**Undertale – PC (2015)**

Publisher: None

Developer: Toby “Radiation” Fox

Themes: Independent/Doujin

<b>NOTE: While an attempt has been made to avoid going into the biggest spoilers of the game, it should be noted that Undertale is a game best played from an entirely fresh viewpoint. Reading this article may end up ruining some of the surprise the game has to offer, so be forewarned.</b>

As video games have slowly begun to mature as a medium, we’ve seen more and more games start to examine themselves, the way we interact with them, and the things they expect us to do. Over the years, countless parts of video games we often take for granted have been deconstructed and dissected, done better in some games than others. And one particular subject that’s been touched on every so often is the nature of what it means to take the life of another being, even in the context of a virtual world. Undertale is a game that explores that question, placed into the context of an RPG, a genre where the constant slaughter of enemies is an entirely natural thing to do.

It’s not the only game that takes that aspect of gaming into question, one example being the 2012 shooter, <i>Spec Ops: The Line</i>. That particular game forced you to kill every enemy that you encountered to progress, all the while making it very clear that what you were doing was a horrible thing. Undertale, however, makes killing your enemies into its own separate option, one that the player is never forced to do. Unlike <i>Spec Ops</i>, where you never had any choice in the matter, yet you were punished for playing the game regardless, <i>Undertale</i> rewards players for showing mercy by letting you get deeper into its world and characters. The alternative is always available, although how quickly you’ll explore it is one of the many messages the game has to offer.

It may be easy to dismiss Undertale as one of many indie games that place more importance on its own message than its graphics or gameplay, but that’s far from the case. While the game does ask some serious questions on the nature of gaming, it supports itself with a wonderfully goofy sense of humor, lovable characters, and a unique battle system that makes combat a far more interesting endeavor than so many of the games that previously inspired it. Despite the messages it has to offer, the game never ends up feeling self-important or pretentious, nor does it ever beat you over the head with what it’s trying to tell you. It’s also another RPG that points out the usual tropes of the genre, yet it never breaks its own universe to do so, keeping the occasionally self-referential humor from getting too annoying.

Many years ago, humans and monsters lived together on Earth, until war broke out between the two races. Eventually, the humans were victorious, sealing the monsters deep underground beneath a magical barrier. Eventually, in the year 201X, an androgynous human child climbs the mysterious Mount Eebot, despite the legends that those who scale it never return. They end up tripping and falling into the mountain itself, trapped in the underground realm of the monsters, who have created their own society since their imprisonment. The child soon learns that an exit out of the underground waits at the castle of the king of the monsters, leading them on a long journey through the underground. Unfortunately, as it turns out, the monsters have also discovered that they can break the barrier trapping them with the soul of a human, which some of the monsters are very eager to get their hands on…

**CHARACTERS**

The Human: Very little is ever said about just who the human is, or their reasons for climbing the mountain. About the only thing that’s known for sure about them is their sheer determination, which is what enables them to survive on their journey. It’s due to this determination that they’re able to save their adventure, enabling them to press on no matter what.

Flowey: The first character you encounter in the game, this flower’s friendly façade disappears almost immediately after you meet him. He’s a firm believer in “Kill or be killed”, and he’ll take the first chance he can get to attempt to kill you. Somehow, he’s also aware of the human’s ability to save and load their game. Even worse, he has a plan to gain that power for himself.

Toriel: As the sole caretaker of the ruins the human falls into, Toriel takes it upon herself to serve as your foster mother, helping you learn to survive in the underground. The good news is that she intends to keep you safe and well cared for. Unfortunately, she plans to do this by keeping you in the ruins for good, no matter what. How you deal with her is one of the first major decisions the game gives you.

Sans: As one of two skeleton brothers who were sent out to capture the human for their soul, Sans is the lazier, more laid-back of the two. He apparently goes out of his way to be lazy, like taking two jobs so he can take twice as many breaks. Thankfully, this also means he’s far less interested in capturing you than his brother. Despite his lazy nature and his penchant for puns, it also seems like he knows more than he might be letting on…

Papyrus: Sans’s brother is far more energetic and high-strung, an energy he focuses entirely on capturing you. Since one of his plans to capture involves distracting you with cooked spaghetti, however, he’s not all that much of a threat. Despite this, he’s a genuinely nice guy who’s more interested in friendship than anything else, even if he’s not as smart as brother.

