonance techniques and subcategories to strengthen its gameplay and narrative, enhancing each aspect with every appliance. Visual commentary is transformed into a narrative experience, game objects relay a narrative element within their very existence, and semiotic metaphors are utilized to highlight the thematic and narrative framework of *Undertale*. This strengthens the player's cognitive interpretation of the narrative, not only being provided narrativization through

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[23] Narratively it would not make sense for Undyne to be spared, as she firmly believes the PC's soul will save all monsters, and thus her resolve for the PC's demise is absolute.

[24] One of the additional metamedia storytelling *Undertale* employs is that 'saving' which is considered mainly a visual commentary and to assist the player by saving progress of the game thus far, it is incorporated in the narrative as a central element.

cutscenes and dialogue, but on a ludic level. Thus, story and narrative are not constrained to the limitations of passive mediums, but allowed to flourish in a dynamic environment, where the player is not an observer, but an active participant in the cognitive mapping of narrative. The player is not simply observing events unfold, but actively create and interpret them, become an active agent in the creation of narrative.

Good or Evil, Kill or Spare?

Thus far, I have supported the claim that gameplay may convey a narrative element, and narrative may enhance the gameplay, thus providing a more engaging and attractive experience in comparison to cinema and literature as the player is an active participant not only in the mental construction of the narrative through ludic elements, but additionally as the active agent who enforces the progression of it. Furthermore, echoing Sicart's and Ryan's argument, interacting with an object creates an experience, one which may hold a more powerful ethical engagement than other art forms (Sicart 53; Ryan et al. 300). But how exactly does *Undertale* engage the player morally or ethically with its ludic experience?

Video games have a fictional quality and therefore this "lack of reality is perceived as the great advantage of [video] games and its great danger" in terms of ethically and morally engaging the player (Sicart 44). Sicart refutes this claim by stating that although the storyworld the player interacts with is fictional, the moral agent, the player, and actions taken by said moral agent are real (44). Furthermore, Sicart argues that the ethics of video games are not simply measured in the storyworld, but in the design of the video game system and rules as well (48). As discussed, every enemy encountered in *Undertale* can be considered a choice, and thus, I would argue, even an ethical one, as to whether killing or sparing a being is an ethical dilemma. In the Neutral route, how does the player determine which monsters deserve death and which does not? What is the argument for choosing killing in the first place?

Sicart defines the term *ludic phronesis* as the moral wisdom developed by a player's continuous engagement with video games, aiding them in evaluating choices, actions and dilemmas encountered within the ludic experiences (112). To the same extent as the previously mentioned principal of minimal departure guides the player's gameplay understanding of video games in general, ludic phronesis is continuously developed as the player interact with the vast landscape of different video games and their ethical propositions. If one then approaches

Undertale with ludic phronesis, one might begin to understand why a player might resolve to violence upon first encountering an enemy instead of mercy.

The role-playing game (RPG) genre fosters a tendency for endless slaughter of enemies to grow stronger, thus the player develops a ludic phronesis which ignores the ethical dilemma of killing, as overcoming a foe is an important part of the ludic experience to advance the narrative[25]. Additionally, in traditional RPGs, the playable character (PC) is considered the hero who must overcome challenges and become stronger to face the adversaries of the storyworld, and thus can ethically reason for massacring enemies as it fuels their growing attributes (Sicart 156). Furthermore, traditional RPGs frame the enemies as mindless minions who are indisputably evil. Thus, if an experienced player approach *Undertale* from a traditional understanding of the genre, they will be inclined to play the video game as their ludic phronesis guides them, ignoring the ethical dilemma. However, *Undertale* continuously attempts to establish emotional proximity not only with the PC and non-playable characters (NPCs) but also enemies, with their dialogues, different [ACT] interactions and bullet missiles. The player might be resistant to the attempted emotional proximity, disregarding it as merely flavor text; however, the instance of anagnorisis during the final act of the game, despite which route, is tremendously successful, revealing the fallacy of the player's principle of minimal departure and ludic phronesis. Suddenly, the player is not the hero, on the contrary, to the inhabitants of the gameworld, the player might be the villain. Thus, according to Sicart, creating an ethical experience as the video game asks the player to "reflect upon the meaning of the previous actions and our being as players in [a storyworld]" (157). After the first boss fight with Toriel, if the player chooses to spare her and the player has killed an enemy, Flowey will flaunt their names, and ask why Toriel was spared when perhaps the enemies killed could have been someone else's Toriel. *Undertale* not only breaks with traditional RPG conventions, but simultaneously confronts the player with their sense of ludic phronesis, asking them to reflect upon choices and actions taken, thus creating an ethical experience (Sicart 211).

I have previously mentioned that I believe the creator of *Undertale*, Toby Fox, considers the Genocide route to be the morally wrong option, attempting to persuade the player to mercy, whether they be a reactive or reflective player. I would like to further elaborate and support this

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[25] To advance in almost any traditional RPG, it is paramount for the PC to increase their attributes as to survive and defeat later enemies and bosses.

statement, as I believe Fox purposefully use the video game system to dissuade the player, using *ludonarrative dissonance demotivation* to create a moral punishment for the player who pursues the Genocide route. As mentioned previously, venturing deeper into the Genocide route makes ludic elements dissipate. Gameplay becomes a repetitive slog with mashing the same buttons, the gameworld and interactions with NPCs gets limited, the music slows down and other ludic elements which may provide gameplay variety are removed. Toh refers to this demotivation through gameplay as ludonarrative dissonance demotivation, which also entails the "narrative demotivating the player from achieving the gameplay goals…" (68-69). Not only is the player demotivated through lack of gameplay variety, but also from a narrative standpoint as NPCs continuously warn or scorn the PC. Moreover, the final boss of the Genocide route is notoriously difficult, providing one of the biggest gameplay challenges in *Undertale*, as to dissuade the player from its completion. Thus, a moral element is injected through gameplay, that persistently playing a villain, will not reward the player but punish them instead.

However, if the creator and gameplay seemingly punish the player, why do they then pursue this path? Firstly, the Genocide route is significantly more difficult in comparison to the other routes, thus it may be to overcome said ludic challenge. Secondly, what I believe to be the strongest motivator: *Logocentrism*. To fully grasp the narrative of *Undertale* it is required to play through each route, each supplementing the mental construction of the narrative elements at play in *Undertale*. Logocentrism is, for Derrida, the desire for ultimate truth, simply put, for the player that means comprehending the entirety of the narrative (Seraphine 12). Seraphine conducted a survey which showcased that the Genocide route was the least played among the respondents, however, it was the most watched route on YouTube (12). Albeit the survey may not be a completely accurate portrayal of the percentages, it does highlight that a certain part of the *Undertale* community, despite not playing the Genocide route, still yearns for logocentrism. As Seraphine further expounds, the respondents wish to know all possible outcomes without having to experience the guilt or regret of killing the inhabitants of the Undergrounds (Seraphine 12). Even Flowey during the climax of the Genocide route mocks the player who dares not commit the atrocities of the Genocide route, yet chooses to watch someone else do it: "At least we're better than those sickos that stand around and WATCH it happen… Those pathetic people

that want to see it, but are too weak to do it themselves. I bet someone like that's watching right now, aren't they…?"[26] (*Undertale*).
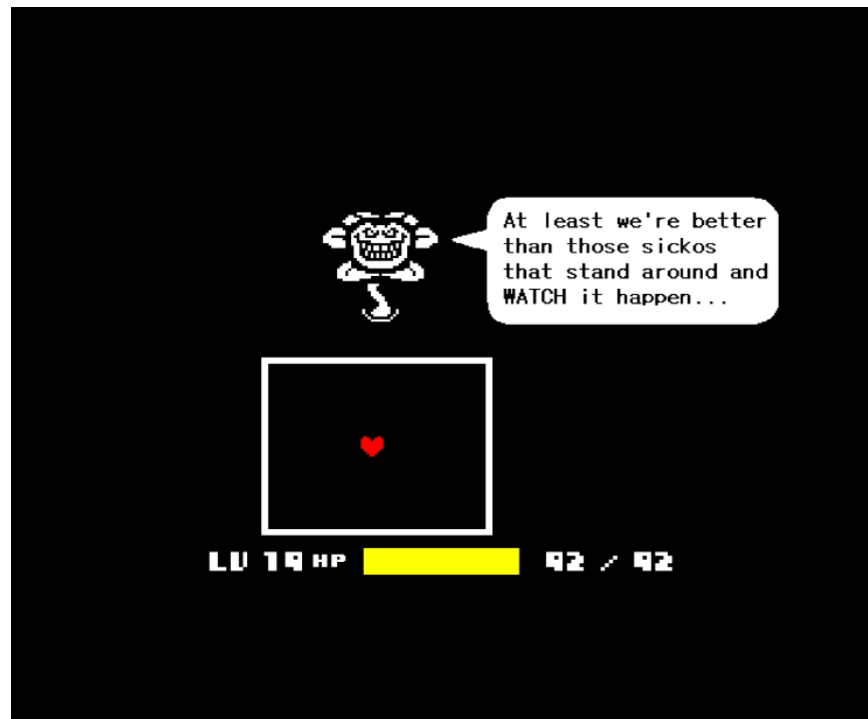

Fig 5 – *Flowey's taunt. Screenshot by author.*

Flowey further holds the player morally responsible for the gameworld, attempting to dissuade them from restarting on the True Pacifist route. Upon completing a True Pacifist route, the player will be given a "The End" screen, with no way to progress except rebooting the game, echoing the tradition of older video games. Upon rebooting, the player is greeted by Flowey, who now appears to speak to the player directly, telling them how they hold the power to erase everything, and start anew. At first it may appear to metamedia storytelling; however, the video game dodges this issue by using the name of the first fallen human, the surrogate for the player in the storyworld, providing a diegetic reason. Once more does *Undertale* hold the player responsible for the joy or terror of its inhabitants, raising the ethical issue whether it is worth to erase the characters happiness for the player to have a satisfying conclusion to the narrative, to have ultimate logocentrism.

