Tutor's Name: Rowan Tulloch

Tutorial day and time: Monday 3pm

Unit Reading: Bryce, J. & Rutter, J. (2002) – Killing like a Girl

Argument: By featuring a gender-ambiguous main character, Toby Fox's *Undertale* (2015) manages to create a more inclusive and universal experience that is able to be enjoyed by a wider and more varied audience.

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Congratulations, it's a…? - The Role of Gender Ambiguity in *Undertale*

Robert Quinn

Across the short history of the video game industry, there has been a stereotype that 'virtually all computer games are designed by men and the majority of players are males.' (Nakamura, Wirman. 2005, p.1) As a direct result of this stereotype, there has been a worrying tendency for developers to create games featuring ultra-masculine characters conducting activities that are likewise traditionally masculine – so-called 'gendered activities' (Bryce J., & Rutter, J. 2002 p.250). However, research is now indicating that the shape of the overall player-base is not as male dominated as once thought, indeed, with approximately 52% of gamers in the United Kingdom now being females. (Internet Advertising Bureau, 2014) Add to this rapidly rising participation rates amongst transgender gamers, and it is clear that the trite, archaic characters created for a male-only target audience will no longer suffice in a modern gaming market. I argue, therefore, that Toby Fox's critically acclaimed 2015 game *Undertale,* draws much of its surprising success from its use of a deliberately gender-ambiguous main character and multiple ways of playing, creating a more inclusive and universal experience for a far greater audience.

There is no doubt that playable characters in video games are in dire need of diversifying. Indeed, it can be said that as the gamers who play video games get more and more varied, the characters whom they control are becoming far less so. Dozens of games are released every year featuring a white, male protagonist with slightly greying hair, stubble and an uncouth, larrikin-like appearance. Even video games with female lead characters manage to oversexualise them, showcased through the character of Samus Aran in *Metroid Prime*. Samus performs heroic acts of strength usually reserved for male-characters in video games,

and when encased in her thick suit of armour, portrays a 'bad-ass… very masculine representation' and yet when the player finishes the game, her armour is removed and out emerges a lingerie wearing, impossibly-proportioned 'paradoxically extremely sexualised, graphic representation of Samus.'(Roberts, K. 2012, p.97) Whilst many dismiss this as necessary for the purpose of marketing, it can be argued that such sexualisation 'in virtual environments has been tied to rape myth acceptance and the objectification of women.' (Geraci, R. & Geraci, J. 2013, p.332) This problem is not solely found in *Metroid Prime,* however, as it is the case that 'in the 509 games studied…. Of those characters shown with a low neckline, in which cleavage or pecs were visible, 85.71% were women.' (Beasley, B., & Standley, T., 2002 pp. 279-293), thereby objectively proving that female characters are far more likely to be portrayed in a sexual manner. Similarly, female-characters usually exhibit simplistic 'feminine' characteristics, and 'are routinely represented in a narrowly stereotypical manner; for example as princesses or wise old women… as objects waiting on male rescue, or as fetishized subjects of male gaze in first person shooters.' (Bryce J., & Rutter, J. 2002 p.246).

Viewing the main character in *Undertale*, it is near impossible to determine whether they are male or female. They are a young child, wearing a stripy shirt with medium-length hair, and no obvious indicators as to gender. From those who I have discussed the game with, some have seen the child as a boy, others as a girl, others as transgender. Another group of players, perhaps the largest of all, had not even considered the gender. Fox takes care in the writing of the game's dialogue to only use gender-neutral pronouns in referring to the child, other characters only ever refer to the player as 'they' or 'them.' This presents the user with a subtle, intrinsic choice – the character can be whatever gender they would like them to be, which allows the player to identify to a greater degree with their character and share in their experiences. Although there is a tendency to assume that it is only females who care about diversity in main characters, it has also been found that many males if, given a choice, would rather play as female characters as they are tired of playing as 'hypermasculanised… super deformed hulking Neanderthals.' (Geraci, R. & Geraci, J. 2013, p.333) Certain games allow the player to create their own, unique character at the beginning of the game. This practise, although a step in the right direction in encouraging diversity and player choice, can, contradictorily, lead to further 'hypersexualisation' of female characters. In the case of massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG's), some women 'refuse to play as female avatars, because doing so leads to unwanted attention' (Geraci, R. & Geraci J.