Undyne: As captain of the Royal Guard, Undyne is hell bent on killing the human and taking their soul for the good of all monsterkind. This makes her far more dangerous than any monster you’ve encountered to that point, especially since she’s just as determined as you are to stop you. Despite her hot-blooded, somewhat frightening personality, however, she’s not quite as stoic as she seems, since she has a massive love for anime. Which she believes is actual human history.

Alphys: As the royal scientist, Alphys ends up so enamored by watching your adventures that she would rather help you than hinder you. While she does her best to help you through the challenges you encounter, her total lack of self-confidence doesn’t prove to be all that useful. She also has some very, very strong opinions about anime.

Mettaton: Before deciding to help you, Alphys built a robot designed entirely to kill humans. Unfortunately, she was never able to deactivate his combat functions, and now he’s after you. As it turns out, Mettaton fancies himself a TV star, and makes his attempts on your life into live television. For some reason, however, something always seems to happen just in time to prevent your demise when he’s around…

As far as RPGs go, Undertale is actually fairly linear. There’s no overworld to deal with, meaning that the entire game takes place on one continuous path. Of course, you’ll come across the occasional town on your journey, as well as side areas that might contain places to buy things or more NPCs to talk to. Aside from that, however, the way ahead is always pretty obvious to figure out, and there’s rarely any need to backtrack at any point. While this does make the game pretty short, it also means that there’s pretty much no filler to get in the way of the experience. No pointless dungeons, only one real side quest that requires moving backwards, and no having to wander around looking for the next event to trigger.

There are plenty of random encounters, however, although the rate they appear is never quite enough that they get annoying. Battles take place from a first-person perspective, much like Dragon Quest or Earthbound, with animated monster sprites. The human is only capable of one kind of attack, which initiates a quick timing minigame whenever it’s used. A bar moves across a meter, and when the closer the bar is over the center of the meter when you hit the button, the more damage you do. While that’s your only offensive option, it’s generally effective enough you won’t miss having any spells or special techniques.

It’s when enemies attack that things get far more interesting, however. Every enemy attack opens up a box on the screen, in which a heart, representing your soul, is at the center. Enemies will use attack patterns against you, and you have to maneuver your heart around the screen to avoid them. Getting hit by bullets, barks, flexing muscles, tears, or whatever else they put out against you will reduce your HP. If you encounter more than one enemy at a time, they’ll even combine their attacks, giving you something especially tricky to weave your way through. It’s a very interesting concept, overall, and since every enemy uses their own unique patterns, it makes every type of monster a unique experience.

While hitting your enemies until their HP hits zero is one way to defeat them, the game makes it very clear there are other options. If you select the ‘Act’ option during a battle, you’ll be given a few different choices, depending on the enemy you’re using it on. The trick is that doing certain actions on each type of enemy will make it so they no longer wish to fight you. Once that happens, you can ‘Spare’ them, non-lethally removing them from the fight. While you won’t get any EXP from spared enemies, they’ll still drop gold that can be spent on healing items and armor, so it’s a perfectly viable option. Almost every enemy, aside from certain very special cases, can be spared, and due to the way the game is set up, it’s always in your best interest to try and do so.

The monsters are all pretty unique as well, including their attacks and the tactics you need to use to scare them. One monster will become much nicer when he’s the only enemy remaining, while another might make you get into a flexing contest with him, forcing you to survive multiple rounds of his toughest attack. One particular enemy, the Tsundereplane, makes you carefully edge close enough to its attacks without getting too close, which makes it drop its tough exterior. Picking the wrong options, however, can make monsters angry, which can make their attacks harder to avoid. Some monsters even have multiple ways of sparing them, with certain methods being rewarded by being pointed out on the game’s cast roll at the end.

The bosses are just as interesting as well, as they tend to change up the usual battle system in some interesting ways. Papyrus, for example, will unleash a ‘blue’ attack, which will pass by you harmlessly as long as you don’t move. Just when it seems like you’ve encountered a joke battle, however, it turns out the blue attack makes <i>you</i> blue, which makes it so you have to quickly platform over a series of bone attacks. Another boss makes you block her attacks by rotating a shield around your heart, making you quickly switch directions as attacks come from all sides. They’re definitely some of the most interesting fights of the game, even when you’re going out of your way to avoid harming them.

Almost every fight in the game can be won without inflicting any damage onto the enemies at all, if you so wish. Even the boss encounters can be spared, if you can survive their attacks and figure out just how to outsmart, outlast, or escape from them. It’s definitely more a challenge, since you won’t gain any EXP, meaning you’ll never gain any extra HP. The extra difficulty is balanced out by a few benefits, however, mostly in the way the story plays out. It helps that all the characters, even the enemy monsters you encounter, tend to be surprisingly likable. The major characters, while they all have their good points and bad points, are all generally likeable, sympathetic people, and there’s very few characters that could actually be classified as “evil”. The path to the true ending also involves spending time with them, as well, which leads you to discovering more about them and just what they’re like when they’re not fighting you.