Thus far, many storyworld elements and aspects of *Undertale*'s fiction have been

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[26] Flowey possess the same 'save' ability as the PC, and thus have experienced the same conclusions as the PC and player.

discussed, however, what part of the video game system and design presupposes ethics? Firstly, if Fox was utterly opposed to the player killing enemies, the option would simply be removed. The ethical discourse lies in the very fact that the video game system allows the player to choose at every encounter the way to proceed, mercy or murder. As Sicart discusses, choices are ethical devices and upon interacting with them, produces moral gameplay (154). It is not in the fiction of *Undertale* the moral weight comes from, but the video game system. The fiction allows the player to see consequences of their ludologically-oriented agency, however, it is exclusively in gameplay wherein the ethical decisions transpire, the fiction merely providing the player feedback on their actions. In addition, ludonarrative resonance amplifies the emotional proximity the player develops for the storyworld and characters, as the previously discussed gameplay elements serve to characterize and add narrative elements to what would otherwise be regular enemies. Thus, ludonarrative resonance work in unison with ethical game design to deliver an ethical experience.

Furthermore, it is in the future narrative one may find the ethical nature of video games, whichever route the player chooses will confront them with ethical or moral epiphanies. Even completing the True Pacifist route conveys to the player a moral element, as without the Genocide route to supplement it, the reward of achieving the undoubtedly 'best' ending, the True Pacifist ending, would not be as gratifying. Additionally, a first-time player is most likely to finish a Neutral route first as it does not have as many requirements to complete in comparison to the others, however, Fox has implemented narrative text to allude the existence of the other routes. If spared after the final boss fight of the Neutral route, Flowey will reappear after the credits to inform the player of what they could do differently to achieve the True Pacifist route. Of course, this may lead the player to wonder; if everything can be spared, perchance everything may be killed as well, however, Fox seems to urge the player for the True Pacifist ending. Simply informing the player of the existence of alternate endings creates an ethical experience as the player learns of their agency within the storyworld, their choices matter. This notion is further underscored by the previously discussed irreversible storytelling of *Undertale*, as Domsch supports the claim that reversible choices lessen the ethical importance of said decisions (141-142).

However, despite the ethical and moral foundation of *Undertale*, it does recede to a *Black and White* morality, where the Genocide route is undoubtedly bad while the True Pacifist is good

(Domsch 166). According to the Four Component Model to moral expertise, this may halter the development of moral focus, as the video game prescribes moral values to certain gameplay actions, thus the player's room for moral interpretation is limited. However, as exemplified earlier, *Undertale*'s strength lies in the metamedia storytelling and subverting the ludic phronesis. Hence, for an individual who do not play video games, their moral focus will not be developed, but for an average player of video games, their morals may be altered, as despite their appearance, an enemy may just be as much of an individual as oneself. Likewise, the scripted nature of *Undertale*'s video game system and narrative, to script every sequence of narrative text and events according to which gameplay actions taken thus far, allows a greater approach to moral sensitivity, as each NPC is an individual, enemies more so, as they are richly characterized if the player opts for sparing them. Especially observable during the Undyne boss fight, as she is the first fight wherein the player lacks emotional proximity to the character prior to the fight in contrast to Toriel and Papyrus. Only during the battle are her rationales explained, and the player learns of her motives for fighting the PC. Moral judgment and moral action are the most engaged categories within *Undertale*'s ludic experience, however, it must be noted that *Undertale* offer the player repetitious choices, as their moral judgment are mainly challenged during combat, with either [FIGHT] or [ACT] as their differing options. Moreover, despite enemies presenting different options for the [ACT] action, it permits the player little to no creativity for pacifically resolve the fight, merely test each option in hopes of choosing the correct one or the correct sequence which resolves combat. Finally, the player's moral action is trialed during the entire playthrough, mostly unbeknownst to the player. Despite *Undertale*'s Black and White morality, it holds the possibility for providing the player with Rest's moral expertise by engaging the four components in different ways, albeit some more successful than others.

  Undertale undeniably relays an ethical and moral experience to the player. It challenges the player's morals through the subversion of their ludic phronesis, forcing them to question the established norms within the genre and subsequently develop their ludic phronesis and even moral sensitivity for future video games. Through the use of choices and ludonarrative resonance does *Undertale* fuel the ethical and moral dimensions of its ludic elements, the player facing moral judgment and moral action with each enemy encountered. Despite ultimate logocentrism fueling some players, as seen in Seraphine's survey, a player making unethical choices does not constitute unethical game design, as *Undertale* does not deprive the player of possible ethical

reflection, quite the contrary, the Genocide route further expands the ethical and moral dimension, forcing the player to choose between logocentrism or moral action (Sicart 37). *Undertale* does not simply explore the morals and ethics of the player but confronts them with their place in the narrative framework, their responsibility of agency within the ludic experience, as active agent they are not merely observers, but actively create and shape the narrative experience, holding them morally responsible for actions taken.

Disco Elysium – A Tale of Drugs, Depression and Decisions

Disco Elysium (DE) is a role-playing game (RPG) with elements of visual novels, developed by ZA/UM, an indie studio. The video game follows an unhinged detective, who is prone to the effects of narcotics and alcohol, as he and his partner, Kim Kitsuragi, investigate a lynching which has taken place in the fictional city of Revachol. To reveal the truth, the player and playable character (PC), Harry Du Bois, must traverse the empty husk of a city and talk to its people, investigate its secrets and history, and ultimately reveal the culprit. However, prior to the start of the narrative, Harry has lost his memory, and part of the optional game objective relates to him finding out who he is and his place in this world. The video game explores a multitude of heavy topics, from depression and sorrow to political ideologies and existentialism. The version of the video game which lays basis to this thesis is *The Final Cut* version which includes full voice acting and additional quests curtesy of player feedback on the original release to give more narrative satisfaction (RPGFan). The reason for selecting this version is that the developers envisioned these features in the original release, thus they have included them in the rerelease, making it the culmination of their vision for the ludic experience (Gamingbolt). I will continue to employ the abbreviation *DE* to refer to this version, however.

Despite its status as an RPG, *DE* spurs its own unique approach to the genre mirroring *Undertale* to some degree of distinctiveness and shares similarities with the genre of visual novels. What differentiates *DE* from being exclusively a visual novel is the skill tree and experience points the player accumulates as they progress and explore. The skill tree allows the player to assign points to the PC's attributes, thusly leveling the PC's ability to perform more complicated or demanding task. Otherwise, the gameplay revolves around talking to the inhabitants of Revachol, exploring the many intrigues and stories they may divulge.

Fig 6 – *Game screen as the player traverses Revachol. Health and morale bar in the left corner with additional visual commentary of the PC and Kim. Inventory, quest log, thought cabinet, skills, money, and time in the right. Screenshot by author.*

DE's ludic experience offers a complete lack of combat[27], or rather, the PC gains experience through talking with non-playable characters (NPCs) and completing missions. Much like the subversion of expectations in Undertale, *DE* does not traditionally force your character to slaughter enemies to grow stronger and gain experience points, only the latter being implemented as a game mechanic. To what end then would the player be encouraged to level up attributes then, if not to overcome world threatening dangers? *DE*'s video game system much resembles that of the popular *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* tabletop RPG and others like it, wherein to attempt certain actions, a dice roll is required, called *skillchecks*. By upgrading certain attributes does the passive success rate of a skillcheck elevate, thus even rolling low on two six-eyed dice will still secure a success. In *DE* the dice system is limited to two six-eyed dice which are rolled automatically by the video game system whenever a player commits to attempting a skillcheck. However, rolling two ones will guarantee failure and rolling two sixes will secure a success, no matter how low or high a skill attribute is, echoing the system of traditional tabletop games.

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[27] This is not to say Harry does not fight, as on multiple occasions the player may encourage him to it, however, that is part of a skill check and not required to gain experience points.

There are 24 skills within the game, divided into four categories of six skills per category. The four categories are: Intellect, psyche, physique and motorics.
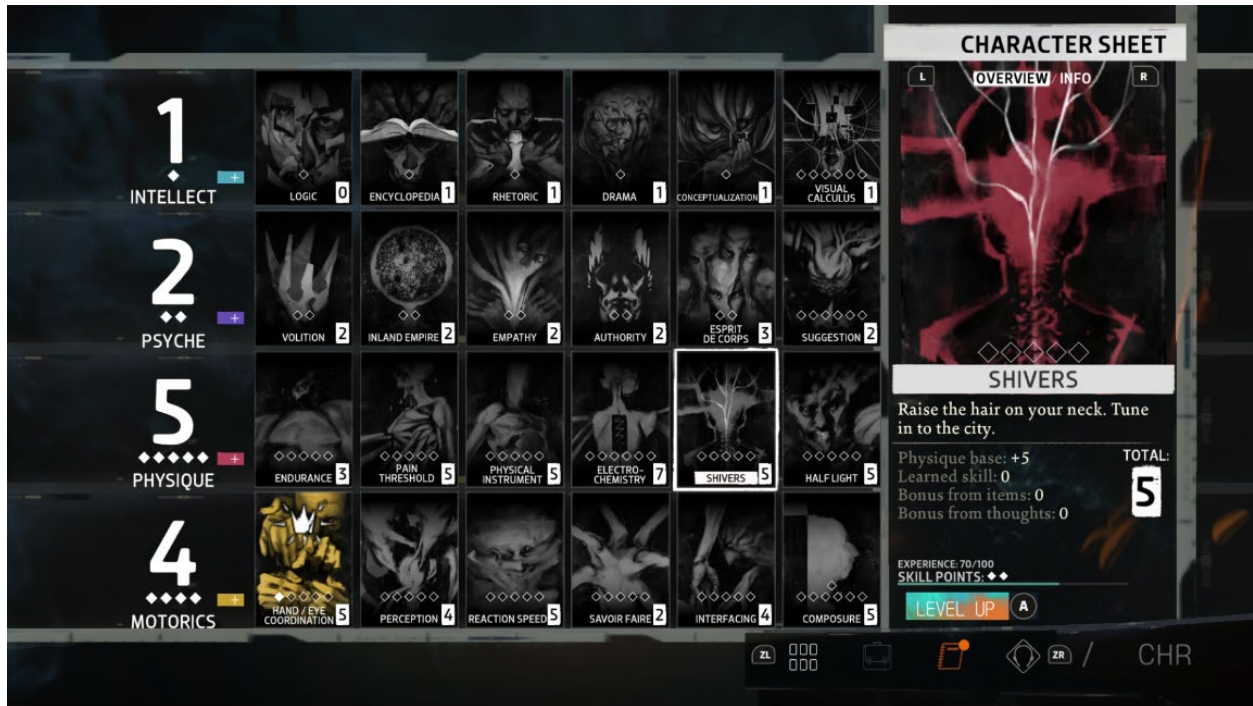