2013, p. 334), which could suggest that a large part of the problem is not only with game developers, but some gamers themselves who possess backwards, sexist attitudes. This, however, ignores the fact that in many of these games it is impossible to create female characters without exaggerated proportions and deliberate sexual appeal. *Undertale's* natural, internal style of 'character-creation' through the use of a gender-ambiguous character, therefore, is an excellent solution as it is solely reflective of what the player themselves wants in a character.

The other major success of *Undertale* in creating a diverse experience is by the removal of the necessity of 'gendered content.' Gendered content refers to the creation content that it is exclusively seen as appealing to either males or females. The thought process, which has been popular amongst game-developers since the advent of the industry, is that male gamers enjoy themes such as 'war, competition and sports' and females enjoy games with an emphasis on 'creation, nurturing and character interaction.' (Bryce J., & Rutter, J. 2002 p.250) In a misguided strategy to diversify and attract more female gamers, therefore, some game-developers attempt to make games exclusively for females, such as the swathe of low budget dress-up games released by large studios. Although it is a good thing that game developers make an attempt to include female and other-gendered audiences, this way of doing it misses the point entirely. Indeed, by creating 'games for girls' and 'games for boys' we are further segregating the culture of video games, alienating and casting out any females who enjoy games 'reserved' for males, and any males who enjoy games designed for a target audience of females. A better strategy, and the strategy employed by *Undertale*, is to offer the player freedom of choice to play the game as they desire – within a reasonable set of rules of course. The game advertises itself as 'the RPG game where you don't have to destroy anyone,' and this is the case. Crucially, however, the game does *not* punish you for taking either path, nor is it a binary decision between killing everyone or not killing anyone. If a player wishes to kill an enemy, they can, and likewise if they wish to talk their way out of a situation, they can. Such a decision means that the game can represent whatever themes the player desires it to, and does not limit itself to 'traditionally masculine' or 'traditionally feminine' playstyles. *Undertale* is of course not the first game to do this, with the MMORPG EverQuest praised at the time of its release for 'actually providing women [and men] with a wide variety of ways to enjoy the game. Rather than just a one-dimensional space of hunting to game levels, the game in fact offers multiple ways for players to enjoy engaging with it' (Taylor, T.L., 2003, p.24.)

In a 2013 survey of video gamers, it was found 'half of the men either actively prefer female avatars or play both sexes equally, compared to just over one fifth of the females surveyed.' (Geraci, R. & Geraci J. 2013, p. 331) This highlights the flaws in the logic of game developers in creating generic white male protagonists for their video games. Likewise, the use of hypersexualised, one-dimensional female characters does more to hurt gender-inclusivity than it does to help it. *Undertale*, through its use of a deliberately gender-ambiguous main character, manages to create a main character that appeals to both men and women equally, as the character servse as a direct reflection of the player. This is ultimately more natural and has a greater impact than the simple character creation or customisation found in many games, as it is the character's decisions and interactions with other characters that reflect the player's choices, rather than just the external appearance. Similarly, the focus on the freedom of choice when it comes to playstyles within the game means that the game is not limited to players who enjoy traditionally masculine or feminine themes, but instead removes this gender-divide almost entirely by allowing the player to play the game in whatever style they desire; regardless of gender. *Undertale* was an enormous success despite its low budget and 'indie' production because it is a game that is universally appealing: there is no 'right' way to play and no audience at whom the game is exclusively targeted. It is a game that is not revolutionary in terms of gameplay nor does it have especially high-fidelity graphics – yet it is a game that resonates with almost all who play it by granting players the right to make their own, internal decisions on almost everything on the game, and it is undeniable proof that the gender-divide within video games can be fixed.

<u>References</u>

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