It helps that the game’s writing is generally so goofy that it helps make the characters so much more endearing, too. There’s puns and silly jokes to be found everywhere, like an entire area full of literal guard dogs. Despite their best efforts to kill you, they’ll all almost immediately give up the fight once you start petting them. Or one particular boss fight where the boss makes you write out a short essay on what you like the most about them. There are points where the humor isn’t always quite up to par, but it’s not hard not to hold back a giggle as you make your way through the game.

Despite the game’s lighthearted nature, however, there are points where it takes itself more seriously. It’s made clear that you’re in a world where most people think you would be better off dead, so that your soul can be used to help the monsters escape. A few characters hold secrets that explain a lot about the way they act, and exploring too closely into one of them will lead into a surprisingly horrifying extra area. Worst of all, however, is what happens should you start killing the monsters you encounter, instead of sparing them. It should be noted that sparing even a single monster will prevent you from falling into this path, meaning that you have to be absolutely certain that this route is the one you want to take.

You can get away with killing a few of the monsters across the game, and still end up with a mostly decent ending. A few characters will have a far lower opinion of you, and NPCs you encounter will start to wonder where some of their friends have gone. But you don’t have to stop at murdering just a few monsters, here and there. The option remains for you to seek out and systematically kill every single encounter you find, until there’s nothing left. Should you start doing this, the game goes down a very different route. Boss encounters will end after a single attack from you, your victims horrified at what you’ve become. NPCs will quickly evacuate as you approach, entire towns becoming desolate, leaving nothing but money and items for you to steal from their shops. Characters plead with you to stop what you’re doing, while others hold dim hope you may still end up being a good person.

Something about this route is so well done that it’s hard not to feel absolutely disgusted with yourself as you go through it. This writer must admit that he couldn’t even stomach what this route takes, and had to watch the differences through Youtube, instead. Something like this can’t be compared to so many other games that let you be ‘evil’. There’s nothing petty about what you do, no simply bullying or threatening the other characters. This is a route about killing absolutely everyone in your path, no matter how little threat they pose to you, and killing and killing until literally nothing remains. Given how lighthearted the game is before you hit that point, the only comparison is if Nintendo themselves made a game that gave you the choice to brutally murder every character. And despite this, some people may still be tempted, due to the fact that this route offers extra dialogue, plot, and two incredibly difficult boss fights not seen in any other route. The idea that you’d go that far just to see them does not go unnoticed by the game.

Whichever route you take, it’s a pretty short game, and it takes even less time to finish once you’re done with your first run. That’s hardly any slight against the game, however. Considering how bloated other games of the genre tended to get, it’s refreshing to have a game that has little to no filler to get in the way of your enjoyment of the game. It helps that the game encourages repeated playthroughs, if only to see every bit of content and choice the game has to offer.

There’s a lot of resemblance to Earthbound in the way the game looks, particularly in the way the main character is drawn. The characters and sprites are functional, if not particularly impressive, and not quite up to the standards of the SNES-era RPGs the game tries most to resemble. There is one particularly neat touch, however where each of the major shops you encounter are drawn in a separate style, with one shop being run by a cat who looks like he came straight out of a Ren & Stimpy episode.

The soundtrack, however, is fantastic, and well worth the cost of purchasing it separately. It runs from NES-style chiptunes to synth orchestras, to even, at one point, a rendition of Jingle Bells rendered entirely with ghost sounds. If there’s one song to look out for, it would have to be “Megalovania”, a track that’s made a few appearances in the author’s previous work. It plays on the hardest fight the game has to offer, a hard rock song that’s just as intense as the battle it plays over.

While it’s difficult to say for certain if the game’s massively positive critical reception is entirely deserved, there’s no doubt it’s a fantastic game. Even for those who don’t typically enjoy JRPGs, the game breaks so many of the standard genre conventions that it’s an entirely unique experience all over. It’s a game that manages to be hilarious, heartwarming, and at times, horrifying. It examines the nature of player choice, the idea of what it means to emphasize with a video game, how far players are willing to go to see everything in a game, all while never becoming annoying or preachy about it. Even if you’ll only play it once, for $10, it’s an experience worth going through.