Fig 7 – *Skill tree in Disco Elysium. Screenshot by author.*

Since the skills are so extensive, all will not be described here, but brought up when essential to the discussion at hand, however some examples will be provided to give an idea of their use. In intellect there are skills ranging from [Logic][28] to [Visual calculus], in psyche there is [Empathy] to [Esprit de corps], in physique [Endurance] to [Half-light] and finally, in motorics there is [Reaction speed] to [Savoir faire]. Some are self-explanatory due to their namesake, others offer either obscure or ambiguous nature, however, are clearly describe in the visual commentary. Furthermore, it is not simply the nature or existence of these skills which highlights *DE*'s uniqueness, but their contribution to the narrative. As the player encounters early on, each skill will on occasion talk with the PC and offer their opinions and reactions to certain events unfurling in the storyworld. The introductory segment of the thesis was a narrativization of a confrontation between the PC and NPCs, Cuno and Cunoesse, my interpretation of the ludic experience I was provided during my playthrough, a *micronarrative* as Toh would define it,

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[28] The brackets used with the same intention as in the *Undertale* case study, to refer to the specific visual commentary within *DE*.

produced by my experience (155-156). Here, I refer to 'something' as urging the PC to perform certain actions, one which entails punching Cuno. That 'something' is the skill physical instrument, and it has the difficulty of [Challenging]. The difficulty level of skillchecks range from [Trivial] to [Impossible] and prior to committing to a skillcheck the visual commentary will inform the player of the percentage chance they have in succeeding. Additionally, skillchecks vary, as some will be white while others red. White skillchecks may be reattempted if the skill level is raised, meanwhile red skillchecks may not be retried if failed. In order to progress certain quests or obtain valuable evidence or new leads, some skillchecks must be passed, however, a failed skillcheck does not necessarily lead to failure, but may offer a more humoristic approach to a situation or force the player to find another approach or route to their goal.

The rest of the gameplay consist mainly of interacting with objects within the navigable gamespace and talking to NPCs, listening to their trials, tribulations, and testimony. During conversation with NPCs, the player may select pre-scripted options from a dynamic dialogue tree, dynamic in the sense that depending on variables in the gameworld it will adjust accordingly (Domsch 39-40). It is within the bounds of the dialogue trees where skillchecks will appear. The player may select and explore different dialogue options which will convey and contribute to the cognitive mapping of the narrative, events and characterization of NPCs and PC. The central element of *DE*'s gameplay challenge is to constantly explore and construct the narrative events which have taken place in Revachol, not only during the contemporary story, but in the past as well, unveiling the mystery to not only the lynching but the PC and the storyworld's past.

Before dwelling further into the case study, I would like to clarify what constitutes gameplay in *DE* as to aid the understanding of ludic elements at play. Considering the heavy element of narrative, the lines between gameplay and narrative might be fuzzy, at least in contrast to *Undertale* which has a clear distinction between its gameplay and narrative despite their symbiotic relationship. The initial assumption would be that every option for interactivity would be gameplay, however could pressing the corresponding button to advance text then be considered gameplay? I would argue against it, as one could compare pressing a button to advance dialogue to that of flipping a page in a book. Thus, it may be excluded from the gameplay, however, paradoxically, I would claim that reading the text itself may be regarded as gameplay as it is an integral part in the understanding of the storyworld and continued

engagement with the video game. As claimed initially, *DE* bears heavy resemblance to visual novels, and thus there is an unseen contract, a principle of minimal departure, between the player and the video game, that the ludic experience will mostly consist of reading, engaging the player through narrative elements instead of ludic challenges. Moreover, traversing Revachol, interacting with various NPCs and objects, making choices during dialogue, and assigning skills will be considered gameplay, advancing dialogue will not.

The story structure employed by *DE* is the open story structure as opposed to deterministic, as discussed during the *Undertale* analysis, it allows for a greater sense of immersion and agency within the ludic experience. Albeit the responses of NPCs are deterministic, the structure itself allows the player to explore and ignore whatever part of the narrative they desire, not conforming them to a single path apart from a certain event which will trigger the concluding hours, however, how they player goes about reaching and subsequently solving this event is entirely in their hands. Nevertheless, the video game system encourages exploration with sidequests, thus the narrative elements are not buried in an endless slog of searching but encouraged by the video game systems to seek out and rewarded thusly for their completion. To also clarify, this is not a criticism of video games with deterministic story structure, however, it will not impart the player with the same sense of agency nor authorship in the creation of the narrative, instead they are confided to the path designed by the game developer. Furthermore, *DE* employs the *side quest and story convergence* model as proposed by Toh, wherein the player has some agency in the direction of the narrative but as mentioned earlier, the narrative convergences at a single point, within *DE* the event is called the 'Tribunal' (154). Albeit seemingly agency constricting, *DE*'s approach allows the player to still experience a sense of agency as after the convergence the story may branch once more depending on skillchecks during the Tribunal and the outcome of the Tribunal may as well be affected by sidequests up until that point[29].

DE is the quintessential future narrative as within every inch of its narrative does the video game offer the player nodal situations which may be resolved in a variety of ways. Firstly, the dialogue options offer variation in approaches to any given situation, wherein the player might opt to yell "fuck you" to a hostel clerk for charging the PC for damage caused by him in a

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[29] One of the more notable sidequests is locating Harry's gun which he lost on his bender. Having a firearm before the Tribunal may skew the situation in the player's favor.

drunken spree, or simply, politely, respond "sorry for the trouble", which in turn may evoke a retaliation from the NPC, which they may or may not use against the player in later dialogue options, underscoring the dynamic nature of the dialogue tree (*Disco Elysium: The Final Cut*). This highlights the second aspect, wherein NPCs may respond differently depending on options taken by the PC. Outside one of the main areas, the hostel, a racist lorry driver will stand, and the PC may engage in conversation with him, during which his prejudice becomes apparent, and the player will have the option to call it out, which in turns make subsequent interactions with him a sour experience as he still recalls the slander the PC threw at him. Numerous other NPCs will have similar reactions, either during dialogue options taken or regarding failed skillchecks.

The dialogue tree is a key element in the gameplay as it dictates what information the player may acquire, but also how the PC, Harry, will act and present himself in the storyworld, shaping his very being. As aforementioned, the dialogue tree is dynamic in nature, however, retains elements of what Domsch prescribes as *cyclical* and *arborescent*. Cyclical refers to when NPCs repeat the same dialogue, usually referring to shopkeepers as they often repeat the same greetings and responses to purchases or inquiries, while arborescent refers to dialogue trees which will offer choices once and thereafter exclude other options, not allowing the player to pick another option (39-40). *DE* incorporates all three types, as shopkeepers in the storyworld or NPCs who have their dialogue exhausted, will retort to a cyclical dialogue tree and repeat previous information. However, on occasion, some options will be arborescent, often those which shape the PC, his personality, and his relations to other NPCs. Finally, dynamic dialogue trees will appear on occasion depending on circumstances and accomplished quest(s) in the gameworld, either the NPCs will react differently to the PC or even allowing new alternatives for selecting dialogue options. In the business district, there is a bookshop with a child standing outside, advertising for it, the owner being her mother. As the PC probes the young girl, he learns that despite her love for her mother and her venture, the young girl does not find it comforting to stand outside in the cold, less so that she must skip school to advertise her mother's shop. If the player then returns to the mother inside the bookstore after gaining this information, the dialogue tree will offer the option to let the mother know of her daughter's true feelings, even reprimand the mother in case the player feels inclined to do so.

Finally, outcomes of skillchecks present nodal situations and may lead to alteration in the narrative sequence. White skillchecks may be retried at any point if the player assigns more

points to the corresponding skill, while red skillchecks may not. Failing a red skillcheck is a permanent consequence to the gameworld, however, despite the semantic nature of the word, failing skillchecks may not be a failure, but lead to alternate scenarios, information or perhaps a humorous scene otherwise missed (Bodi and Thon 171-172). Thus, failing becomes not a hinderance in the progression, but may open new alternatives for it, or encourage the player to seek some alternate solution. During the narrative, the PC must interview the Union leader, as he may possess valuable information for the investigation. However, to access the harbor, one must pass a gate which is raised to keep out protesting workers, the button for its release protected by a behemoth. One may attempt to knock him out, however, the skillcheck is quite formidable, especially early in the game, and the PC's partner, Kim, is against the approach. If the player explores Revachol, they will find an alternate path into the harbor which requires a different skillcheck to pass. Both solutions are viable options, one more violent than the other, and it is up to the player to decide which approach and subsequent consequence they desire. This quest structure is what Domsch refers to as a *Python structure* which allows freedom in completing objectives, but the objectives have only "one state of completion" (89). Additionally, the player might not even meet the Union leader at all, as it is an optional objective, not needed to complete the video game, however, the player will miss vital information and narrative elements along with a multitude of experience points. An example of a red skillcheck which might be failed, but still not lead to a game over or halt in the progression, is during the first minutes of gameplay where the PC encounters a woman. The option to flirt with her appears in the arborescent dialogue tree as a red skillcheck which the player may attempt, however, as with the previous example, it is challenging as the player has not yet had an opportunity to level up skills. Thus, many will fail, and the words which the PC is forced to utter is upon failure is: "I want to have fuck with you" (*Disco Elysium: The Final Cut*). The only true consequence of the action, other than second-hand embarrassment, appears later when interrogating the woman, and she chuckles when remembering her previous encounter with the PC.
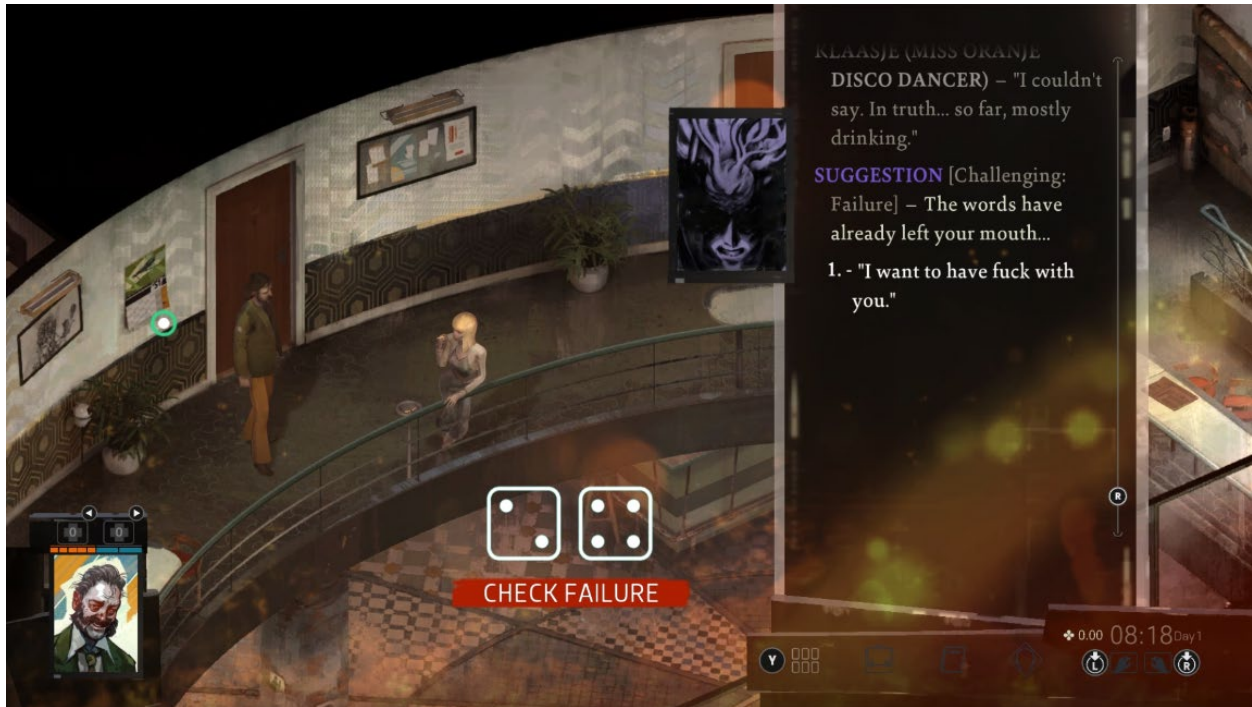
Fig 8 – *Failing a skillcheck in DE. Screenshot by author.*

As argued, *DE* offers the player plenty of nodal situations where they may choose and explore multiple options which may skewer the gameworld and its inhabitants in different narrative directions, proving its non-unilinearity. *DE* features multiple differentiations of the ending which may be triggered by different conditions, either having done certain side quests or succeeded certain skillchecks, fulfilling the non-unilinear criteria of materiality. Secondly, the player is given a vast amount of options in gameplay, from movement to interactivity with the environment and finally, dialogue options. The player may experience spatial restrictions within the navigable space, however, not as invisible walls as to break immersion, but instead diegetical reason, for example the bridge to a fishing village being broken thus prohibiting the player from entering the area until day three of the investigation, as it has been repaired. Another aspect of player's options not yet touched, is the skills. As mentioned previously, on occasion the skills will interrupt the flow of text to weigh in, in the form of passive skillchecks the video game system calculates without player input, only based on skill level thus far. The skills will vary both depending on the situation but also on which ones that have more attributes assigned to them. The Reddit user ForrtessBoss has accessed the video game system and determined that programed into the latest update of *DE* are approximately 10.239 passive skillchecks which may activate during dialogue (Reddit). And failing passive skillchecks alters the dialogue as the skill

is unable to grasp the situation or simply will not comment. For example, if the player opts the PC towards more physical attributes instead of intellect, the PC's skills may notice different things with the NPCs for example body language or endure physical constraints the PC may experience. If the skill attribution is reversed, the PC's skills may grasp emotional turmoil within NPCs or know a great deal about the storyworld through the skill encyclopedia. Even the attributions of skills may lead to new information or tidbits, once more reinforcing the notion of *DE*'s non-unilinearity, offering partial new experiences with a new playthrough.

Consequences of actions may vary as well, as explored earlier with red skillchecks, but additionally with dialogue tree options as well, as hidden modifiers which aid skillchecks. As aforementioned, some NPCs dialogue trees will update as per their dynamic nature as a response to the player's influence in the gameworld showcased with the mother and daughter example. However, the video game system also tracks hidden modifiers which may aid *or* hinder certain skillchecks. These modifiers are exclusively based on interactions with the gameworld and may add or subtract the chances of succeeding a skillcheck, thus providing additional consequences for exploring various textual paths within the dialogue tree. Adding to the example with Cuno previously used, if the PC hits Cuno, it will add a positive modifier to a later empathy skillcheck, as Cuno now respects the PC. If the PC refrained from punching, Cuno will take it as a sign of weakness and a negative modifier will be applied to the skillcheck. With implementation of hidden modifiers, a new level of immersion is ascertained, and the player may see the narratologically-oriented agency of their ludological decisions. It should be noted that there are more positive modifiers in the video game in contrast to negatives, further enabling and encouraging the player to explore the storyworld and experience the many sidequests and NPCs.
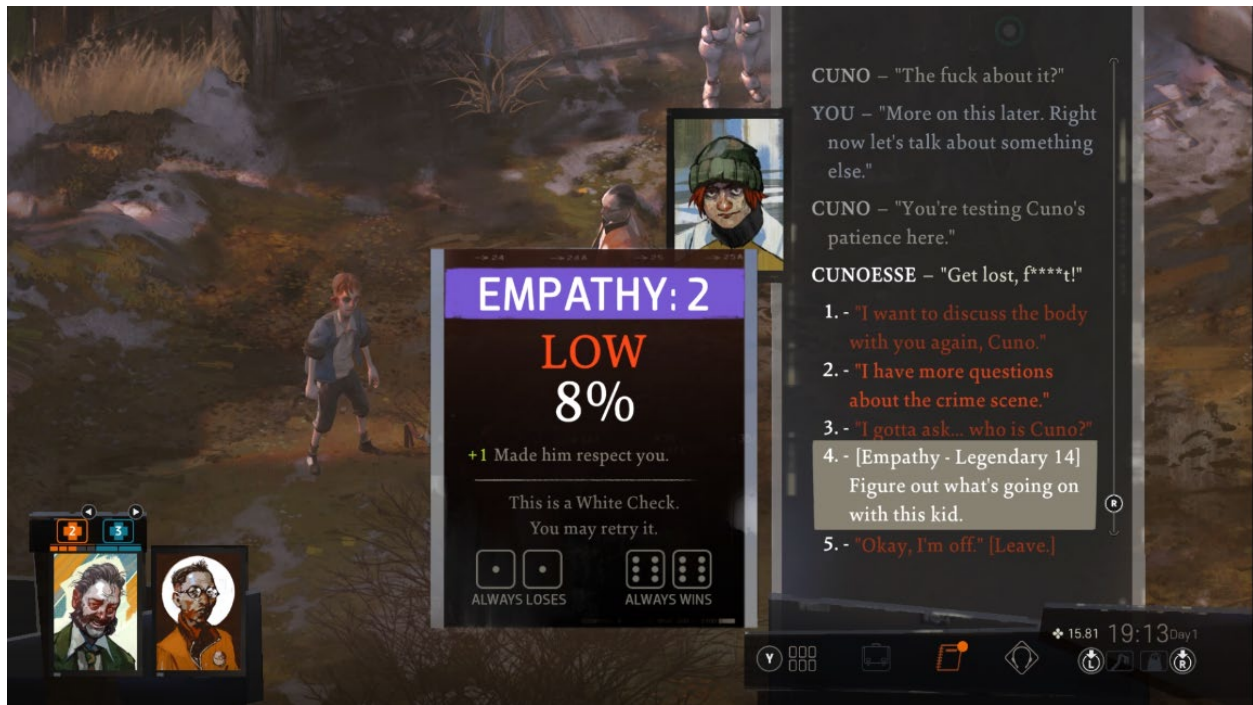
Fig 9 – *A modifier applied to assist in a skillcheck. Screenshot by author.*

Finally, one gameplay mechanic which is unique to *DE* is the *though cabinet*. As the PC traverse and interact with people, they may offer information or insights which may trigger thoughts within the mind of the PC. They may vary from political leanings to attempting to persuade a memory lost to the tides of time or drug usage. The player may spend a skill point on an available space within the though cabinet to internalize thoughts, and as they get internalized, will often cause a temporary penalization to the player's gameplay. These thoughts, when fully internalized, will divulge supplementary narrative text as well as gameplay benefits in various forms, from raising maximum caps on certain skills to gaining experience from indulging in the little tidbits of thoughts the PC will offer as he traverses Revachol. However, to trigger these thoughts specific requirements must be fulfilled, either talking with the correct NPC or simply choosing the specific responses or dialogue options within the dialogue trees. For example, the thought "Some kind of Superstar" will appear if the player continuously makes the PC refer to himself as a superstar, which when internalized will cause the skill logic to be permanently decreased by one, however, will raise the skill cap in four other skills[30].

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[30] Specifically: Visual calculus, suggestion, electrochemistry, and composure
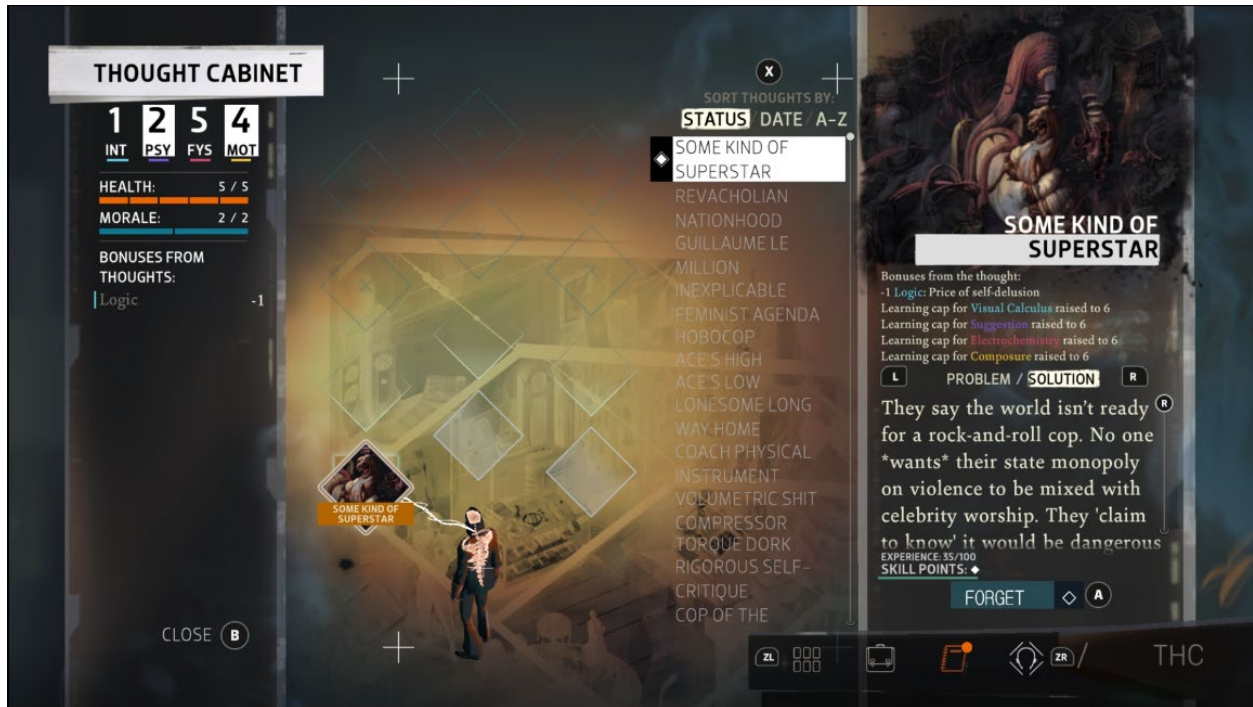
Fig 10 – *The Though Cabinet with "Some Kind of Superstar" internalized. Screenshot by author.*

As Domsch discusses, choices within the gameworld have narrative coherence, as the choices reflect upon the gameworld and NPCs, thus further emphasizing the player's agency in the creation of narrative (96-97). The agency informing techniques (AITs) employed by *DE* are a blend of user interface (UI) cues and skillchecks. Skillchecks have been fully detailed thus far, however; it should be shortly noted that the UI conveys the agency of the player in the moment of choosing options. The visual commentary will clearly state when a skillcheck is white, therefore may be attempted anew, or when it is a red skillcheck, even the textual commentary proclaiming its irreversibility. If not for the visual commentary, the theoretical agency would not become perceived agency, especially for the passive skillchecks which do not have the additional dice roll, only appearing in its fully calculated form, informing the player whether it was successful or a failure as the narrative text continues. Thus, the player is under no delusion of their importance in the unfurling events and narrative.

Most decision within the ludic playground of *DE* offer narratologically-oriented agency, as decisions impact narrative, storyworld and cutscenes, however, unlike *Undertale,* lays heavier emphasize on configurative agency as outlined by Bodi and Thon. With both skill attribution and the thought cabinet, the player is allowed to construct the PC however they see fit, either to roleplay or self-reflection, which I will expand on in a later chapter, thus allowing configurative

agency in the creation of the PC as a character and his abilities. Additionally, when skill attribution is reflected in the gameworld as passive and active skillchecks, the player's notion of agency is constantly reaffirmed, especially as it interacts with the narrative agency, coherently altering the unfurling narrative based on decisions made by the player. *DE* allows for explorative agency as well, with many points of interest being interactable, as well as ergodic agency. The time of day will occasionally affect NPCs and whether they will appear in the storyworld or not, most notably during the later hours, where they will disappear. The player may affect the diegetic time by either resting on a bench, engaging in conversation with NPCs or read a book.

Despite the PC appearing like a surrogate for the player in the storyworld, an avatar, the PC is in fact a preexisting character, much like the PC in *Undertale*. Following a traditional trope within the RPG genre, the PC suffers from severe amnesia causing them to lose all memory of everything, even the storyworld itself, thus allowing the player and PC to discover the storyworld together. However, in contrast to *Undertale* where the PC serves as a twist during the finale of the narrative, *DE* does not employ the technique of metamedia storytelling, signaling early in the narrative that the PC is a preexisting character who the player is allowed to control within the ludic and narrative framework of the video game. The only indication of authorship in the PC's life is skill attribution prior to the opening of the narrative, where the player may select from predetermined set of skills as created by the developers or create their own 'set' much like a character in *Dungeons & Dragons*. However, as the PC is a preexisting character within the establish storyworld, it may invite the proteus effect in terms of the player's approach to roleplaying. During the first hours of gameplay, NPCs are providing important pieces in the cognitive mapping of Harry's character and nature prior to the drunken bender: A raging alcoholic who showcases suicidal tendencies and a complete disregard for property and people, which also led to his severe amnesia. The player may attempt to continue this self-destructive behavior, if they deem it appropriate to his character, or they may possibly try to enable his recovery. Here *DE* shines, as it provides options for whatever path the player deems worthy for Harry to travel, continue in a downward spiral of self-loathing and hatred, or recover from abusive tendencies and seek redemption. The player may also wish to use Harry for self-reflection, perchance learn something not only about the storyworld but about themselves. As the player's agent within the storyworld, Harry presents the unique and enticing possibility of not merely watching events and narrative unfold, but actively participate in their creation, forming

the protagonist in the process as well.

The player may want to attempt to experience every alternation in narrative, *rereading* as Alex Mitchell and Kevin McGee put it. As discussed earlier regarding *Undertale*, logocentrism is an enabler of multiple rereadings, especially as *Undertale* offers *reframing* to persuade the player to multiple playthroughs, reframing referring to a new perspective on the narrative (38). However, as Mitchell and McGee argue, the reframing needs to be substantial different from the original narrative to induce the player to commit to another playthrough (38). In comparison to *Undertale*, *DE* offers not the same degree of diverting narratives, except the altering endings and potential differing relationship with the NPCs. However, as the video game explores the many facets of life, the player may be encouraged for a reread to see the many ideologies and sidequests they may have missed upon initial playthrough. *DE* may not offer substantial reframing, however, as noted with the amount of passive skillchecks, an initial playthrough might only activate a fraction of them thus encouraging rereading of its many differing narrative elements and alternations.

Even the video game system of *DE* lays ground for retreading previous narrative elements if the player is not satisfied with the outcome thus far. *DE* sports a save system which allows the player to save their progress whenever they desire except in dialogue trees, meaning the video game system easily allows for *save-scumming.* Save-scumming entails to deliberately reload an earlier save file to get another result (Kleinman et al. 2). For example, on a failed skillcheck, the player might want to reload it to achieve success instead as the principle of minimal departure has conditioned them that failure is not the desired outcome. Thus, reloading and retrying allows for additional attempts to be made at a skillcheck as the video game system will randomize the outcome each time. However, even the developers, ZA/UM, have discouraged this action, they hope that the player's first playthrough they will commit to their decisions and live with the consequences and "[s]ee if you have the guts" to do so (indiegraze). Save-scumming has a slight undertone of breaking immersion, however, as Kleinman and colleagues have found in their research, rewind mechanics[31] did not necessarily break immersion, albeit it should be noted that they conceded their research was neither final nor

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[31] An important distinction to elaborate is that save-scumming is not a rewind mechanic which Kleinman and colleague research centered around, however, save-scumming has the same result as most of the rewind mechanics discussed in their article and thus is included as an argument here.

conclusive (9-10). *DE* does not encompass the same irreversible framework as *Undertale,* however, that does not denote the agency for which the video game allows the player, quite the contrary, it enables their perception of it, as altering gameworld conditions communicate the player's impact on the storyworld. The video game system allows for immediate rereading of certain events; however, it is entirely the responsibility of the player whether they desire to take advantage of it or not.

Many aspects of *DE* could be compared to future narratives previous lodgings, the choose-your-own-adventure novels (CYOA), from the amount of reading to the actively nodal situations it presents. However, as showcased, the non-unilinear approach separates the two, as experiencing *DE* can be done in multitudes of ways, from how the player customizes the skills of the PC, to dialogue options and partaking in certain events or questlines. Additionally, consequences are important in the *DE* universe, as not only does it convey a sense of agency, but also coherence in the narrative framework. What *DE* then proves is video games' natural evolution of the formula invented by CYOA novels, allowing more nodal situations and a dynamic storyworld which responds to the player's interaction. The medium breaks and transcends the formulas restrictions within literature, allowing it to flourish in an environment that is not only a product of an author or a producer, but of the player as well.

The Voices in Your Head Whispering of the Ludonarrative

Albeit *DE* not sporting the same approach to ludonarrative resonance as *Undertale*, the implementation of it should not be underestimated. Firstly, *DE* contains numerous game objects which underscores the video game's ludonarrative resonance. As discussed earlier, the playable character (PC) will walk around Revachol and may interact with numerous objects, which either initiates a dialogue tree or a visual commentary window for which the PC may acquire items. These vary from money and collectible postcards which can be pawned at a local shop, to bottles and clothes. Revachol is a city in war-torn wreckage, and the items found within its streets and buildings further highlight this narrative aspect of the storyworld, creating not dissonance as seen with the aforementioned *The Last of Us* example, but resonance in its implementation. Furthermore, the clothes which may be equipped lends additional points to certain skills, or subtract from them, which are determined by the nature of the garments. The player may equip:

Hats, glasses, jackets, neckwear, shirts, gloves, pants, and shoes. For example, the player may equip an 'Orange Bum Hat' which will give an additional point in reaction speed, however, will subtract one from the rhetoric skill. Another example is the 'Army Surplus Winter Scarf' which adds two points to the empathy skill while removing one in composure. The garments are given a brief, textual description as well, to justify their skill allocation, the scarf emanating a sense of "humanitarian aid" and the bum hat having gaping holes (*Disco Elysium: The Final Cut*). Thus, *DE* does not confide to simply stereotypes for the allocation of skill points, instead providing diegetic reasons for the attribution. However, the player does not need to read the description to understand the reasoning, the distribution of skill points conveys the narrative element itself, the narrative text simply expounding or confirming the player's initial impression. Additionally, the player may equip several tools which may aid in skillchecks, for example the 'Chaincutters'. This will significantly increase the chances of opening wires or chains, as those too are presented as skillchecks, however, they still have a slight chance to be passed without the equipped tool, albeit an abysmal one. Even non-playable characters (NPCs) will occasionally react differently to the PC based on his attire, further underscoring both ludonarrative resonance but also the non-unilinearity of *DE*.

Items used for healing, either health points or morale, the latter will be discussed during the character features analysis, can be obtained within the many corners of the world, or bought in the kiosk. These vary from magnesium to supplement morale or 'nosaphed' to add health back, all made from a fictional medical company, however, bearing names which resemble medicinal products, thus providing sufficient narrative coherence for their uses[32]. The player may even resolve to using alcohol, cigarettes or even drugs to aid their playthrough. These items can be obtained in the storyworld or stolen from NPCs. Consuming drugs will decline either morale or health, as stated by the textual commentary, however, it also warns the player of unforeseen consequences. What the textual commentary does not expound is that consuming these drugs will lead to a permanent decrease to either [Volition] or [Endurance], based on the drugs taken. However, the benefit of drugs is that they temporarily raise attribution or the cap of a specific skill, allowing the player to more easily pass a skillcheck. The drugs then communicate an element of the PC's character, as he can take advantage of drug usage in his

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[32] RPGs tend to simply use a "Health points restoration potion" without further explaining its concoction, while in *DE* there is clear place for it in the storyworld.

investigation, however, as a previous addict there are reverberations for relapsing, thus the substance abuse, whether the player opts to use it or not, communicates the narrative elements of its benefits and dangers.

Character features is the category for which *DE* shines the most. Every skill is not merely just a skill, but a voice which will weigh in during the narrative whenever a passive skillcheck is made. Even if the passive skillcheck fails, they will still comment, although they may not grasp the situation entirely. It should be noted, that even successful, passive skillchecks may grasp or encourage the wrong type of behavior. If the player opts for a physique build certain skills might encourage misogynistic behavior as the PC studies a magazine portraying various women in different attire. Or the player may realize that the skill, even with a successful passive skillcheck, has failed. During a confrontation with the person who reported the lynching, Klaasje, the PC may ask her if she is manipulating him, having to roll a [Legendary Volition] skillcheck. If passed, [Volition] will inform you that the other skills have been compromised by Klaasje, that they are not to be trusted with information they divulge regarding the situation. Although the skills attempt to defend themselves, [Volition] resonantly argues for their ineptitude in the current interrogation. This may evoke a realization for the player, perhaps there have been other situations where the skills have misjudged or misguided the PC and the player. Thus, the gameplay element of leveling the skills and passing skillchecks become a narrative element closely connected to the themes of *DE*, namely that sometimes, one cannot always trust one's own instincts, and despite one's best effort, may not discern the entire truth of every matter, especially considering the PC's circumstances. Furthermore, the ludic element of passive skillchecks and skills conveys the sensation of obtrusive thoughts conjecturing with every interaction, much replicating how the player might experience their own thought process.

As mentioned, the way the PC acquires experience points is by interacting with the storyworld, exploring different dialogue options, and completing quests. In the acquisition of experience points does *DE* communicate a narrative element, namely, to gain experience as a human, one must engage in activities and dialogue with other humans to gain new insight to the world one inhabits and one's place within it. For example, if the PC undertakes the many ideological dialogue options of an NPC named Joyce, they will not only accumulate a chunk of information regarding the storyworld, its history, and the political ideologies laying ground to historical and contemporary events within in, but also gain the same in experience points. What

DE tells is a very human story of a police detective who has lost his place in the world due to personal issues, like going through a divorce, leading to his drug abuse. Thus, the experience point system transcends its ludic purpose within the expectations of the genre and serves as enhancing the narrative and thematic aspects of the storyworld.

The skills themselves reflect a narrative element, not simply by their description, but by their very nature in the context of a role-playing video game. Some skills are more obscure in nature, not commonly associated with the normal skillset of a human, for example [Spirit de corps], [Electrochemistry], and [Shivers]. [Spirit de corps] refers to the mental connection the PC has with his precinct, being able to resonate his colleague reactions or behavior to his actions when not there, [Electrochemistry] entails the consumption and understanding of drugs and includes comprehension of sexual dynamics, lastly, [Shivers] allows the PC to tune in to the voice of the city by raising the hairs on his neck, get an inkling of things happening beyond his current vicinity. The importance of these skills is their narrative contribution, as they aid in the mental construction of who the PC is and his credentials. As the narrative unfolds, the player may be able to learn that the PC is an extremely good detective despite initial assumption[33], thus the many skills align with the developing image of the PC. And despite lacking authorship in the pre-narrative development of the PC, the player is in complete control of his evolution during the narrative course of the ludic experience.

Another aspect of character feature is the thought cabinet, as it contains a maximum capacity for how many thoughts may be internalized at any point. The player may equip a total of twelve thoughts, and at any given point may expend an additional skill point to permanently forget a thought previously internalized. To add to the ludonarrative resonance aspect, during nighttime when the PC sleeps, internalizing will pause and resume once the PC awakes, further fueling the semi-realistic process of how thoughts are acquired and internalized. It is through the gameplay which these thoughts are allowed to form and subsequently be equipped to aid in the ludic experience while also provide the player with additional narrative elements.

Despite being a staple of the role-playing game (RPG) genre, it might feel misplaced that in *DE* there is a health bar and additionally a morale bar, and if either of these drop to zero, a game over screen will be triggered unless the player can manage to take a healing item before it

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[33] There is an emphasis on "may" as the player might not necessarily obtain this information as it is locked behind a specific sequence of events not required to progress the main narrative, only enhance it.

occurs. As mentioned, there is no ordinary combat found in the ludic experience of *DE* only ones triggered by skillchecks, like attempting to knock out the aforementioned behemoth. So how then does the PC's health or morale drain? Certain skillchecks require to be succeeded and failing to do them will result in damage to either of the categories, as despite failure leading to perhaps a more humorous text, it will still damage the PC, physically or mentally. For example, during the interview with the Union leader, Evrart, if the player fails a [Medium Volition] passive skillcheck, it will then lead to a [Challenging Pain threshold] passive skillcheck, as the PC is not able to assert his dominance over Evrart and is forced to sit down in a painfully cumbersome chair. If the [Pain threshold] skillcheck is also failed, it will lead to PC to take damage, as it damages their health, both as a ludic element, but also a narrative one. Morale on the other hand is a unique resource to *DE*[34] which may be drained when the character experiences emotional damage, either in terms of a painful past resurfacing or having his confidence shaken. For example, during the confrontation with another suspect, Titus, he will constantly berate the PC, and to stand up to him a successful [Godly Authority] skillcheck is required, however, if failed, will lead to an even more embarrassing situation thus damaging the PC's morale. Thus, a visual commentary otherwise used to track a resource to upkeep the ludic experience, is integrated with narrative importance, as it informs the player of Harry as a character and what is deemed damaging to his mental health. However, the player may also perform actions which increases the PC's morale, where no healing items are needed, only action. Running around Revachol, the PC might encounter a mailbox, for which they receive the dialogue option to either kick it or pet it. If the PC kicks the mailbox, he loses one health point, however, if he pets it accompanying it with the compliment "good mail delivery box" and thereafter "I feel you, mail collection box", he will receive a point back in his morale, thus communicating to the player how patting the mailbox soothed the PC (*Disco Elysium*).

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[34] Not unique in the manner that is has never been done before, but rather within the RPG genre. It is not a traditional resource to manage in contrast to health points, often the blue color is associated to magic points.
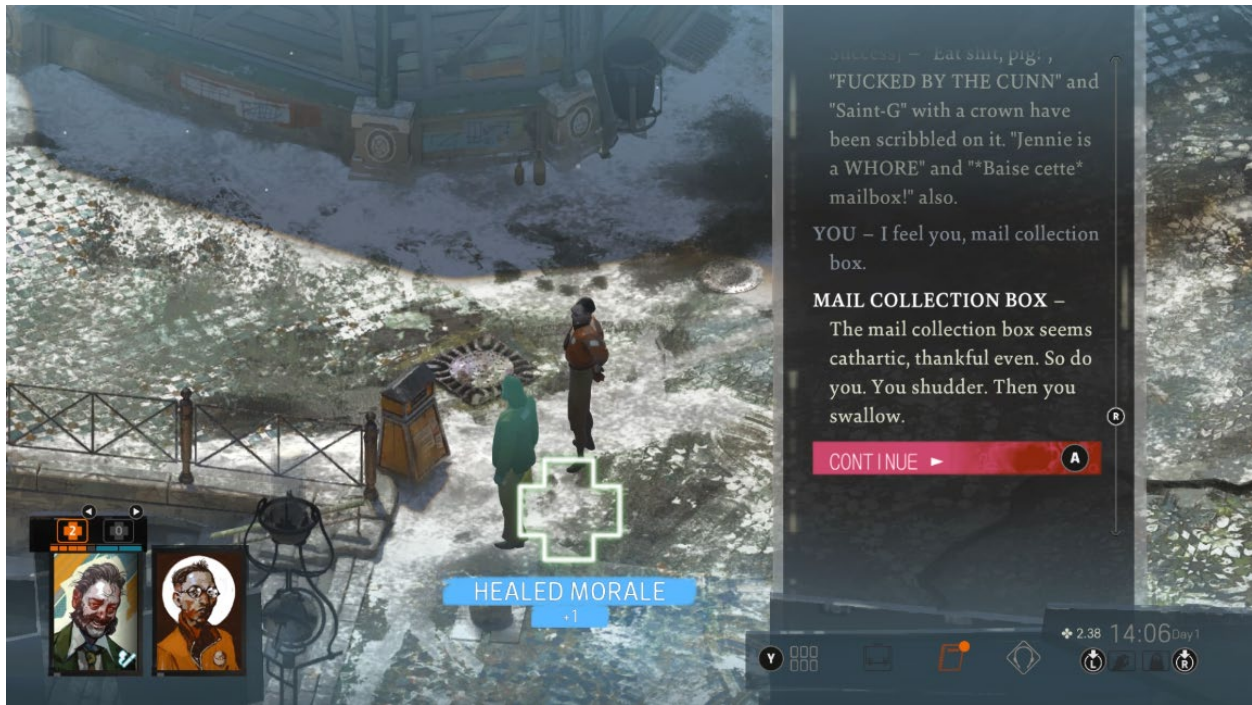
Fig 11 – *Morale healed in DE. Screenshot by author.*

Traditionally in RPGs, whenever the PC levels up, so do their stats like health points increase, however, in *DE* certain skills attribute to the amount of health and morale points. Adding points to [Volition] will increase morale, while adding points to [Endurance] will increase health, thus reflecting that the PC grows stronger as a person by expending the experience he gains from interacting with the storyworld and depending on what type of detective the player chooses to build, he might be more resilient to either physiological damage or physical damage.

The final feature of ludonarrative resonance is movement, however, the only ludic elements which may be considered an enemy are somewhat hostile NPCs. One could argue that the NPCs within the storyworld moves accordingly to face the PC if interacted with, however, I would suggest adding an additional aspect to supplement Toh's which provides a more interesting insight, namely the feature of *visual commentary*. It has been discussed earlier regarding *Undertale* however, while *Undertale* transformed the visual commentary as part of the ludonarrative semiotic metaphor as the change occurred within gameplay, *DE* simply alters the visual commentary without altering gameplay nor mechanics. At the start of *DE*, the PC does not recall who they are, where they are or current status. The visual commentary atop the health bar shows a foggy outline of what could resemble the PC's head based on his in-game character model. However, as the PC has yet to recognize himself, the visual commentary does not

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showcase his face. Not until later, if the player forces the PC to look in the mirror will the visual commentary update with a profile picture of the PC, communicating the PC's acknowledgment of his appearance. Furthermore, as the narrative continues, the player may be prompted with either altering the PC's expression or his appearance, the changes reflected as well in the visual commentary, thus blurring the lines between visual commentary and visual representation. Moreover, as the PC's partner, Kim, joins the investigation, his portrait will be present, and as the two disband before nighttime, it will vanish, communicating to the player that Kim is no longer following the PC, which may allow them to conduct tasks which Kim previously stopped.

As the PC traverses Revachol, on multiple occasion will what appears to be a thought bubble appear above his head, often in a specific area, which if left, so will the thought bubble. If the player interacts with it, it will either trigger a short, one sentence comment on a sensation, specific NPCs or simply objects or buildings in the background. On occasion, it may trigger a skill which will engage in conversation with the PC, either an ideological thought triggered by previous conversation with NPCs, or merely a comment from an intrusive skill.

Fig 12 – *A thought bubble leading to a description of the lynching scene. Screenshot by author.*

The context of the seemingly random thought bubbles will be revealed the more the player decides to interact with them. As the name given implies, these are thoughts which sporadically

emerge as the PC roams the city, as both their nature and visual commentary implies thusly, the visual commentary placing it just above the PC's head. The player may even leave an area with a thought bubble, not interacting with it, and return later to activate it, afterwards the option will no longer be available as the PC has acknowledge the thought. This provides additional snippets into the characterization of Harry, while simultaneously allowing the player greater immersion in the storyworld, if they so desire, and also providing added narrative components in the player's cognitive mapping of the storyworld.

The ratings for skillchecks, whether it be a passive skillcheck or not, convey a sense of ludonarrative resonance and narrative element in their visual commentary as well. The ratings of certain skillchecks vary and are reflecting the difficulty of the task at hand. However, the agency-informing technique not only inform of agency but provides additional characterization of an NPC or situation. The aforementioned Klaasje example demanded a [Legendary Volition] skillcheck to be passed, which may be interpreted as Klaasje being a woman who guards her secrets and feelings well. When confronting the NPC Titus, a [Godly Authority] is required, signaling the difficulty for the PC to establish his dominance to Titus and his men, as they show reluctance in respecting the PC's role as an authority figure in Revachol. The mere difficulty of skillchecks adds additional characterization of NPCs, further unionizing the ludic and visual commentary with the narrative.

Ludonarrative parallelism integration is incorporated into *DE*'s ludic experience as well. During the opening of the narrative, as the PC wakes from a blackout, a sharp ringing sound can be heard, resembling that which may be heard as a drunk is dragged into the waking realm. From the first moments of the player seeing the PC's visual representation coupled with the sharp noise, conveys the notion that the PC either is or has been previously drunk or hung over, thus promptly planting certain presumptions of the character which the player is about to play. It reoccurs in the overall structure of the narrative as well, as the PC experiences amnesia and thus the storyworld is as foreign to him as it is to the player. Amnesia is a common trope within the RPG genre, as an excuse for the NPCs to detail exposition for the storyworld and subsequent narrative to make sense to the player. However, in *DE* said exposition is not forced upon the player, and as the player shapes the PC's very being and embark on the ludic experience of cognitively shaping the storyworld of *DE*, they experience the same construction of 'reality'[35] as

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[35] The 'reality' here being the storyworld.

the PC.

There is an instance of ludonarrative semiotic metaphor in the ludic playground of *DE*, which is during dream sequences. These are communicated to the player by removing certain visual commentary, thus removing the gameplay element of morale and health, the player not having to worry if options and choices within the current navigable space will cause a game over. By removing this gameplay element does the ludic experience successfully communicate the lack of danger while also reflect the nature of dreams, deliriums, or memories, that while they may prove hurtful, they do not cause damage to the one's physical being.

DE underlines the importance of character feature(s) and game objects as potentially crucial parts in the mental construction of the narrative and storyworld, providing elements of narrative within each category to further cement the symbiotic relationship of gameplay and story. As Souvik Mukherjee argues: "Game and the narrative are parts of the gameplay and in being so, inform each other intrinsically and not extrinsically" (94). By designing their video game around RPG tropes is ZA/UM able to produce and inject a genre, which often is infatuated with fantastical elements, with an aesthetic of realism and humanism, using the established conventions of visual commentary and game design to further underscore its thematic. The story and narrative portrayed in *Disco Elysium* is one that cannot have been reproduced in other mediums, or rather, not to a feasible extent, and thus it provides an experience unique to video games and to the player, as seen with the critical acclaim it has gotten from critics.

Will you Shut Him up and Prove your Authority? Will you Punch the Kid?

Prior to the introduction of this thesis, there was provided a narrativization of one of the moral conundrums presented within the narrative of *DE* if the player engages in conversation with one of the non-playable characters (NPCs), Cuno. Perchance to some it would not propose a dilemma, one does not hit a child, however, *DE* still affords the player the decision, and even certain skills advocate for it. Thus, within the game design is the player allowed to explore moral predicaments and act how they see fit within the constraints of the ludic playground. It should be noted that *DE* may appear constraining due to the fact that all dialogue options which express an ethical approach to a problem are pre-planned. However, as the options vary in nature, some more aggressive or pacifistic in comparison to their counterparts, and the differing situations they present, I would argue that they are not agency constricting nor diminish the moral dimension of

the ludic experience. As the preliminary dilemma dictates, the player may ethically reason that punching Cuno is beneficial for the investigation as he might be more inclined to relinquish information if proper authority is established, while others might reason against it, as hitting a child might be considered morally wrong despite the benefits the action might reap. While *Undertale* sought to force the player to reevaluate their developed ludic phronesis, *DE* instead aims to further develop it, with posing said ethical problems. This is not only through the varying skillchecks, as some red skillchecks are merely optional, like the one with Cuno, but also with the aforementioned drug abuse the player can enforce upon the playable character (PC), is it morally responsible to further fuel an addict's addiction to hopefully solve the case, or should the player aid in his recovery? This then leads to whether the player is playing for self-reflection or roleplaying.

As cited by Jesper Juul in the theory chapter, each player seeks a different experience, thus, this chapter will not be a finding of facts as the field of ethics and moral is flooded with subjectivity, especially in a morally grey storyworld as *DE*. However, based on various factors within the game design, assumptions can be made. Firstly, as Sicart would define it, *DE* is an ethical game experience, namely, one which allows a moral agent interpretation, ethical behavior, and contribution to the video game system while gameplay supports the affection, reflection, and motivation of ethics within the ludic space (145-146). Moreover, this relationship may then affect and determine the values of the player after engaging with said experience (Sicart 146). As seen with the previous example, the player may opt to even save-scum to see what would happen if they committed to a different choice, whether they decided to punch him or not, however, the scenario still lays ground to moral reflection. Secondly, *DE* may be played as either roleplaying or self-reflection. *Undertale* carried the distinct characteristic where the PC bore no significant trait nor did the narrative provide any, thus there was no chance for the proteus effect to take place, hence the experience was geared towards self-reflection. However, the player is given multiple instances of characterization of the PC, Harry de Bois, and therefore the proteus effect is more accessible. What is so enticing with the proteus effect in *DE* is that despite the player's knowledge of who Harry *was* it does not determine who he will *be* as the player takes control. The narrative of *DE* also provides enough ambiguities for the player to choose how to roleplay Harry, all the player knows is his previous drug abuse, not if he is determined to stay on the path, and he is investigating a lynching. All other narrative elements of

Harry's life are optional, only found if the player explores the storyworld and interact with it. Which means, the player might even be inclined to change their approach to how they roleplay Harry as the narrative progresses. For example, when the player discovers that the PC is indeed an ace detective, their views might change, as the opening of *DE*'s narrative diminish his capabilities. Thus, the player may need to update their interpretation to continue the proteus effect and play Harry according to their understanding of his character.

The other approach, and perchance more morally and ethically interesting is playing for self-reflection, approaching the PC's character to realize their ideal self. As James Paul Gee argues, the unique opportunity of video games is to allow the player a secondary life, one which they may shape how they see fit and construct a new identity for themselves within the ludic playground (355). Harry's destiny is not yet determined, the power to shape his being laying in the hands of the player. As *DE*'s gameplay revolves around careful reading and making decision it stresses "emotional intelligence rather than fluid intelligence and physical reaction" (Heron and Belford 23). The game design paves way for self-reflection as determining which skills to level and even the initial learning caps of them enable the player to mold the PC in their ideal image. Thereafter, every choice is theirs to make, whether it be a moral situation as with Cuno, or just simply which way to respond to NPCs, as exemplified earlier with either shouting "fuck you" to an NPC or politely respond "sorry" (*Disco Elysium: The Final Cut*). The player engaging in the choices presented within the ludic experience conveys an ethical experience as *DE* does not allocate what is good or bad, allowing the player to determine these values themselves and reflect upon them resonating Sicart's argument for ethical game design (37).

Moreover, in contrast to *Undertale* where right and wrong are clearly stated, not simply by the narrative but also the game design, *DE* subscribes to what Domsch terms *Grey and Grey* and *Black and Grey* morality (166). Grey and Grey morality refers to when a choice and subsequent consequences are tremendously ambiguous in nature to where a correct answer is almost undecidable, while Black and Grey entails morally ambiguous choice, however, one options is considered better than the other, the lesser of two evils (Domsch 166-167). For example, during the interrogation of the Union leader, Evrart, he suggests a cooperation, as the PC has lost his gun during his previous drunken spree, in return for favors. The PC's partner, Kim, implies that finding the gun should be a priority, however, acknowledges the dubious nature of such a partnership, despite the advantages to the investigation and retrieval of the PC's

gun. Another instance is during the confrontation with Klaasje, as after further interrogation and investigation she becomes a main suspect, and even admits to other criminal activities. The player may arrest her accordingly, however, as she and Kim notes, if she is taken into custody, the enemies which she is in hiding from might find her, and she would never reach a prison alive. So, does the player allow a woman who has ruined the lives of many and potentially the man who was lynched go, or do they sentence her to her death by arresting her? For some the choice may be clear, but however, *DE* favorably uses emotional proximity to its advantage and morally cloud the dilemmas it proposes. Every NPC is written with depth, accompanied by a visual representation and a portrait when engaging in conversation with them. An NPC the player might find unlikable can develop likable traits or if the player unveils their backstory, they may be more inclined to enjoy their character. Cuno upon initial encounter is a foul-mouthed, adolescent child with a clear despise for the PC's profession. However, if the player engages in his questline, they will come to learn that Cuno stems from an abusive and drug-fueled household, knowing only the authority of violence, which may trigger a sense of anagnorisis, as the player learns the reason for his behavior, but may also understand why not hitting him will deduct a point from his later skillchecks, while hitting him will add one.

In a world morally grey, how will the player then know the repercussions of their decisions and actions, or even seek guidance? The skills which speak to the PC are one of the sources for advice, however, their advice is tailored-based on the PC's build thus far. However, the PC's partner, Kim, serves as a moral compass throughout the playthrough, ensuring there is a reaction to every action, mostly letting the PC and player know whether he agrees or not with decisions made. Kim stands as a normative ethos within the gameplay, reprimanding the PC for hitting Cuno, or carefully analyzing a situation and suggesting approaches to it, regardless of what the skills say. Thus, the developers have implemented in the video game design a moral counsel to aid the player who may not yet have a strong sense of ludic phronesis and are still developing one. This is not to say that Kim's input is indisputably correct, nor his assertions accurate at all times, however, it may help mentor the player's sense of ludic phronesis, even for an avid player, as *DE* tackles subjects deeply rooted in reality and not merely those constrained to the ludic space. Which then enables the ludic experience to impact the player's morals through its ethical experience.

Based on the Four Component model of moral expertise proposed by Rest, I would argue

that *DE* enables the player to engage with each of its categories, thus providing a deeply moral experience. Firstly, it engages heavily with moral focus, as one of *Undertale*'s shortcoming was prescribed values, killing is bad. There is not always a prescribed good or bad way to act in *DE*, sometimes the ends justify the means[36]. As described by Formosa and colleagues, one of shortcomings of not already established principles of morally good and bad, is that if the video game does not ascribe values there is no external force which measure their ethical being and incentivizes the player to develop an ethical identity (221). However, *DE* resolves this issue by assigning Kim to accompany the PC throughout most of its ludic experience[37] thus providing the external feedback for the player which contribute to the development of their moral focus. The player's moral sensitivity is engaged continuously throughout the ludic experience, as not every situation proposes a clear moral or ethical dimension, therefore leaving the player to recognize and interpret whether it is or not. For example, during conversation with a plethora of NPCs, the PC may ask for money, as he is lacking a severe amount, even to cover the rent for the hostel room. One of the NPCs is a salesman, vending his wares in the streets. The player may ask for money as a skillcheck, however, if engaged in conversation before attempting this, the NPC will tell the tale of his poor mother who he sends the surplus to. Neither Kim nor the video game inform of the moral dilemma it proposes, the only clue is a subtraction to the skillcheck, as the PC knows of the dire family situation. Is it morally right to persuade someone who already lacks in money to indulge oneself, despite one's own fault in the initial lack of it? Another example is the use of drugs, as they may aid the PC in their investigation, however, not only do they provide ludologically-oriented agency in the form of gameplay advantages and penalties, but also a moral conundrum whether the player should seek to rehabilitate the PC's addiction or further fuel it. *DE* proposes several other scenarios which engages the player and their moral sensitivity, the scripted nature of *DE* allows for richer characters and thus, the moral dilemmas proposed have a new dimension and potentially allow the player additional perspectives. Moral judgment has been covered in earlier discussion, however, will be restated here how much *DE* challenges this aspect of moral expertise, especially prudent considering the Gray and Gray or Black and Gray morality the video game presents with complex ethical scenarios. Moral action is tested

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[36] One could perchance say the same in *Undertale* in regard to logocentrism, however, there is a significant difference in punching a child in order to get answers and mindlessly slaughter innocent monsters to achieve an alternate ending.
[37] In some endings, Kim will be absent during the final hours.

throughout an entire playthrough, the player having their moral resolve tempted. To reuse the example with Cuno, prior to the skillcheck he has been vulgar, slandering and verbally abusing the PC. The player may be inclined to punch him solely out of frustration, however, if their moral deems the action appalling, they must resist the temptation, despite some skills encouraging it and Cuno actively mocking the PC.

As aforementioned, Domsch has argued that reversible decisions lessen the impact of ethical choice and considering how easily the video game system allows for save-scumming, it must be noted that *DE* does not carry the same irreversible framework as *Undertale*. The video game system allows a new save file to be created at nearly any point during the gameplay, with exception during dialogue, thus, despite the developers wish for the player to take "full acceptance of the consequences of your actions" (indiegraze). The player may save-scum to either succeeded a previously failed skillcheck, regret a decision they made, or simply experience ultimate logocentrism, see every possible outcome, as the developers themselves predicted. Nevertheless, in an otherwise morally bustling ludic experience, the presence of save-scumming denotes some of the moral and ethical impact *if* the player exploits[38] the video game system.

The ethical experience and dimension of *Disco Elysium* is a vast and gray field, designed to challenge the player within every aspect of moral expertise. From the incorporation of Black and Gray and Gray and Gray morality to cloud choices and decisions in ambiguity, to the emotional proximity established with almost every NPC encountered to further immerse the player in ethical dilemmas. Despite the player seemingly alone in this voyage into the unknown waters of morality, the PC's partner, Kim, aids the player in navigating this morally gray storyworld, and hopefully emerge from it with a developed ludic phronesis. Whether or not the player pursues the ludic experience as roleplay or self-reflection, the reflective player is bound to surface from *Disco Elysium* with their morals and ethics engaged and challenged.

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[38] The use of the word "exploit" is to convey that albeit it being part of the save system, the developers frown upon it at least in an initial playthrough.

Conclusion

Ever since the first video game was created, a simulation of tennis, and subsequent video games following its path, the realm which the medium inhabited was purely of a ludic nature, narrative being a mere supplement to entice investment in its ludic experience. However, as films have broken out of their black-and-white restraints, so have video games left the purely ludic dimension to incorporate narrative as an important element to its experience, as Domsch argues: "Gameplay and narrative can be mutually enhancing" (27). If the scope of the medium can expand so should the scholarly approach to research in the field, as video games have transcended the state of being purely ludic or narrative driven. Ludology and narratology may aid in comprehending certain dimensions of the ludic experience of the medium, however, with more complex video games, the scholarly approach may need to encapsulate both dimensions, and I believe Toh's ludonarrative framework supplements and unites the two previous schools of thoughts. Both ludonarrative resonance and to some extent its counterpart, dissonance, assists in comprehending the multifaceted dimensions of the ludic playground, analyzing the ways in which gameplay and narrative mutually enhance one another to create its experience for the player. As observed in *Undertale* and *Disco Elysium*, both incorporate gameplay and narrative elements into a single cognitive construction to convey its themes, symbolisms, and story. Thus, the elements of narrative are not merely reserved for cutscenes, dialogue or embedded narratives, but part of the ludic experience, the player needs to dissect and interpret the ludic elements to construct and develop the cognitive mapping of narrative and the characters inhabiting the storyworld.

The concept of agency has been experimented in other mediums, as distinguished in choose-your-adventure novels, or even films in an attempt to afford the viewer agency, however, within the bounds of video games is where agency and future narratives, find their proper residence. The non-unilinear nature of video games further enable the future narrative aspect, as *Undertale* and *Disco Elysium* can present widely different gameworlds based on the agency afforded to the player. Futures narratives are not restricted to narratological decisions, as *Undertale* has proven, ludological decisions and ludological-oriented agency impact the nodal situation as well, steering the experience in accordance with the agency afforded to the player. Thus, the player is not merely a passive observer of the unfolding events, but actively participate in their creation, shaping the narrative and the storyworld in the process, producing their own

gameworld, a reflection of their agency in the creation of narrative.

Playing such an integral part in the outcome of the storyworld and its narrative lends video games to possess a unique opportunity for the player to morally develop throughout the adventure as the ludic experience affords the player moral reflection and ethical engagement with its immersion. From posing moral conundrums to forcing the player to make ethical decisions to advance the narrative, video games harbor the potential to engage the player in each of the categories of moral expertise proposed by Rest, pivoting the player towards self-reflection. Video games may be roleplayed, for the player to pursue a life different from their own, however, it does not diminish the moral and ethical impact of the experience, as their ludic phronesis may still be developed, thus adapting it for future video game escapades.

From infancy to now, the scope of video games has significantly expanded, however, titles such as *Undertale* and *Disco Elysium* prove that the medium does not necessarily need a grand breadth, but the creative use of the unique toolset provided to video games. Video games offer an immersive experience, one which may provide a more attractive and enticing experience in comparison to traditional narrative. The level of agency bestowed to the player in accordance with the ludonarrative framework delivers a narrative and experience not yet rivaled by other mediums, and to once more echo Ryan and colleagues: "There is a persistent hope, that by virtue of their interactivity, games can present a very different, and perhaps more powerful, type of ethical engagement than other art forms" (300).

No longer are video games confined to the realm of playfulness, as educators use video games to discuss and teach moral and ethics, confronting students with ethical conundrums. Video games have transformed from a simple device for entertainment purposes to a tool which may aid in the continued development of society. With simple clicks of buttons, the player is treated to an experience unlike any other, fueled by gameplay, challenges, agency, decisions, morals, and ethics. Video games are a marvel of the modern age, and with continued development, there is no doubt that the ludic experience will only continue to improve, merging gameplay and narrative into a single mental construct. There is no doubt that greatness lies within the ludic realm, and once scholars dare excavate deep into its multimodal caves they will emerge with the gems that encapsulate video games' potential and uniqueness.

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